

# AGING *in* PLACE

by MEREDITH OECHLER

*A strategic design can keep  
homeowners comfortable  
as their needs evolve*

AS HOMEOWNERS ENTER THE GOLDEN YEARS OF THEIR lives, finding accessible and accommodating living situations can be stressful and complicated. But according to several local building and design companies, staying in your beloved long-time home, or “aging in place,” is easier than you might think.

Aging in place is a broad, ever-evolving concept that should be embraced by more than just the elderly, explains Jane Hampton, president and founder of Accessibility Design. “Aging in place is kind of like an attitude,” says Hampton. “It’s a flexible home that

allows a person to remain in their home by providing options for accessibility, from independent care to hospice care.”

People of all ages and abilities often reach a point in their lives where things they never thought would be difficult are beginning to pose obstacles to their daily activities—even inside their own homes. “It just gets harder and harder on all of us,” notes Catherine Deutschlander, CEO and founder of CW Design. “I would say the biggest thing is the bathroom. Maybe the tile is a little bit slick, maybe there are no grab bars, maybe it’s just the tub



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itself. Maybe [a client] recently had knee surgery and they can no longer lift their leg up and get into the tub. It’s just little things like that,” she continues. “I love discussing and working through that with [clients].”

To create these tailored spaces, professionals may turn to principles of universal design—an open-minded way of thinking about design that accommodates an owner as they age. At its core, the concept is about making a space accessible for everyone. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, universal design is more relevant than ever.

“During COVID, we’ve seen people needing to stay inside with their family members, and a lot of issues started popping up,” Hampton says. “Kids came back from college and grandparents were living with family members. We had families calling us saying the house that *was* great no longer was in this situation. We’re also seeing that families are leaving the cities and moving up north or turning to their lake home or a retirement home. Everybody should be considering aging-in-place features that will be able to accommodate their future needs.”

Lake Country Builders shares the belief that “all design should be universal design.”

“You can design these homes so they don’t look different,” says Peter Jacobson, president of Lake Country Builders. “There are wider hallways, handles on the doors versus knobs, cabinetry that’s more accessible, washers and dryers that are higher up.” All those little things, he says, anticipate future challenges without making the home feel overtly constructed for an aging resident.

St. Croix Hospice reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has more people thinking about accessibility in their homes. “We have found more families choosing to care for loved ones at home at the end of life to ensure they can spend that important time together,” says Mandy Cogswell, St. Croix’s chief clinical officer. “St. Croix Hospice was already uniquely positioned to meet that need because we care for our patients wherever they live.”

“We anticipate more families will look for ways to care for loved ones at home,” she continues. “Studies have found that more people would prefer to spend their final days in their own home, and we are privileged to be able to provide this uniquely personalized healthcare experience and enhance the comfort and quality of life of our patients.”

While aging in place centers on individuals reaching the end of their lives, it doesn’t have to be a downer. In fact, the concept of aging in place is a very future-focused way of thinking. “It’s proactive,” explains Hampton. “It’s really about peace of mind. It’s ‘Hey, I’ve got a plan, and we’ve phased it out so that I can afford it. I can stay here forever.’ It takes the fire drill and the lights and sirens and the chaos out of the process. It provides certainty to people.”

Homeowners will find that with experts by their side, planning to age in place will bring relief both now and in the future.

“We find it meaningful because we’re finding life solutions for people,” says Sue Jacobson, vice president at Lake Country Builders. “We’re helping people.” ✕



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