

Aging Baby Boomers Have Homebuilders Rethinking Home Design

By J. Lennox Scott

The baby boomer generation, which is now aged between 38 and 56 years old, comprises almost one-third of the nation's population. The demand that this lucrative segment of the population has on housing is causing homebuilders to rethink how they design homes. In fact there's an event called the Seniors Housing Symposium, put on by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), which focuses entirely on the housing needs and desires of aging baby boomers.

A study commissioned by the NAHB affirms that baby boomers and older homebuyers want a maintenance-free lifestyle, freeing them up to travel, socialize, and pursue active lifestyles. This demand is underscored by the increase in condo and townhouse sales in recent times. The real estate industry is also reporting a growing popularity for luxury units because they appeal to empty-nester baby boomers that no longer want the maintenance of a single family home, but don't want to scale back too much.

Homebuilders are reporting an increase in construction that is specifically designed for the aging baby boomer clientele, incorporating universal designs that allow anyone to function within the home, whether its children, an elderly person, or someone who is wheelchair bound. The AARP, which is a nonprofit membership organization for people over 50, has devoted a great deal of resources educating people about universal home designs. In fact, the AARP reports that legislation in some areas has been drafted to mandate that builders integrate universal design concepts into their homes.

There are seven principles to universal design, which were developed back in 1970 by Ronald L. Mace, an architect and wheelchair user who helped found the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. The seven principles are equitable use; flexibility; simple and intuitive; perceptible information; tolerance for error; low physical effort; and size and space for approach and use.

According to the principles, universal design should compensate for a reduced range of motion that often times comes with aging homeowners. Electrical switches and thermostats should be placed no higher than 48 inches above the floor and outlets no more than 27 inches—this puts them within the reach of virtually anyone. Likewise, the use of Lazy Susans, rolling carts under counters, pull-out shelves, and height-adjustable shelves make items more accessible. Also, the height of counter tops must be within reach of all household members sitting or standing. Increase accessibility also comes with using bathroom and kitchen sitting stools, installing fold down benches in the shower, and adding grab bars to the bathroom. Builders are also installing extended dual handrails and raised toilets to compensate for decreased balance and coordination.

Homes must also compensate for reduced strength by adjusting tension to assist with opening/closing windows and doors. Installing C or D shaped loop handles on drawers and cabinets and using easy gliding hardware for drawers also assists weaker individuals. Berms, ramps, and wider doorways with lower thresholds help with mobility and agility. Single-story homes also offer increased accessibility for aging homeowners—in fact, builders say that 75 percent of the homes they build for the 50+ market are single story.

The National Association of Home Builders has designed something called the “Life Wise House” to show homebuilders how to implement universal designs into their homes without having to go to great lengths or exorbitant expenses. The end goal for organizations like the NAHB and the AARP is to encourage the construction of more homes that can be adjusted over time to homeowners' needs so that they can live comfortably, safely, and independently as they age.

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