

# Designed for all kinds

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## Universal design makes life easier at home, and at resale time

**Modifying a home to make it more accessible can also make it easier to sell when the time comes to move. Simple changes such as new lighting can enhance the safety of the home for current and future residents. Big changes, such as a complete kitchen redo, can make it easier for anyone — young or old — to navigate the space which can boost a home's appeal.**

"Accessible features add value to a house," says Lisa Davis, real estate broker at Coldwell Banker's Glenview office. "Changes can increase a home's marketability too."

Home modifications that improve accessibility are typically included within the framework of what's called "universal design." This concept says that a home should be usable by the widest range of people. For example, a house without entry steps is good for someone in a wheelchair, for small children, and also for older people with arthritis who have difficulty climbing stairs. A bathroom with universal design can be easily used by everyone.

Universal design also looks good. New products are available such as attractive grab bars, appliances that sit in a drawer, and touchless water faucets. Sleek, modern lighting fixtures can be connected to motion detectors that turn the lights on when someone enters the room or starts down a stairway.

A big obstacle in many houses is the entrance because it usually has steps. But installing a ramp for wheelchairs at the front of the house can be a turn off to potential buyers. "There are other ways to get into a house," says Leslie Markman-Stern, owner and president of Leslie M. Stern Design, a Chicago interior design firm that specializes in working with homeowners with special needs. She advises making another entrance accessible. An attached garage might have room for a simple lift. A back entrance can sometimes be reconfigured.

New American Homes in suburban Antioch has a model ranch home with a stepless entry. Instead of a ramp, the house has a sloped brick pathway hidden behind the front porch that blends into the landscaping. "It doesn't look like a ramp," says Susanne Tauke, president at New American Homes.

"That's the whole idea."

The house includes an elevator that stops in the basement, the garage, and on the first floor. The garage has an entrance to the basement which has an accessible bathroom and bedroom that could be used by an elderly person, or by a caregiver.

In general, buyers seeking an accessible home look for a single-level design, or a first floor that includes a master suite. Wide doorways and halls — about 42 inches wide — make it easier to maneuver inside the house too. Many buyers now also prefer 42-inch-wide front doors. "They're very popular," says Tauke.

Remodeling for resale Kitchens and bathrooms are two rooms where universal design modifications can boost the home's value.

A simple change is to move the microwave oven. Many homes have the microwave installed over the stove which makes it hard to reach. As an alternative, the microwave can be built into a lower cabinet so it sits at waist level.

"Cabinets have come a long way," says Brian Drew, lead designer at BILD, a design firm based in Milwaukee that also works in the Chicago area. Cabinets are available with easy-to-reach roll out drawers. Another new type of cabinet drawer is available that rolls easier the heavier its load gets. Other improvements include pull down shelves and cabinets with cut-outs underneath for wheelchairs.



Kitchen appliances are getting more accessible too. Dishwashers can sit in a drawer at waist height. Refrigerator and freezer drawers are also available. With safety in mind, induction stovetop systems are cool to the touch which can help prevent burns. "It's a different way of thinking about how a house functions," says Joe Caravella, coowner of BILD.



A new bathroom with universal design features is always a plus at resale time. Consider a walk-in shower without a threshold. A bench in the shower can be a big help for those in a wheelchair and even for small children. Anti-scald valves prevent water from getting too hot. Also, consider a high toilet.

"Those are great for everyone," says designer Markman-Stern.

Add wall blocking behind grab bars, towel bars and toilet paper holders, advises Markman-Stern. The blocking supports the grab bars so the rails don't pull out of the wall when people use them to get up or to steady themselves. Real estate agent Davis says that it's worth it to reinforce the walls for grab bars when a bathroom is being remodeled even if the bars aren't installed. "Younger buyers

may not be interested in grab bars, but the backing should be there," she says.

Don't forget the exterior Another way to add value is to consider the outside landscaping. A yard should be as accessible as the house, according to lead designer Drew at BILD. He planned his own yard with universal design features in mind. He built a path that winds through the yard. The path provides access to garden beds and the fire pit. Everything is on one level so anyone can visit all parts of the yard whether using a wheelchair or walker.

For those selling a home to move to a senior-friendly house or apartment, consider carefully what to take along. It's best to stick with items that will allow you to function easily, says designer Markman-Stern, who conducts a home safety assessment for her clients before making recommendations. She also suggests having furniture reupholstered with new stain resistant fabrics that are easy to clean and now come in a variety of colors and designs.

Markman-Stern recently advised Millard and Barcy Grauer in their move from a big house in north suburban Highland Park to a two-bedroom apartment at The Mather, a seniors-only community in Evanston. "Some of our friends have fallen and we were worried about that," says Millard, 86.

The couple didn't take throw rugs that are easy to trip over. A closet shelf was built to keep shoes at waist level so the couple doesn't have to bend down.

"The main thing is accessibility," Millard says.

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