Optimal Living: Home Environments

Key Design Definitions

- **Accessibility** design and features accommodate or make provision for a person's impairment or disability. Access standards or codes help ensure minimum levels of accessibility and can apply to products, buildings, and public spaces. The accessibility standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the guidelines for Fair Housing Accessibility provide guidance.

- **Visitability** applies to homes with three key features: a stepless entryway, wide doorways, and a bathroom on the main floor, so that people using assistive devices can access them.

- **Universal Design** refers to design standards for products and indoor and outdoor environments that require they work well for users with diverse needs. Homes built universally provide many ease-of-use and convenience features and allow for easy customization. Inclusive design and design for all are related terms.

Lifetime Homes and Neighborhoods

Today, when you visit Hendersonville, North Carolina, almost one in three people you see is an older adult. In a few years, most communities will find at least one in five of their residents is older than 65.

Most of us expect to remain in and enjoy our own homes throughout our lives. But as we face declines in function, we’ll find our homes and neighborhoods have many barriers to carrying out our daily activities. For individuals as well as society, the costs are tremendous.

Good design allows people full use of their homes. Examples are stepless entry ways, wide doorways, short hallways, an open floor plan, bathrooms with maneuvering room and reinforcements for grab bars, and user-friendly appliances and fixtures. Such features not only support independence, but also make caregiving and health care delivery easier. Homes built with good ventilation and safe building materials also help prevent and manage chronic diseases.

Increasing the stock of healthy, accessible homes is essential for accommodating the growing numbers of older adults, but we also need to rethink how neighborhoods and communities are planned and organized. Development should include co-housing options and building near community centers, transit, and healthcare services.
Policy and Practice Drive Changes in Housing

We can act now to ensure an adequate supply of universally designed housing, along with a range of housing options. All levels of government have important roles to play in education, advocacy, planning, and regulation. The private sector, including builders, developers, realtors, architects, and universal design specialists, can drive innovation and help educate consumers.

Key Strategies

**Federal Government**

- **Adopt a universal design policy.** Through special grant funding or ongoing funding streams, such as Community Development Block Grants or the HOME program, HUD could expedite construction of dwellings, particularly affordable housing, to accommodate lifelong living.

- **Create branding.** A coordinated branding and certification initiative, similar to the Energy Star program, would focus attention on universal design and promote widespread use. Such an initiative could be integrated with certification for Healthy Homes.

- **Use housing finance incentives.** The secondary mortgage market, through purchasing and securitizing mortgage loans, can influence the type of dwellings that are built. Incentive programs can reward home buyers for purchasing universal design homes.

**State Government**

- **Rank and track progress.** States can initiate an annual grading system to rank how state- and county-level policies promote better housing.

- **Engage housing finance agencies.** As major funders and developers of affordable housing, state housing finance agencies can require broadly applied universal features. In 2006, for example, the Kentucky Housing Corporation (www.kyhousing.org) adopted this strategy for new housing and some townhomes.

- **Use tax authority.** States can encourage universal home design through taxation. For example, Virginia’s Livable Home Tax Credit Legislation (House Bill 1950) provides a tax credit for taxpayers and real estate developers for construction-related costs of retrofitting homes or building new homes with enhanced accessibility and visitability features.

Today only 12% of existing homes have any accessibility features. By 2050, we will build 54 million new homes. This gives us a real opportunity to expand our stock of housing that meets needs across the lifespan.

Adding basic universal design features to new home construction can be done for minimal cost. Adding the same features later can easily reach $50,000 or more.

Current efforts are limited. Government housing requirements focus on adding only a limited number of accessible units (such as the 5% or 10% fully accessible units required by many state codes in multifamily housing projects) or homes with accessibility features, such as those required under Fair Housing or Visitability programs.

The private housing industry has only begun to consider universal design, focusing primarily on the relatively small retirement housing market. Demonstration projects and voluntary initiatives offer hints of what is possible.

Let’s seize the opportunity to create more homes for a lifetime.
Local Ordinance, Huge Impact

At first glance, the Pima County/Tucson, Arizona, and the village of Bolingbrook, Illinois, have little in common. What they do share are very successful local ordinances requiring a basic set of universal design features in all new single family homes and townhomes.

Both enacted mandatory ordinances in 2002/2007 and 2003, respectively, yielding almost 30,000 new homes with key Inclusive Home Design features.

The Pima County ordinance was the first in the nation to require a zero step entrance to a home, along with other key features, such as lever door handles and wide doorways.

William and Colette Altaffer, advocates for the ordinance, helped the county fight a lawsuit by the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association and assisted the county in drafting standards and writing new code.

Today, that initial resistance by the building community, fueled by cost concerns, has largely disappeared, replaced for the most part with pride in the new standards and marketing that touts the advantages of access features.

Local and Regional Government

- **Pass local ordinances.** Current ordinances are more likely to be voluntary and to address only older adult housing, as in Howard County, Maryland, where builders are allowed a density bonus. To meet the needs of the future, local ordinances should focus on all housing, not just housing for older adults. Although local entities are often most comfortable with voluntary strategies, mandatory provisions are more likely to yield substantive change.

- **Integrate planning.** Metropolitan planning organizations and agencies can work together to better integrate accessibility issues into planning for development and redevelopment and to coordinate land use, public and pedestrian rights of way, and transportation. Experts in universal design and in aging must contribute so that the realities of changing demographics are addressed.

Private Sector

- **Stimulate consumer demand.** Without knowledge of benefits, consumer demand is limited. A concerted social marketing effort could convince home buyers to change their purchasing criteria. When consumers demand such features, housing developers will respond.

- **Adopt national universal design housing standards.** The lack of a uniform universal design standard has hampered the adoption and understanding of a universal approach.

- **Build cross-industry awareness.** Industry-specific educational campaigns, such as that of the National Board of Realtors, focused on Smart Growth, would help get more builders, developers, lenders, architects, and realtors on board.
Adapting for Independence

Emma Jones is an active 72 year old who enjoyed daily yoga and hiking until a stroke left her with weakness on her left side.

Determined to stay independent, Ms. Jones found ways to adapt her lifestyle and home to keep her active. To get around her house and to avoid falling, she uses a cane. She also replaced the steps up to her front porch with a smooth, level entry.

For bathroom safety, she installed sturdy grab bars to guide her in and out of the tub and on and off the toilet.

She also removed all throw rugs throughout the house. Ms. Jones also found new ways to be physically active. For example, using her cane she does laps around her house three times a day. She takes an access bus to go to a local senior center to participate in exercise classes.

Home modification is an important strategy for maintaining independence, but is not available or affordable for everyone. That’s why it is so important, whenever possible, to invest in universal design in all new construction and renovation.

Resources

AARP Housing Checklists
www.aarp.org/families/home_design/rate_home

Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access
www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea

Charles Schwab Universal Design Smart Homes
www.universaldesignonline.com


Institute on Human Centered Design
www.adaptenv.org

Organizations: Floor Plans and Home Design
www.aarp.org/families/home_design

Universal Design and Home Modifications
Udinstitute.org


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- Optimal Living: Promising Strategies
- Optimal Living: Frameworks to Guide Change
- Optimal Living: Getting Around
- Optimal Living: Home Environments

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