

Top 10 Ideas for a Great Accessible Home

We often think of accessible design as reserved for “other people”; those people with serious disabilities, using walkers or wheelchairs. In reality, each of us lives along a continuum between ability and disability. Aging shows us in incremental degrees where our homes fail us. Even for a young person, a fall or accident can reveal the many barriers that exist in our homes to performing simple everyday tasks.

Universal Design is a philosophy that seeks to remove as many barriers as possible for as many people as possible. Here are a few strategies to include when planning your new home or remodeling project. These features can make your home safer and more enjoyable for you to live in and more valuable when you decide to sell.

1...BE SMART ABOUT GETTING IN

Don't just look at the number of steps at your front door when considering a ramp. Is there a rear or side door that has fewer steps to deal with? If these entrances are unappealing for daily use, maybe there are some architectural changes that could make them beautiful. When deciding on the best entrance, look at the height of the surrounding ground. Find the highest spot near your house and plan a ramp from there to keep it as short and convenient as possible.



2...THINK ABOUT THE OUTDOORS

Go beyond just the functional needs of an accessible home, and, think about enjoying the outdoors. Especially for someone with limited mobility, the option of getting outside - even if it's just a small back deck - can make a huge difference. Look for opportunities to make an existing deck accessible, or change a bedroom window to a glass door, and build a new deck.

3...BATHROOM SPACE

Being able to use a bathroom independently is top on many people's lists. Having enough space is foremost for that. Look around your bathroom to see if there are any closets from which you can borrow space. Even if it means moving plumbing fixtures, it's worth it. Once you create enough space in the bathroom, a whole range of other possibilities open up.

4...FLOORING

Floor surfaces don't get enough attention in many projects - especially transitions from one material to another. Going from a tile bathroom to a carpeted hall can create a trip hazard...and just doesn't look very good. Choose materials carefully based on their thickness and how they meet one another. Also, think about slipperiness and safety. This is especially important in the bathroom (where most home accidents happen), but also consider wet shoes coming in from outdoors.





5...KITCHEN WORKSPACES

There are a wide array of appliances that are usable by people with disabilities, but if you don't have a place to work, they don't do you any good. Although a kitchen table can be a prep space, it's often not very convenient. When designing your new kitchen, create work areas with different heights. This can be a low countertop with knee space below, or a regular height countertop with knee space and a stool below. Cutting boards mounted a few inches below the countertop are great. Everyone, whether seated or standing, benefits from a variety of height options for different kitchen prep tasks.

6...GET THE LAUNDRY OUT OF THE GARAGE OR BASEMENT

It makes little sense to take the clothes down two flights of stairs from where you take them off...or out into the garage. The best choice would put it on the same floor as the master bedroom. A laundry can also be combined with a first floor bathroom or mudroom.

7...DOORWAYS

Getting through doorways with a wheelchair or walker can be a knuckle-scraping proposition at best, or impossible at worst. Sometimes it's easy to widen a doorway if it's in a non-structural wall. One trick is to use "swing-clear" hinges that give you another 1.5 inches of space. Another is to remove the door "stops" on the jamb, from 30" to the floor. That usually gives you another inch. If you're planning from the ground up, use all 36-inch-wide doors. This works well for wheelchairs and is more comfortable and welcoming for everyone.



8...PLAN FOR CONNECTEDNESS

Pay attention to the need for connections to the community by making the home visible by anyone of any age. Also, an accessible workspace for easy use of online tools can allow working from home when needed and reduces the need for many trips.

9...THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY

It's hard to predict the future. Will an aging parent suddenly need to move in with you? Will a friend with a disability want to visit? Or will you just happily and gradually age, and need a home that works with you rather than against you? Without knowing specifics now, plan your project as broadly and flexibly as possible.

10...THINK AHEAD TO SAVE MONEY

The best time to implement accessible design ideas is any time you remodel! If the budget won't allow it right now, do the parts that are easy now but expensive later such as rewiring for a future stairlift or including blocking for grab bars in the bathrooms. Do the product research now and have your plan in place for when it is needed.



This list of ideas and concepts was compiled by Architect Erick Mikiten, AIA and Designer Colin Healy based on years of experience crafting homes that serve the needs of their owners at every stage of life.

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