

## **FIX IT UP!**

*Bruce Turner*

### Aging in Place With Universal Design

You read lots of scary articles these days about the graying of America, warning about how much it can cost you to live out your final years in a nursing home or other assisted living situation. The idea of selling your home (and perhaps losing equity) and then spending the proceeds on institutional care is pretty frightening. But a relatively new construction concept called Universal Design offers an alternative.

Don't hold me to this statistic, but I read somewhere that about ten percent of Americans over 80 live in some sort of senior housing. The other 90 percent, therefore, are "aging in place" – living in their own homes or perhaps with their children. And these homes may not suit their needs.

That's where Universal Design comes in. Instead of spending their savings on retirement apartments or nursing homes, older Americans are remodeling their homes to make them user-friendly for people with physical challenges – which sooner or later includes just about all of us. This has become such a fast-growing aspect of home construction and remodeling that the industry now offers certified "aging in place" specialists – architects, designers and builders specifically trained to meet people's needs for what used to be called "handicapped access."

The prime target for this sort of work is the bathroom. We're installing lots of grab bars around toilets and showers these days, and we're building curbless showers that allow wheelchairs to roll right in and give easier access to caregivers. Other frequent features are shower benches and seating areas just outside the shower to make personal grooming or medication easier to handle.

The kitchen is another prime location for Universal Design. Installing countertops at various heights will allow both standing and wheelchair users to have ergonomic and accessible work areas for food preparation. One company even offers a hydraulic system that will raise or lower a countertop on demand. And there are ovens, cooktops and sinks specifically designed for people in chairs.

Widening doorways to 36 inches (or whatever the local code permits) makes wheelchair access throughout the house much easier, which also helps caregivers provide navigation assistance. And of course wheelchairs won't handle stairs, so elevators have become a popular feature in Universal Design retrofitting projects. We're installing far more of them today than we were a few years ago. Elevators are expensive, and some homes cannot accommodate them, but they're in high demand among people who don't want to sell their homes and move to assisted living just because they can't make stairs anymore. A less costly alternative is the stair lift or wheelchair lift, a track system which carries the user up and down the stairway on a bench.

Outside stair access is another key area. We often install smaller stair rises (a four-inch step instead of the standard 7") or shallow-angle ramps that allow wheelchair access.

All of this is good design, not just "special" design. As the baby boomers retire and the senior population grows, you can expect aging in place to become a major societal movement. And you can expect Universal Designers to come up with more creative ways to help seniors stay in their homes with a preserved quality of life.

*Bruce Turner is president of TurnerBuilt, Inc. in Half Moon Bay. He can be reached at [bturner@turnerbuilt.com](mailto:bturner@turnerbuilt.com).*