

Senior homeowners turn to aging-in-place specialists

Americans prefer to stay in their homes as they mature

Demographic trends indicate that homeowners who plan to stay in their homes as they get older instead of making other housing accommodations are one of the fastest growing segments of the residential remodeling market. Many of these households can be expected to call on remodelers to adapt their homes to their changing needs and lifestyles in order to maintain their independence.

What is Aging-in-Place?

In plain English, aging-in-place means living in one's home safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age, income or ability level. It means the pleasure of remaining in a familiar environment throughout one's maturing years, and the ability to enjoy the familiar daily rituals and the special events that enrich all our lives. It means the reassurance of being able to call a house a home for a lifetime.

Projects for the aging-in-place remodeling segment range from installation of bath and shower grab bars and adjustment of countertop heights to the creation of multi-functional first-floor master suites and the installation of private elevators.

The AARP's landmark study "Fixing to Stay" was a wake-up call to the residential remodeling industry. The results of the study sent two messages loud and clear:

- Americans prefer to remain in their homes as they mature, rather than seek assisted living and other arrangement;
- Older consumers want a reliable means



Wheelchair accessible shower built by Legal Eagle Contracting.

of identifying the professionals they can trust to remodel their homes.

Millions of the Baby Boom generation will turn 55 years old this year and millions more will cross this significant threshold in the next 15 years. About 80 percent of all Americans 55 years or older currently own their own homes, making it the highest rate of homeownership of any age group in the country. Members of this population group also tend to

be healthier and wealthier than previous generations of similar age, and expect their homes to reflect their active, independent, and upscale lifestyles.

"Remodelers can't afford to ignore the aging-in-place market," said Dan Bawden, CGR, GMB, CAPS, a remodeling contractor from Houston, who heads the task force charged with developing the Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist program. CAPS is a joint effort of NAHB Remodelers, NAHB Research Center, 50+ Housing Council and AARP.

"Learning to work with homeowners in this age group will improve remodelers' customer service delivery across the board and will give NAHB members a competitive advantage in reaching this currently under-served market. CAPS is a win-win situation: consumers will finally have an answer to the burning question 'Where can I find a skilled contractor I can trust?' This certification will connect homeowners of all ages with contractors trained to do the kinds of home modifications they want and need as they grow older in their homes. As for the contractors, they are discovering a whole new segment of customers to serve as our population grows older."

"There's been a growing demand for remodeling as a means to enhance Americans' independence

as they choose to remain in their homes into their retirement years," explained Leon Harper, the AARP representative on the task force. "While there's a growing need, there's also been a growing fear, as a result of the unfortunate work of a few unscrupulous contractors. This program represents a welcome opportunity for us to help our members identify the good guys, the professionals they can hire with confidence."

How big is Aging-in-Place?

Here are some statistics the task force discovered:

- 89 percent of people over age 50 wish to remain in their own homes indefinitely;
- 75 percent of remodelers have seen an increase in requests for aging-in-place work;
- 60 percent of remodelers already perform aging-in-place work;
- more than half of all 55+ households rate their current home a nine or 10 out of 10;
- the aging population is the No. 2 issue to affect the remodeling industry over the next five years, only behind the availability of skilled labor.

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What should my home contain if I want to age in place?

- master bedroom and bath on the first floor,
- low or no-threshold entrance to the home with an overhang,
- lever-style door handles,
- no change in levels on the main floor,
- bright lighting in all areas, especially places like stairways,
- low-maintenance exterior,
- non-slip flooring at the main entryway.
- open floor plan, especially in the kitchen/dining area,
- handrails at all steps.

What are some techniques CAPS-trained professionals use?

- lighting from multiple directions, which reduces glare and shadows,
- light sockets with more than one bulb in case one bulb burns out,
- stacking closets for a future elevator shaft,
- contrasting colors for depth perception—using a different color counter (or edging around the counter) from the floor, staining the edge of the stairs a darker color than the rest of the steps,
- convenience shelf at an entry way to place packages while retrieving keys. ●

You get what you pay for

Best price isn't always the best remodel



Most of us understand—when making key purchases such as a car, furniture or jewelry—price matters. The quality of the item is most often connected to the cost of the item. Unfortunately, that same assumption is not generally applied when selecting a remodeler. Your home is the largest financial investment you make, and generally, the value will be increased with a remodel project. However, in selecting the right remodeler for your specific project there are many factors that should influence your choice.

Remodelers often review detailed plans and provide free estimates in the hope of being selected as most qualified for a project. Yet homeowners, expecting great value and quality results, choose a remodeler on the basis of

run. When a remodeler is aware that a homeowner's decision will be based on cost, there is a temptation to underestimate the expense of a project in order to get the business. Once hired, they increase expenditures as the project progresses. This is unfair to the client because it creates budget problems. It is also unethical and a business practice that reflects poorly on the industry.

The success of a remodel project depends on more than just cost. When selecting a remodeler, consider the importance of trust, confidence and peace of mind. By interviewing prospective remodelers thoroughly, the best fit should become evident quickly. In order to evaluate each remodeler fairly, prepare a set of questions in advance. Ask how long they

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cost. Hiring the remodeler with the lowest bid may seem like a deal at the time, but as the saying goes, "You get what you pay for."

Often, those remodelers with the lowest bids choose to cut corners in their building processes. They employ subcontractors that change from job to job and therefore can't be certain about what they will produce. Sometimes, they even hire illegal workers to keep costs low. Furthermore, they use lower quality materials, sub-standard methods of construction and tend not to warranty the work for any period of time. Additionally, when reviewing plans, they subscribe to the minimum requirements. This can lead to potential problems during the building stage that will end up increasing the cost of the project later.

Thorough review of plans can cost more at the onset, but it is a cost well worth it in the long

run. have been in business and about professional affiliations. Find out about certifications and registrations or awards that the remodeler may or may not have. You will also want to know about their project management and communication skills. Equally important are contracts, billing and change order procedures and warranties of work.

The cost of the project is important, but it should only be one of many factors in the selection process. Invest your time and energy in the early stage of the project; interview and choose a remodeler that you feel confident in and can build a solid relationship with throughout the design and construction phases. Your project's success depends on it. ●

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