



“Seniorizing” a Home: It Doesn’t Have to Cost an Arm and a Leg

The old television show *Golden Girls* evokes pictures of retirees in spacious homes in sunny Florida, far away from the towns where they grew up. But for most older Americans, the homes they occupy after retirement look rather like the ones they lived in during their working years — because, in fact, *they are*.

A recent AARP survey revealed that 85 percent of senior citizens wish to live in the homes they occupied prior to retiring. A similar survey from the National Association of Home Builders Seniors Housing Symposium reached a similar conclusion — people preferred retiring in their current homes or homes nearby. Professionals who work with the senior population call this *aging in place*.

The problem with staying put at retirement is that most U.S. housing fails to meet the needs of aging homeowners. Steep stairs and slippery tubs are accidents waiting to happen. Few homes in America, whether newly constructed or 90 years old, were designed to be aging-friendly. Design, lighting, and maintenance issues are likely to present challenges for older folks. The more people stay in their own homes, the greater the need will be for remodeling and upgrading.

Cost may be an obstacle that prevents senior homeowners from starting the renovations that enable aging in place in comfortable and safe environments. Although many older homeowners acknowledge that their homes can be made more comfortable, their retirement incomes may not provide the means to fund major remodeling.

The good news is that a little long-range planning may prevent major remodeling expenses in the post-retirement years. Every change, replacement, or improvement to something around the home is an opportunity to make the home a partner in the quest for long-term independence.

Even though some seniors undoubtedly will move, it still makes sense for them to adapt their homes as they go along. In fact, because seniors are a rapidly growing part of the population, homes that meet their needs will be in increasing demand on the market.

For example, a homeowner who is considering replacing a cracked front sidewalk should imagine the future needs that might unfold. Many homes have a curving walk that winds from the driveway to the front porch and terminates with a few steps. Is it possible to eliminate the steps in front of the home? That homeowner might consider engaging a

repair firm to slope the walk slightly. In many cases a gentle angle in the walk eliminates the need for steps.

Done as part of a routine improvement or replacement, such a new sidewalk feature is not likely to entail a cost anywhere near as much as a major exterior remodeling. Just as important, the new walk will match the rest of the home's exterior — unlike wheelchair ramps hurriedly installed by people who failed to plan ahead.

Stairs are especially challenging to older homeowners. Many original stair railings are little more than decorations. In many homes, short flights of steps may lack railings entirely. Talk about an accident waiting to happen! Any time a railing needs repair, a homeowner should consider the viewpoint of an older person: Is the railing easy to grab? Is there enough hand space for a firm grip on it before taking the first step up? What about stepping down? Problems in those areas could be resolved with design modifications. If someone were to fall and grab the railing for support, would it hold the person's full weight? In that case, a homeowner should think about replacing an inadequate railing with a stronger one.

Sometimes, making the physical environment of a home more senior friendly entails little, if any, measurable cost.

For instance, many older homes have very narrow hallways that are filled with lifetime accumulations of treasures. Cramped halls are difficult for anyone needing the assistance of a firm hand, a walker, or a wheelchair. Eliminating the clutter costs nothing but time and thought to properly relocate the keepsakes.

Homeowners should also look underfoot, steering away from deeply padded carpets, which can impede or trip older residents and visitors, especially someone with an unsteady gait. And slippery floors are leading culprits in causing falls. Throw rugs, especially on slick floors, can also be a real hazard. Falls themselves rob independence and health; the threat of falls cause unneeded worry.

By taking responsibility for making home adaptations over time, a homeowner can keep control over the process by making reasoned decisions before the situation requires hasty ones. By procrastinating, homeowners get nothing done until there is a crisis — at which point other family members, discharge planners, or social workers are likely to make those decisions.

Understanding the need for independence brings us to the most important element of adapting a home to better suit the needs and desires of seniors: The seniors whose needs are being met must be in the driver's seat. It is their home; it is their turf. If adaptations are forced from outside the home, most folks will resist. But once seniors understand that it is their home and the environment where they should feel most safe, most will become open to making changes.

Seniors who want to prevent meddling by concerned family, friends, and social workers in the future should take the initiative in making necessary changes. They'll end up with safer homes, easier daily routines, and well-earned independence.

Making changes to a home can extend a senior's independence by years — that's years of independence and years of avoiding the additional costs associated with retirement housing. The numbers aren't even close. Forward-thinking adaptations for seniors make good financial sense.

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