

Boomers' desire to 'age in place' driving new home trends

Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal - February 24, 2006
by Judy Harkleroad

There's a new marketing segment trend in the home building and remodeling industry going after the "aging-in-place" crowd. The target audience is the 76 million baby boomers who are preparing for retirement in a single home.

Aging in place means building and remodeling homes so this group, age 50 and older, can stay in their homes comfortably, safely and independently as they age, regardless of physical challenges.

The aging-in-place marketing trend dominated talk at the 2006 International Builders' Show & tec HOMExpo, sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders last month in Florida. More than 1,600 exhibitors showed off their latest building products, many of which target the baby boomer population.

From larger faucet handles to wider doors to fake lawns, baby boomers are looking for products that are easy to use, easy to navigate and easy to maintain over decades of in-place living.

"People want to live in houses, not institutions," said William Owens, NAHB guest speaker and president of Owens Construction in Columbus, Ohio. "And the idea in aging-in-place homes is you can't tell it's for the aging."

Easy to use, easy to maneuver

With ever-increasing physical challenges, baby boomers want easy-to-use products, such as better lighting, bigger light controls, easy-grip handles and cabinet hardware, adjustable shower heads, seats and bars and bathtubs with textured bottoms.

"People want aesthetically pleasing options that are standard," said Bill Pavilonis, marketing manager for Sterling Plumbing, a division of Kohler Co. "And the aging of the population creates the demand for such products."

Replacing bathtubs with showers is possible now, thanks to Sterling's new bathtub-replacement system that easily converts a standard tub into a shower with a slip-resistant bottom surface. The distinctive feature is the drain, which does not have to be moved, making it an easy and inexpensive project, Mr. Pavilonis said.

With increased mobility challenges, easy-to-navigate features are must-haves, too. They include low-step showers, wide doorways, first-floor bathrooms, hard flooring, low-pile carpeting, electric stair lifts and even in-home elevators, which are seeing increasing sales.

Sterling has come up with a half-inch shower step, virtually eliminating the step into the shower, Mr. Pavilonis said.

And to eliminate steps to a home's various levels, residential elevators have become a tremendous market in the last five to six years, showing 10 percent to 20 percent growth each year, said Stacie Sorenson, marketing director at Wisconsin-based Waupaca Elevator Co., founded in 1957. Elevators can be retrofitted or installed in new construction.

"Builders are offering them as an option now with new construction. Homes with elevators draw a wider variety of buyers," she said. "Any age level can benefit from a home elevator, from the high school student on crutches to young mothers with babies and strollers to older people with walking issues."

For new construction, Waupaca's elevators can have up to six stops, from basic to custom design, and can lift up to 50 feet, Ms. Sorenson said. An average unit price is \$20,000, depending on product type, geographic location, building codes and labor costs.

Easy-to-maintain products

Zero maintenance is a critical part of the aging-in-place concept, Mr. Owens said. Many baby boomers have two homes and want peace of mind and security while they are away, and they want fewer home repair projects both at their permanent and vacation homes.

While the younger, 30-something Generation X homeowners focus on renovating interiors, baby boomers concentrate more on exteriors, said Lori McCreary, director of marketing communications for Pittsburgh-based Alcoa, maker of aluminum and composite building exterior products.

"Baby boomers are more concerned with energy efficiency and low maintenance," she said. "And the backyard has become the new living room. So the outside of the house is very important now."

With Alcoa's new DreamColor maintenance-free siding, homeowners can choose from 700 colors and several different widths, shapes and textures, creating a custom look, Ms. McCreary said. And because Alcoa's line of Structure siding is insulated with foam, the homeowner gets a \$500 energy tax credit from the federal government.

"It never needs painting and the color doesn't fade," she said. "And it never molds or mildews. The homeowner can take a garden hose to it every now and then."

In 2005, \$233 billion was spent on remodeling.

Judy Harkleroad wrote this article for the Jacksonville, Fla., Business Journal, an affiliated publication.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.