

AGING IN PLACE

According to a recent AARP report, 83% of middle-aged Americans wish to live in their homes indefinitely rather than an assisted living facility. With careful remodeling, homeowners can remain in their homes throughout their maturing years, known as *aging in place*. This means living in one's home safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age or ability level and it often requires home modifications to incorporate accessible features.

To meet the demand of our population's desire to age in place, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Remodelers Council created the Certified Aging in Place (CAPS) designation program. More than 800 people have completed the education requirements for CAPS since 2002. It is the only program that teaches remodelers how to modify homes for the aging in place market.

CAPS designees are specifically trained in:

- How to effectively market and sell services to the aging in place market
- Unique needs of the older population
- How to evaluate a homeowner's needs
- How to implement a project in a professional, aesthetically pleasing way

The majority of CAPS designees are home builders and remodelers, but others such as architects, interior designers, engineers, real estate professionals, occupational therapists, physical therapists and healthcare professionals are also trained by CAPS instructors.

AGING IN PLACE MARKET SEGMENTS

The CAPS program identifies the following three segments within the Aging in Place market:

- 1- Aging in place without urgent needs
- 2- Aging in place with progressive condition-based needs
- 3- Aging in place with traumatic change needs

First, let's talk about the "aging in place without urgent needs" segment. This includes those who want to age in place and are not experiencing immediate or significant health issues. They usually fall into two categories: procrastinators and planners. Procrastinators deny that there is a need for accessible design features or home modifications and will do nothing until the day when a health crisis forces a decision. Planners are the smart ones---they are in good health but have an awareness of their future needs for home modifications.

The second segment---“aging in place with progressive condition-based needs”---includes those who have a chronic or progressive condition that require special modifications or attention to allow them to age in place. Often, these clients have experience with handling their daily living challenges and may have specific modification needs in mind.

Third, the “aging in place with traumatic change needs” segment are those who have experienced an abrupt or traumatic change that necessitates accommodating modifications to allow them to stay in their home. They value clear options from their service providers because they typically feel overwhelmed with all of the changes in their personal lives and are less likely to be informed about helpful modifications. In this situation, the Certified Aging in Place Specialist works with health care professionals and care givers to develop an appropriate home modification program.

AGING IN PLACE DESIGN TIERS

People are often confused about what the design elements are when describing aging in place design. There are four widely recognized tiers, each with its own specialty and application. The tiers are:

- Universal
- Adaptable
- Accessible
- Visitability

Universal Design

First, let’s talk about universal design. The intent of universal design is to enhance the quality of life for all of us, regardless of age or ability. It is defined as the use of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

The principles of Universal Design were conceived and developed by the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University in 1997. The Center enlisted the help of a group of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers to create the following seven principles of universal design.

Principle 1 - Equitable Use: The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

- ✓ Example: Front-mounted controls on a range allow someone in a wheelchair to reach them.

Principle 2 - Flexibility in Use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

- ✓ Example: Levers, rather than knobs, make doors and drawers easier to open.

Principle 3 - Simple and Intuitive Use: Use of design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

- ✓ Example: A universally designed thermostat incorporates simple icons and numbers in a large font, and contrasting colors to indicate cold or warmth.

Principle 4 - Perceptible Information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

- ✓ Example: A doorbell with a light that flashes to alert a home owner with diminished hearing.

Principle 5 -Tolerance for Error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions by shielding dangerous elements, providing warnings and incorporating foolproof features.

- ✓ Example: A step-free entry into a house or a curb-free shower stall helps owners avoid tripping.

Principle 6 - Low Physical Effort: The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with minimal effort. In other words, people should be able to use the design without a lot of bending, straining, exertion, or repetitive action.

- ✓ Example: Microwave drawers eliminate reaching high to pop in a frozen entrée.

Principle 7 - Size and Space for Approach and Use: The design incorporates the size and space needed for every user to function well, regardless of size, posture, or mobility. Tall or short, standing or seated, alone or with an assistant, everyone should be able to see, reach, and comfortably use the features.

- ✓ Example: Doorways that are wide enough for a wheelchair or walker to easily navigate.

It is important to note that a key component of universally designed housing is market appeal of the home. Products and designs blend functionality with aesthetics so accessible features are invisible.

Universal design is really a gift to seniors, especially baby boomers who typically want it all: comfort, beauty, function, safety and style. They have an aversion to anything that makes them feel old, especially products that have an institutional look.

There is no limit to the creative possibilities for designing a universal design home, but the design should include at least the following 20 components.

- At least one home entry that has no steps
- Flat or very low thresholds at doorways
- An open plan with wide doorways, halls, and passageways
- At least a five foot-diameter clear turning space in rooms
- A plan that accommodates one-story living now, or can be adapted easily for this later
- If the house has more than one story, stairs that are low and deep, with handrails on both sides; if possible, include an elevator or the space for one
- Light switches lower than standard and electrical outlets higher than standard, so they are easy for all to reach
- Easy-grip door, faucet, and drawer hardware, such as lever, C-shape, and D-shape handles
- Appliances designed and placed for convenient use from a standing or seated position
- Controls for appliances, heating, air conditioning and other equipment that are easy to reach, see, understand, and operate
- Plenty of lighting throughout the house, including natural light, ambient lighting, and task lights
- Easy to operate windows, such as casements, awnings, and remote control units
- Generous counters in the kitchen, bathroom, and wherever a tabletop would be handy
- Work surfaces at various heights that are accessible for various users, standing or seated
- A roomy shower with a wide entry, an easy-to-negotiate threshold
- Comfort-height toilets
- Grab bars or other handholds in the bathroom and elsewhere
- Reachable storage, including low cabinets, full-extension drawers, open shelves, and adjustable shelves and rods
- Smooth, firm, slip-resistant flooring
- Low maintenance systems, materials, and finishes

Accessible Design

The second tier is accessible design. Accessible design will incorporate many of the principles of universal design but it focuses more narrowly, zeroing in on an individual with a disability and addressing that person's particular needs for a barrier-free home. Criteria that establish the individual design necessary to accommodate a particular client with disabilities is often the outcome of a detailed assessment of the client's needs and, therefore, the home's needs.

In accessible design, modifications need to work for the individual who has a disability, not necessarily for anyone else. Aesthetics are not a priority, so accessible design doesn't carry with it the obligation for market appeal.

Adaptable Design

Tier three, adaptable design, plans ahead by incorporating features that may not be accessible now, but are ready for modification if accessibility becomes necessary. An adaptable dwelling allows some items to be omitted or concealed until needed. For example, in an adaptable home, grab bar reinforcing in walls is built in. Grab bars, however do not have to be installed until needed. Because the bathroom walls are already reinforced, the bars can simply be screwed into the wall when they are required. Also, the open knee space under the sink may be concealed with a removable base cabinet. Counter tops and closet rods can be placed on adjustable supports rather than fixed at lower heights as required by some people who use wheelchairs.

Visitability

The fourth and final tier is visibility. Visibility prepares the main floor of a home for visitors with limited mobility. In a visitable home, wheelchair users can enter the home with ease, and comfortably use the living spaces and guest rooms on the main floor.

The visitable home is characterized by three important features:

- One zero-step entrance
- Doorways with minimum 32-inch clear passage---and
- One wheelchair-accessible bathroom on the main floor

SELECTING A REMODELER

We all know that home remodeling can be a challenge. It is important to remember that you are buying a service rather than a product; and no matter where you start in the process you will eventually need to hire a professional remodeler to make modifications to your home.

The NAHB has an online directory that allows you to search for specific Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists in your area. The search tool allows you to search within specific locations in the state and/or individual company names (www.nahb.org/designationsdirectory).

When selecting a remodeler you should:

- Calculate your budget.
- Seek referrals.
- Search the Directory of Professional Remodelers to locate an NAHB professional remodeler in your community or contact your local home builders association or remodelers council.
- Verify the remodeler's references and state license(s).
- Look for professional designations such as CAPS, Certified Graduate Remodeler (CGR), or Graduate Master Remodeler (GMR).
- Check with your local/state office of consumer protection (Better Business Bureau).
- Select a professional remodeler with plenty of experience with your type of project. Remember, lowest price does not ensure a successful remodeling project.
- Ask your professional remodeler for a written estimate of the work to be done based on a set of plans and specifications. Be prepared to pay for this package.

Note: Laws, regulations, and codes ensure that public and commercial facilities, as well as some multifamily dwellings, meet established standards of accessibility. In most locations, these design specifications are not required for single family houses and are mandated for only some multifamily and townhouse units. Still, they offer helpful benchmarks for home design and should be considered in all home modifications.

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