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Modern Home Design Trends Make Life Easier

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Modern Home Design

Trends Make Life Easier

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BY ROSEMARIE ROSSETTI, PH.D.

[Excepts from the Universal Design Toolkit www.udll.com by Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D.]

Homeowners need to consider adapting their homes for all phases of life. Modifications aren't just for older adults, they are for anyone regardless of age or physical ability. Basic renovations to plan for a future to age in place include: 36" wide doors, 42" wide hallways, no-step entrances, and low door thresholds.

According to the American Institute of Architect's quarterly trends survey (2017), demand for in-home accessibility features and home additions and alterations drove the majority of work at residential architecture firms in the fourth quarter of 2017. Many of those features require a room with a larger footprint, including bathrooms. Bathrooms were the focus, with 61 percent of firms reporting that clients desired adaptability and universal design features in bathrooms, compared to only 18 percent in kitchens. Interior design elements that help people aging in place continue to top the list for high-demand bathroom features, with larger walk-in showers, doorless/no threshold showers, and stall showers without tubs topping the list of requested fixtures.

The HomeAdvisor 2017 Aging in Place Report (2017) annual survey gained insight into how people are preparing their homes for aging in place. Homeowners are completing projects now that will facilitate their lives as they grow older, putting ease-of-living improvements ahead of aesthetics in their approach to home projects. Most homeowners are not making the connection between these projects with either the term "aging in place" or the intention to do so, even as they actively age in their homes. The term "aging in place" doesn't tend to resonate with homeowners, because people don't think of themselves as aging. No one wants to think they are old. However, aging in place is simply the ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level.

This report examines the motivation behind home projects at different life stages, providing advice and perspective from both homeowners who've watched loved ones age in place and those who've aged in place first-hand. Taking a holistic approach to home improvement lays the foundation to help homeowners live better now and later, no matter their current age or objective. A key finding is that watching loved ones grapple with physical barriers where they live impacts how homeowners view aging in place. Roughly three in five homeowners aged fifty-five to seventy-five report seeing loved ones (parents, siblings, partner, etc.) struggle to get around their home as they got older, noting that this experience changed their feelings about how they will age in place personally. Improved ease of living is a key motivator for homeowners making home improvements. Both homeowners aged fifty-five to seventy-five and homeowners aged seventy-five and older cite ease of living as the impetus for most of their home projects, even above aesthetics, safety, accessibility, and increased home value.

Universal Design And Aging In Place

There are many terms people read about and use when communicating about homes that enable families to live there throughout their lifetime. The terms include: universal design, accessible design, aging in place, living in place, age friendly, and forever home.

Good design follows the principles of universal design. The concept of universal design has been embraced by architects, interior designers, and other design and building professionals since the 1980s. The definition of universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for further adaptation or specialized design. Universal design is an approach to planning that embraces diversity and inclusion by providing for equitable use while promoting efficiency, flexibility, and sustainability. Universal design is human-centered design, accommodating people of all sizes, ages, and abilities, taking as many needs as possible into consideration in the design process. Life is easier when a home includes universal design features and products.

The broadest spectrum of users is considered, traditionally focusing on creating non-stigmatizing, equitable designs. Based on the premise that the environment can level the playing field for people with disabilities, universal design provides a comprehensive approach to design. It is age- and content-appropriate, aesthetically pleasing, affordable, and has broad market appeal.

Environmental factors in homes can be disabling or enabling. People need to design to human strengths, while accommodating individual weaknesses and limitations. Home design in general should support and enhance human functioning.

Making simple modifications to a home is not surrendering to the aging process, but can enhance lives. For example, home modifications can prevent a fall that would otherwise lead to serious health consequences. In fact, prevention of falls should be a top consideration when designing a home or evaluating an existing home. When assessing a home situation, look for trouble spots such as how steady the people who live there are on their feet. Look for areas that are difficult to navigate, or contain obstacles to daily living. Falls can lead to a serious injury that can change a life in an instant; I know from personal experience.

A First-Hand Understanding

On June 13, 1998, my husband, Mark Leder, and I went for a bicycle ride on a rural wooded trail in Granville, Ohio. After riding for a few minutes, Mark thought he heard a gunshot and slowed down to investigate. As he scanned the scene he saw a large tree falling. He shouted, "Stop!" But the warning was too late. I was crushed by a 7,000-pound tree and paralyzed from the waist down with a spinal cord injury.

When I came home from the hospital in a wheelchair, I was keenly aware of the obstacles in my home that intensified my disability due to my home not being accessible. Modifications were made to give me access, like removing doors and repositioning furniture. A platform lift was installed at the front entrance and the porch surface was raised so I could roll into my home in my wheelchair. Grab bars were placed in the toileting areas. Throw rugs were removed.

After a few years, my husband and I decided to design and build a home that would meet my accessibility

needs. In September 2004, we hired an architect to draw the plans for our new home in Columbus, Ohio. There was a steep learning curve for me in ramping up to build our home. We assembled a team of interior designers and over two hundred corporate contributors to assist us. Serving as the general contractors, my husband and I spent 32 months building our home.

This home, named the "Universal Design Living Laboratory," is the top-rated universal design home in North America, earning three national universal design certifications (view the virtual tour at UDLL.com).

Living in the Universal Design Living Laboratory while using a wheelchair for the past six years has given me a unique perspective. I have learned the importance of space planning and that small differences in the width of a door, height of a threshold, or slope of a ramp can impact a person's independence. I have experienced the joy of rolling on hardwood and tile flooring. No longer do I have sore shoulders as I did when rolling on the carpet in my previous home. Safety features like grab bars in the toileting area and shower have kept me from falling, and they make transfers easier.

Modern Design Trend Enhances Shower Safety

Curbless showers are a modern trend for both remodeling and during construction of new homes, condos, apartments, and hotels. These spacious showers have no barriers at the entry and are easy to roll into. The addition of hand-held shower nozzles and an adjustable-height vertical bar make showering easier. Grab bars can be strategically placed on the walls to assist in transferring to a shower chair and to hold for balance and support. Tile flooring comes in a variety of sizes. Large tiles can be used to reduce the cost of installation.

They may not have a shower door, but will have a minimum 36" wide entry. Shower doors are expensive and need to be cleaned. By not having a door, people save money and time. Some people are concerned that the shower will be cold without a door, however, I have not found this to be the case. The hot water used in the shower generates enough heat to keep me comfortable. If needed to supplement the heat in the shower, overhead infrared heat lamps can be added, or an electric floor warming system can be installed underneath the tile.

These showers are built large enough for a person to roll into and transfer to a shower chair or bench. There is room for a caregiver to be in the shower to assist in the transfer or with showering. My shower is 4' x 7'. I can independently transfer safely from my wheelchair to my shower chair that is mounted on the wall.

Things like how the water drains can impact how practical the shower design is. Optimally, a channel or linear drain is installed on the floor of one of the walls

or at the shower entrance so water drains out quickly due to the slight angle of the floor. Water does not roll out of the shower due to the floor angle and position of the drain. All four wheels on my wheelchair are firmly planted on the tile floor during transfers from my wheelchair to the bench. This is not the case when I shower in a hotel that has a center drain on the floor. Due to the compound angles of the flooring around the center drain, one of my wheels usually is not stable. I have had my wheelchair slip on the floor during a hotel shower transfer. Fortunately, I was able to recover before I fell on the floor.

As the public starts to see curbless showers in home design television shows, magazines, model homes, websites like Houzz and Pinterest, and hotel rooms, people will start including curbless showers in their home projects. These showers give the bathroom a more open feel. No longer do people have to step over the 4" high shower curb that is in older showers. The tripping hazard has been removed and people of all ages and abilities can use the curbless shower equally.

Toilets That Make Life Easier

Toilet manufacturers have created new features that are especially attractive to the older adult. Toilet seats positioned 17" to 18" from the floor are easier for people to get on and off, especially when transferring from a wheelchair, since most wheelchair seats are about 19" high from the floor.

Elongated toilet seats provide more room for personal hygiene. Heated seats are also available. Some toilets have an automated sensor to open and close the lid. Smart toilets have built-in bidets that spray water and air. This is a great feature, especially for those with limited hand function. Some models have LED night lights for safety when the lid is open. There are self-cleaning models that mist the bowl and reduce cleaning time. Wall-hung toilets make it easier to clean the floor underneath.

Kitchen Storage And Access

Decluttering countertops, reorganizing, and increasing accessible storage space are big reasons to remodel a kitchen. To help create accessible storage in the kitchen, consider installing large, deep drawers in the base cabinets instead of shelves. These drawers can hold pots, pans, skillets, lids, cookware, and dishes. Keep in mind that a person in a wheelchair or someone with restricted flexibility has limited reach.

A guideline for home storage recommends that 50 percent should be reachable from a seated position. Generally, storage located 18" to 48" from the floor can be accessed from a seated position. This is especially important in the kitchen. Cabinets with pull-out drawers and shelves and pull-down shelves tend to make it easier to reach what's inside.

Wall cabinets can be installed so that the bottom is 14" from the countertop rather than the more traditional 18". This allows short and seated people a better ability to reach items more easily on the lower shelves. Lower cabinet installation limits or eliminates the need for a person to climb up on the countertop or use a step stool to reach items in the wall cabinet. The less climbing, the lower the risk of falling.

Center islands in kitchens provide storage and counter space. Pull out drawers and shelves under the island can be used to store food and small appliances. Include electric outlets on the center island for these appliances. These islands should ideally have various countertop heights to accommodate people who are seated and standing. A 30" high countertop should have knee space underneath it to accommodate someone who is seated. Standard countertops are 36" from the floor and are a convenient height for most people who stand at the counter.

Better home design can reduce the need for caregivers, reduce home accidents including falls, allow for more independence, delay moves to expensive care settings, and save money. Making your home accessible can greatly enhance your satisfaction with life for decades to come. •CSA

Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D., consults with remodelers, builders, architects, designers, and consumers who want to create inspired and livable homes. She is an internationally known speaker, consultant, and author (RosemarieSpeaks.com). Her newest resource, the Universal Design Toolkit, is packaged with online videos and webinars (UDLL.com/CSA). A free chapter is available at www.udll.com

RESOURCES

Universal Design Toolkit: Time-saving ideas, resources, solutions, and guidance for making homes accessible www.udll.com by Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D.

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