

Remodeling as Retirement Planning

By Carla Fried - Nov 29, 2012 3:54 PM CT

Richard Hayman, 67, and his wife Carolyn are shelling out \$110,000 to complete a strategic part of their retirement plan. They aren't purchasing a fixed annuity. They're making their 1978 Rockville, Maryland, tract house a place where they can age gracefully. "We avoided nursing homes for our parents, and we want it to be the same for our kids," says Hayman.

The Haymans' desire to stay put -- aging in place is the popular term -- isn't surprising. An AARP survey found that more than 80 percent of us want to stay in our homes as we grow old. And as boomers go, so goes the remodeling industry. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) says since October, 2008, the number of members with a Certified Aging in Place Specialist designation (CAPS) has more than doubled, to 4,751.



Photograph: Altrendo/Getty Images

What distinguishes the Haymans is that they're proactively renovating so their house will be user-friendly and safe for their older bodies, something only 30% of remodelers do, according to a survey of CAPS contractors. "Most calls I get are for an emergency situation where someone needs an immediate remodel to accommodate an injury or illness," says Louis Tenenbaum, an aging-in-place expert. "You can't design, get permits and finish the construction in a short timeline so the person can get home fast." That can mean time in a rehabilitation facility, or a move to assisted living, rather than being able to return home right away.

Could all the work be for naught if you become so mentally or physically disabled that staying at home isn't an option? In extreme cases, yes. But by making the changes, you'll have increased your options and likely increased the value of your home. You'll also presumably benefit from and enjoy many of the changes well before you reach a point where living at home is impossible.

Age-friendly features

Tenenbaum and others in his field recommend following the Haymans' lead. Whether you're 37 or 67, incorporate age-friendly features into every renovation project. Prepping for an older you doesn't mean scrimping on aesthetics. "You can have beautiful -- and safe and accessible," says Leslie Stern, a Chicago interior designer who specializes in working with seniors and people with special needs. For example, if you want a marble floor in the bathroom, consider going with honed, rather than polished, marble to make it less slippery, she says.

Bigger-ticket projects obviously require ample free cash flow, but dollars spent today may mean less time (or potentially no time) in an assisted-living facility or nursing home. According to a Genworth survey, the average monthly tab for one person at an assisted living facility is \$3,200 in 2012, and more than double that for a private room in a nursing home. In a research paper for the MetLife Mature Market Institute, Tenenbaum estimated that the payback for a \$10,000 aging-in-place project was about 14 months when measured against moving to an assisted-living facility.

Insta-prepare your home

On the DIY front, if you want to insta-prepare a home for someone older, the first items to go are area rugs. No matter how well secured, they are a tripping accident waiting to happen. Replace cabinet and drawer-pulls with easy-to-grip handles rather than knobs that can be harder for arthritic hands. To accommodate older visitors, consider raising key electrical outlets while lowering light switches at doorways to no more than four feet from the floor, which mitigates the need to reach high up whether someone is standing or in a wheelchair.

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For \$1,000 or so you can do a serious lighting upgrade. What works for your 30- or 40-year-old eyes is not going to cut it at 75. "As we age we need about three times more light, yet the change happens so gradually we tend not to pick up on the need," says Stern. Focus on hallways and task lighting in the kitchen -- under hanging cabinets, for example -- and in the bathroom.

Speaking of the bathroom, grab bars are a must, near the toilet and at the entrance to a shower/bath. If there's a seat in the shower, include another grab bar or two to help maneuver on

and off of it. The NAHB says 80% of projects for CAPs remodelers last year included installing grab bars. Don't worry, there is style to fit your aesthetic: Amazon lists more than 4,000 grab bars.

Unless you've got some handyman chops, you probably want a pro to do the installing to ensure the bar is attached to an existing stud or, if necessary, install blocking between studs to use as the anchor. Stein recently had new blocking put in place and a grab bar installed for a client for \$200. Replacing the usual 14.5-inch toilet with one that is 16 inches high is also popular, as is adding a curbless-entry (even with the floor) shower.

Securing stairs

If you live in a multi-story home, focus on making the stairs as safe as possible, and install railings on both sides. That makes it easier to rely on a dominant hand whether you're going up or down stairs, and in the event one hand becomes injured, you'll appreciate having support for the other. The Haymans are creating a master suite on their first floor so that they won't need to navigate stairs down the line, and installing doorways that are 36 inches wide, rather than the usual 28-to 32-inch clearance, to accommodate a walker or wheelchair if need be.

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If you're doing a gut renovation, installing wider-than-average treads is recommended to increase the landing space for your feet. With an existing stairway, create contrast on each step. The award-winning aging-in-place model home that Beth Tauke, an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning, and director of the school's Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA), designed for the NAHB included a stairway that alternated between taupe and beige low-pile carpeting. It "ended up being one of the most popular features of that home; people saw it as something they could easily incorporate," she says.

Sweet spots

Throughout your home, bring appliances and work spaces into a sweet spot where you're not reaching high or stooping low. With laundry, a front-end loader elevated 15 or so inches off the floor can make for easy access. (For ultimate ease, move the laundry out of the basement.) If

it's part of a renovation, a contractor can build a raised floor for both washer and dryer. Otherwise, front-loaders come with separate pedestal lifts that fit underneath. An LG washer on sale recently for \$900 at homedepot.com has a matching pedestal for another \$229. Not cheap, but neither is throwing out your back bending down to lift heavy wet clothes.

In the kitchen, relocate the microwave from above the stove to a countertop or low cabinet, and if you're renovating think about raising the dishwasher height. Also consider adding a work area with a low-height counter so your older self can sit while prepping meals. That counter will be just as popular with grandkids, or the next owner of the home with young kids. "What works for aging in place should work across generations," says Tauke.

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