

Aging in Place



Most folks would like the option to remain in their homes as they age. In fact, the AARP notes that more than 85 percent of their members desire homes

that will grow old with them. The Universal Design movement, also called "Aging in Place," addresses this trend by building or retrofitting homes to accommodate the needs of owners over time.

Though often thought of as something for senior citizens, universal design features can benefit homeowners at any point of life. For example, eliminating stairs to the front door makes it easier for strollers as well as wheelchairs. Using lever-style door handles facilitates grabbing that door with an armful of groceries for both young and old. Adjustable closet shelving provides versatility for both kids and aging parents. And such design elements can be implemented seamlessly. Your home won't look different from your neighbor's, but it will be filled with features that can accommodate reduced mobility or agility, whether you've broken a leg at 32, or are experiencing a decline in dexterity at 82.

There are several features to ponder if you are remodeling or contemplating the purchase of a new home and would like to include universal design features for yourself or a family member.

If you're buying a home, look for a master bedroom and bath on the first floor. At least one low or no-threshold entrance is also important. You'll want an open floor plan, especially in the kitchen/dining area, as well as 36-inch doorways and hallways. Also high on the checklist is a low-maintenance exterior such as vinyl or brick.

And whether buying or modifying, other elements you may wish to include are the following:

Bright lights in all areas, including the use of newer bulbs and fixtures that replicate natural light

Rocker light switches, rather than traditional ones

Non-slip flooring, including the removal of all scatter rugs, and the placement of double-sided carpet tape or self-stick carpet mesh under area rugs. If rooms are carpeted, use low pile density, with a firm pad

Contrasting colors between floor and walls

Handrails at all stairways, and thresholds that are flush with the floor.

Lever-style door handles and faucets
Easy to see and read pre-programmed thermostats

Pre-wiring for security, including direct wiring to police, fire and EMS departments
Adjustable closet shelving

Many universal design features are centered in the kitchen. These include:

Cabinets with pull-out shelving, upper cabinets which are three inches lower than conventional height and glass-front or open shelving for easy access to frequently-used items

Kitchen appliances with easy-to-read controls and placement, including a wall oven, a microwave oven at counter height or built into the wall, a side-by-side refrigerator, an oven with front controls and an electric cook top with heat-sensor lighting

Multi-level work areas to accommodate cooks of different heights, and open under-the-counter seated work areas

Task lighting in work areas

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A pull-out spray faucet and levered handles

Matte-finish paint, flooring and countertops

Glancing at this checklist, it's clear that universal design can provide great home features to enjoy now, while also helping you plan for the future. By making homes more livable at any point in life, your housing can age along with you.

The design elements cited are by no means exhaustive. For more information on universal design and the "Aging in Place" movement, check out the Web sites of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), at www.aarp.org and www.nahb.org, respectively. Or contact me with any questions you may have. And until next time, here's to your house!