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EDITOR

# Re-imagining Design for Aging

**DURING AN UNEXPECTED** late-April snow-storm, my mother suggested postponing a planned road trip with my father due to iffy road conditions. His reaction was one of utter puzzlement. “Why would we want to do that? We can stay home when we’re old.” As that my father will be 82 next month, I can only wonder at what point that will be.

John Burroughs is credited with the quote, “To me, old age is always 10 years older than I am.” But it’s not just our own perceptions that have shifted about when “old” starts. Demographic changes, innovations in health care, a move away from jobs with pension plans and changes in societal norms mean getting old isn’t what it used to be.

Forget the gold watch at 65 followed by a quiet retirement; today’s seniors often work well into their 70s, or even 80s. Many raise or babysit grandchildren, travel exten-

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sively, are physically and mentally active and are committed to enjoying their golden years as full-fledged participants – all of which they want to do in their own homes.

The growing number of aging boomers, combined with the fact that many are retiring later in life, translates to more disposable income, which means older consumers will increasingly be driving product innovations and purchasing trends.

So what does this mean to kitchen and bath designers? In a word: opportunity. Designers who are able to create flexible, supportive home environments are literally changing the world for their clients, providing them not just with comfort and convenience, but also with the ability to avoid the emotional upheaval and prohibitive costs associated with moving to assisted living facilities. By making their homes safe to live in long term, even if their abilities decline over time, they are changing the way a whole generation evolves (see related story, Page 52).

And designers who create safe, flexible and beautiful havens for their older clients often stress that the rewards

for this work go far beyond just financial ones. There’s no question that designing for aging clients can be profitable, but it also provides the chance to give them the gift of freedom, safety and added confidence as they age. Designers get to create beautiful spaces that make life easier and better for their occupants – which, for many designers, is a big part of why they got into the business in the first place.

Manufacturers’ increasing willingness to jump on board with stylish products that support consumers who face age-related challenges has helped to buoy designers’ efforts, while also growing the industry. And the wealth of new products moving from niche to mainstream is bringing down prices and increasing the number and scope of opportunities for designers and consumers alike.

Programs like the Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) and Certified Living in Place Professional (CLIPP) further these efforts, offering everything from specialized sales and design training to networking opportunities to updates on new products geared for this market.

Yet even as the field grows, one of the greatest challenges for designers is helping consumers get past their unwillingness to accept the idea of preparing their homes for getting older. After all, it’s easier to embrace the idea that “age is just a number” than face the reality that, as that “number” increases, so, too, does the likelihood of physical injuries or impairments, joint issues, decreased physical strength, loss of mobility or even loss of cognitive abilities.

A variety of terms have been used to avoid the dreaded “O” word – from universal design to aging in place to living in place to accessible design – yet active boomers and seniors are still largely resistant to the idea of age-focused design.

Fortunately, a new approach to space planning is upending the idea of design for aging, focusing instead on intelligent design that makes as much sense for young consumers as it does for seniors. Intelligent design makes life better for homeowners of all ages, including families, children and even pets. It’s design that maximizes space and accessibility, and accommodates temporary injuries or careless accidents. And it’s equally valuable for seniors with arthritic joints, nearsighted Millennials and everything in between. It’s where the future of design is headed, and it’s changing the world, one home at a time.

Whether your clients are 50-something and merely thinking about the future or 82 and saying, “We’ll worry about that when we get old,” the design possibilities for creating supportive spaces that work for all generations are infinite. ■

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