

around the HOUSE

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Build New, Re-do or Make Do?

These are the questions we will discuss this month to help you consider present and future needs in your home. You may need immediate wheelchair access into and throughout the home or you may be considering a universal designed (UD) home if your intentions are to live there for a long time or the rest of your life.

Undoubtedly, the volatility of the economy over the last five years may have changed your views on retirement and your future housing options. You may have fared well. Perhaps the Sun Belt states that now have the largest number of foreclosed homes and those at bargain prices may seem more of an option than they did not too long ago. Or, perhaps like many, you were hit hard by the market crash of 2009, and your retirement accounts or savings took a big loss. You may be realizing you will probably stay in your own home and “age in place.” Improvements will probably need to be made.

Pluses & Minuses

Chances are you may not be able to find an existing home that embodies the features of a truly UD home. Some existing homes will be easier to modify for UD than others.

My parents are currently in this situation, so I will use their concerns as an example. They are in their late 70s, and currently neither needs a wheelchair. However, last year Dad had a heart attack and is now doing

well. However, the stairs were a huge obstacle during his recovery, as the bedrooms are upstairs.

None of the bathrooms is accessible, and the house is of typical Midwest post-World War II construction with narrow doors and hallways and steps up into the house, with a basement below. The washer/dryer are located in the basement. The stairs are also becoming a problem for my mother.



As the baby boomer generation continues to age, many of their typical post-World War II homes will need to be remodeled with universal design features such as easier access to the front door.

My parents are aware their current home will not serve them well into the future, but, like most, they want to live as long as possible in their own home, wherever it is. They agree UD is the way to go whether they stay put and remodel, relocate and remodel, or build a new home.

They believe that with the aging baby boomer population, a home remodeled or built with UD features

will be in demand in the future. Nonetheless, resale value after a remodel is not their main concern, as it may be in your case.

Remodel Existing Home

My parents are near the shopping amenities they have been accustomed to, and it's a short drive to the service and social clubs they associate with. They are just a few blocks from the church where they were married and

in which they have participated for more than 55 years. They are about a 15-minute drive from two hospitals.

It is a familiar older neighborhood, and they like the neighbors. Both enjoy the yard and the garden, and all of us siblings are relatively nearby.

If you have young children, are schools nearby?

Do you have pets? Your pets will probably need to find a new home or

at least be removed from the work areas if you remodel.

Is your existing home paid for?

Like many, my parents have a lot of “stuff,” including seemingly generations of heirlooms. The thought of moving everything for them is as big a concern as any remodel or new home construction would be. The moving process is a big deal for them; such may not be the case for you.

Be sure to check with your local zoning officials early in the process and verify if you are even able to expand the home in the first place, which may be necessary for wheelchair access into and within the structure. Front, rear, and side yard setbacks need to be adhered to, and your neighborhood may have specific design covenants that must be respected.

There are a few disadvantages for my folks in staying at that location, which may be the same for you. Many of the older homes in the area are becoming rental properties, and this is not a positive change as far as my parents are concerned. The entire two-story home will need new siding and roofing to match an addition.

A New Home

The advantage of a completely new home is that it can be built entirely with UD so the whole house will be wheelchair accessible and without ramps or lifts.

All the passage doors can be three feet wide and the door side clearances



An addition need not be large to have a big impact, such as the home featured above, which has added a better ramp, wider door and weather-protecting overhang on the front porch.

included for optimum ease of use. The house can also be designed initially according to your exact needs and requirements and taste.

You can choose the new location of your home, and perhaps a fresh neighborhood start is a welcome opportunity. Your new home can also be designed with much more energy efficiency and will typically have lower maintenance and a lower operating cost than a remodeled home.

My parents, as of this writing, have not yet decided which way to go. I am completing preliminary design and will finish the drawings in order to get contractor bids so we can make a rational final decision based on all the facts.

We have decided a lower-level master suite, enlarged kitchen and laundry/mudroom is the way to go.

In this case it is just too costly and impractical to make the entire home wheelchair accessible and UD.

Wise Investment

I hope this has been helpful in the decision-making process as you study your lifespan housing needs. The freedom to move and live throughout your own home will be one of the wisest and most fulfilling investments you can ever make. Consider the alternatives.

In the months to come, I will discuss veterans and other financing options, available tax credits for remodels required for medical use, as well as how to hire contractors and professionals and the design process.

My plan book *Universal Designed “Smart” Homes, for the 21st Century, 102 Home Plans you can order and build* (now with 130 plans) is available at a \$5 discount for PN readers by using coupon code UDHomes or Vethomes. It is available online at universaldesignonline.com.

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