

Universal Design

The baby boomer generation is now wielding its influence on home design. Born out of a more general concept of “universal design”, members of this generation are designing homes for their senior years to be particularly adaptive to the special needs of aging bodies.

As it has on all other aspects of society, this generation is creating a new set of standards for home design that will make its senior years more “golden” than for any previous generation. Some of these concepts include:

- **Ease of access into the home.** “Ramps” might be the first reaction to this idea, but it goes beyond ramps. It has to do with making the home accessible to all, and especially without being obvious about it. It’s designing sidewalks with manageable slopes that look normal to the casual observer. It’s reducing or eliminating those trivial obstacles that aren’t so trivial if you can’t just step over them (such as a threshold).
- **Ease of access within the home.** Many boomers are avoiding second floors altogether. Even when space requirements dictate multiple levels, the most-used spaces are typically at the entry level. And residential elevators are less extravagant than you may think .
- **Security and communication.** Older adults have always been isolated as “easy targets”, less able to physically defend themselves and sometimes less mentally aware of their vulnerability. Traditional security systems are often a part of the universally designed home, but other elements can add security without being as flagrant or prison-like as burglar bars (which create more safety issues than they prevent and which we don’t recommend in any case). Automatic garage door openers are common in many homes now, but are becoming standard equipment in the universally designed home. Telephones and computers can be incorporated into the home to provide hands free communication access from a bedroom, bathroom or even a closet.

- **Fall prevention and maneuverability within the home.** Grab bars in showers and bathtubs can prevent falls and muscle strains, even for the not-so-old. Even the old standard toilet can now be purchased in a “right height” version that is ergonomically better suited for the human body regardless of age.
- **Manageable doors.** Lever-style hardware requires less range of motion than knob-style. The avoidance of bi-fold and similar style doors that require unusual amounts of dexterity (and that are especially prone to malfunctioning anyway) will make movement through the home more trouble-free .

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**Plan ahead for those golden years.
Your guests will appreciate it too.**

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- **Lighting and other enhancements.** Good lighting, free of glare, is more a matter of thoughtful design than cost, and it can make life easier for eyes that aren't what they used to be. Remote control devices, long an asset for the couch potato, can reduce mobility burdens for other aspects of the home as well, such as lighting control, thermostat settings and security.
- **Accessible kitchens and bathrooms.** Kitchens with two levels of countertops are especially flexible for all ages of wannabe chefs.

Even Generation X-ers and Y-ers can benefit from well thought out universal design features. Many of these features will not only make the home more comfortable for the younger set; they will make the home more attractive to a wider range of buyers when it comes time to sell.



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