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Understanding Universal Design

What is Universal Design?

When veterans came home from World War II they were different than when they left. They had seen things they couldn't forget. They had wounds that needed healing. And many of them had disabilities that they would have to live with for the rest of their lives.

These men and women got our attention. They had served our country when we needed them the most. Now they needed our help to go on with their lives.

Everyone tried to help. Families gave love and support. The government offered health and

other benefits. Even architects did their part. They began looking for new ways to design homes so people with disabilities could live with dignity.

"Barrier-free" homes had their problems, at first many of them were ugly. So, most people didn't want to live in them. As a result, builders didn't construct many of them. That made accessible homes hard to find. If you could find one, you probably couldn't afford it.

It's taken many years, but housing designers have found a better way. It's called "universal design." Homes that have universal design features look like other homes. But they are much easier to use.

Universal design is getting popular for two reasons.

First, it looks nice. People with disabilities don't feel like they are settling for an ugly house. And people who don't have disabilities think that universal homes look and work much better than the old models.

Second, more people want universal housing. This means that the old ways of designing homes just don't work anymore. We all want more comfort in our homes. Opening doors with arms full of groceries is as difficult at 30 as it is at 70. People live longer than they used to. More of us are living with disabilities. The traditional home that serves you well when you are healthy won't always take care of you when you break a leg or hurt your back. Younger people want a home that will take care of them when they are sick or injured. People now realize that they need homes that will grow old with them. The 82 year old still wants to live in her own home. She just needs a home that allows her to do it. That's where universal design comes in.

Features for Today

What makes a home "universal"? It's simple. Everyone can use universal design! It doesn't matter if you are young or old. You could be short or tall, healthy or ill. You might have a disability. Or you may be a prize-winning athlete. Because of universal design, people who are very different can all enjoy the same home. And that home will be there for all its inhabitants even when their needs change.

Here are some of the more common universal design features:

- No-step entry. No one needs to use stairs to get into a universal home or into the home's main rooms.
- One-story living. Places to eat, use the bathroom and sleep are all located on one level, which is barrier-free.
- Wide doorways. Doorways that are 32-36 inches wide let wheelchairs pass through. They also make it easy to move big things in and out of the house.
- Wide hallways. Hallways should be 36-42 inches wide. That way, everyone and everything moves more easily from room to room.
- Extra floor space. Everyone feel less cramped. And people in wheelchairs have more space to turn.

Features for Comfort

Some universal design features just make good sense. Once you bring them into your home, you'll wonder how you ever lived without them. For example:

- Floors and bathtubs with non-slip surfaces help everyone stay on their feet. They're not just for people who are frail. The same goes for handrails on steps and grab bars in bathrooms.
- Thresholds that are flush with the floor make it easy for a wheelchair to get through a doorway. They also keep others from tripping.
- Good lighting helps people with poor vision. And it helps everyone else see better, too.
- Lever door handles and rocker light switches are great for people with poor hand strength. But others like them too. Try using these devices when your arms are full of packages. You'll never go back to knobs or standard switches.

Features for Later

Universal design gives you great home feature you can enjoy now. It also helps you plan for the future. Take closets for example. When you build a closet, add some adjustable brackets. Later on, you can use those brackets to move clothing rods and shelves to a better height. This tiny investment helps a closet grow along with a child. It also means you can use the closet even if you start using a wheelchair. This kind of planning can help you make sure every part of your home will adapt to your changing needs.

Fixing Hard-to-Use Homes

You may have your own ideas about universal design features that could help you. Take a good look around your home. Make a list of the things that bug you. Tired of bending to plug in the iron? Sick of stretching to reach your favorite platter? Can't stand carrying laundry to the basement? Don't worry. Follow the links on the left side of this screen. You'll find out that there are easier and safer ways to carry out your daily activities. Universal design can help. Give it a try!

AARP Resources

[Usable Technology for Human Needs](#)

In this interview, Dr. Ben Shneiderman discusses how his message of universal usability goes straight to the heart of AARP's interest in promoting a better experience for older users on the Web.

Other Resources

[Meet a Universal Design Architect](#)

Because of a genetic disorder, Architect Karen L. Braitmayer uses a wheelchair. Her

disability has shaped her career.

[Baby Boomers and Universal Design](#)

This article, published by Realty Times, suggests that demand from Baby Boomers is making Universal Design more popular.

Books

Find this book online at www.barnesandnoble.com:

[The Accessible Home: Updating Your Home for Changing Physical Needs](#), Bryan Trandem (Editor), Creative Publishing International, Inc., January 2003.

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