

Attractive and Functional Design Solutions for Aging Homeowners

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Making a home suitable for older occupants is becoming a mainstream part of the [home remodeling](#) business. Growing numbers of seniors want to remain in their homes as they age, and attractive design solutions for aging in place projects have evolved. Making such modifications not only helps current occupants but may broaden the market for future buyers when the home is placed on the market.

[\[Slide Show: Design Solutions for Aging Homeowners.\]](#)

Illustrating this trend, about 3,000 home remodeling and repair contractors have taken a three-day training course to become Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists. The CAPS program was begun by the National Association of Home Builders and AARP. Therese Ford Crahan, executive director of NAHB's Remodelers Council, describes the sensitivity training that contractors must take as part of the program. "The remodelers are required to put a tennis ball in their nonwriting hand, put that hand in a sock, and then try and write a check," she says, simulating challenges that many people with arthritis face. "Next, we put them in a wheelchair" and they have to maneuver around. Then, "we put sunglasses on them and cover the lenses with Vaseline and then make them try to get around. . . . It's just an eye-opener for remodelers," she says. "They just don't understand . . . until they've been there."

[\[See NORCs: Unique Havens For an Aging America.\]](#)

Cynthia Leibrock is an expert on aging who has turned her Colorado home into a showplace of aging-in-place modifications. "If you really want to stay in your home, you've got to get serious about it," she says. While home modifications for aging residents may have appeared institutional and outright ugly in years past, that's no longer the case, Leibrock says. In her experience, emphasizing the positive aspects of such changes, particularly added safety and comfort, helps overcome resistance. Kitchens and [bathrooms](#) are ground zero for many aging-in-place home improvements. Leibrock breaks down improvements into groups, beginning with those that can be done easily and quickly and moving on to more expensive and time-consuming projects that are best done as part of more extensive remodeling efforts.

[\[See America's Best Affordable Places to Retire.\]](#)

Leibrock's lists are similar to those drawn up by AARP, the National Aging in Place Council, and other groups:

Do it now:

1. Tape down rugs.
2. Add handrails with extensions to both sides of the stairs.
3. Add grab bars to your shower.

4. Reorganize your kitchen around the tasks you perform.
5. Add offset pivot hinges to narrow doors.
6. Replace your shower head with a hand-held shower on a vertical grab bar.
7. Do an energy audit. (We generally need higher ambient temperatures as we age.)
8. Add task lighting to improve visual acuity.
9. Be proactive about your health—reorganize your house to encourage you to make it fun to exercise and to cook healthy meals. Try steam cooking; a portable steamer costs less than \$100. Keep your house cleaner with a place to remove shoes upon entering.
10. **Remodel** the inside of your cabinets. Add pop-up shelves, lazy susans, pull-out racks, and lighter colors, for example.
11. Add warning systems: Smoke detectors, CO2 detectors, and [driveway](#) alerts.
12. Replace difficult controls with door levers and cabinet "C" grips, not knobs; use pressure switches, touch controls, and rocker switches on lamps. To test what works, try to use all controls with a closed fist. Then try to use all of them with one hand.
13. Replace your cookware for safety. Look for stay-cool handles and nondrip edges, for example.
14. You may need a new phone. If you have trouble hearing on your phone, replace it with one that amplifies high frequencies, not one that just increases the volume. If you frequently dial wrong numbers, find a phone with a large, lighted touchpad.
15. Use your house to reduce stress. Add a small fountain that produces the relaxing sound of running water. Keep relaxing music playing at all times. Add speakers which don't require wiring.
16. Buy a comfortable chair that is easy to access and exit, with arms well forward and space to put your feet back so you can lean forward and push off.
17. Increase your security. Add deadbolts to all doors. Block sliding-glass doors when not in use. Consider the many options in security systems.

Do it later: adaptable solutions

1. Install the wall reinforcements, not the grab bars.
2. Install the track and wiring, not the \$10,000 stair lift.
3. Add that study or den now and use it later for a live-in caregiver.
4. Install wiring for an automatic door opener in a tight hallway, and add the opener later.
5. Wall-mount cabinets so they can be lowered or raised later.
6. If the laundry is downstairs, wire and vent a closet on an upper floor so you can add a small washer-dryer at a later date.
7. Stack closets on multiple floors to form a shaft for an elevator at a future time.

Do it as you remodel

1. If you are putting in a wood floor, recess that area rug.
2. Use a nonslip finish on the wood floor.
3. Use a drop-down door bottom instead of a threshold (which is a tripping hazard).

4. Plan 4-foot hallways, 5-foot turnaround spaces in each room, and clear floor space for walkers, wheelchairs, strollers, and scooters. Use anthropometric measures to evaluate the route by walking through your house with elbows out to a 3-foot width.
5. Add more windows and skylights with low-E thermal glass. This will increase ambient light levels. We may need a fivefold increase in ambient light as we age.
6. Replace your cooktop with a safe and fast induction model.
7. Build a seat into your shower.
8. Replace your oven with a safe, side-hinged model. Add a pull-out shelf below.
9. Replace your washer and dryer with elevated, front-opening models.