

**Next Avenue***Where grown-ups keep growing*

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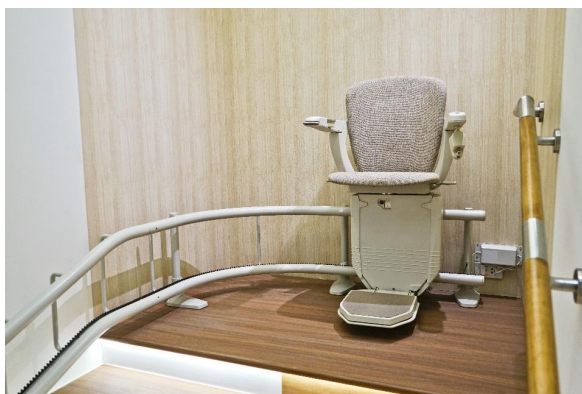
Will Your Home Be Ready For Aging In Place?



Next Avenue, Contributor

By Angelo Gentile, [Next Avenue](#) Contributor

A modest home in the Memphis suburb of Raleigh — a vacant foreclosure — used to be dark inside, an interior that was frankly depressing, recalls David Brown, CEO of Home Matters, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., that's committed to increasing the country's affordable and accessible housing. Now, the Raleigh house has been remodeled based on a winning design concept from an AARP competition, [Redefining Home: Home Today, Home Tomorrow](#). Sponsored by Home Matters and others, the aging in place competition took in entries and announced a winner last year.



Credit: Shutterstock

The remodeled house features a no-step entry and an easily accessible wraparound porch. Inside, there's lots of light, and the hallways and doorways have been widened. Moveable walls can be used to alternately create a bedroom or a larger

living room space for gathering family or friends.

There's one more important improvement, as the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported in February this year: the house is now occupied. After the rehab, it was donated to Walter Moody, a 54-year-old Army veteran. He moved in with his family, including his 77-year-old mother, Mary Moody, who, because of the design changes, is able to move easily from room to room with her walker and wheelchair.

Redefining Home was aimed at the challenge of adapting the country's existing suburban housing stock to the needs people have as they age. A brief for architects and designers entering the competition asked them to create homes where people can stay "as they travel through various life stages."

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Along with Home Matters, AARP and the AARP Foundation, sponsors of the competition included Wells Fargo, the Home Depot Foundation and Dwell magazine.

Just 1% of Homes Are Conducive to Aging in Place

"This competition and one we did in 2015 asked designers and architects to redefine home and re-imagine the home of the future," Brown says. It's great to work on building more affordable housing, he says, but Redefining Home was about finding practical solutions to another of the nation's housing crises. There's a pressing need to remodel and retrofit homes like the one in Raleigh, Tenn.

There are more than 100 million homes in U.S. cities, suburbs and rural areas, yet only about 1% of them are conducive to aging in place, says Rodney Harrell, director of livability thought leadership for AARP, who serves as the organization's housing expert. Meanwhile, 10,000 Americans turn 65 every day, and more than 80% of those 65 and older say they want to stay in their homes.

"The housing stock right now is not meeting people's needs," says Harrell. Designs like those generated in the Redefining Home competition "serve as ways to create attractive housing that will meet those needs and at the same time be functional and beautiful."

Guided by Universal Design

The [winning design](#) in the competition came from the New York architectural firm IBI Group – Gruzen Samton. Like many of the entries, IBI's plans were influenced by a concept known as universal design.

It's not a new idea, but universal design is being "discovered" by more people because of what the approach has to offer to an aging population, says Richard Duncan, executive director of the [R.L. Mace Universal Design Institute](#) in Asheville, N.C., who served as a judge for Redefining Home. The Mace Institute describes universal design as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for specialized design."

Principles of universal design focus on safety, ease of movement and attractive design for all ages and abilities, inside and outside, according to Home Matters. They can be applied to home building and remodeling, workplaces and public spaces such as parks, and community development.

Put another way, universal design is *ageless* design. "You can call it 8-to-80 or lifelong-living [design]" Duncan says. The point is to create an environment that "responds to people over their lifespan through all of life's changes, not just when older." That might mean installing sinks at different heights or using lever-style faucet and door handles because they're easier for anyone with painful joints or a weak grip to turn.

Universal design isn't all about function, however. It also focuses on aesthetics, moving beyond solutions that "look accessible" to a more standard appearance, Duncan says. "Regardless of features, people want regular-looking homes."

Beyond Grab Bars to Quality of Life

"The aging demographic is looming large," says Duncan. Age isn't the only reason to pursue more accessible design, but "it does add to the urgency to do it."

Proponents of universal design encourage young and middle-aged homeowners to think ahead and integrate age-friendly changes to homes as they remodel and update them through the years. It's more affordable to incorporate accessibility and ease of use as part of an already-planned renovation project than it is to apply universal

design later on as its own separate round of remodeling.

Homeowners can also think about the meaning of universal design very broadly. In the Redefining Home competition, entrants were asked to develop solutions based on flexible, simple and intuitive use, and to make the home attractive, adaptable and affordable. They were encouraged to think not only about things like grab bars and specific functionalities, but to keep in mind quality of life, too.

At the Raleigh house, for example, new front-yard box gardens invite neighborly interaction, says Gabriel Espinoza, a member of IBI Group's winning design team.

"When you age, you want to stay connected with your neighbors to create a better community and better quality of life" for yourself, Espinoza says.

Ideas to Get You Started

Moody was chosen to receive the remodeled house in Raleigh, the Commercial Appeal reported, because of his military service, his desire to create a safe place to build his life and his interest in having his mother live there. "Aging in place will allow me to live in this home and grow old," he told the crowd at the ribbon-cutting ceremony in February. "Family will gather at my home during special holidays [creating] fond memories."

To make your home more amenable to a long-term vision like Moody's, think about how you can start adding features like these, suggested by the experts involved in the Redefining Home initiative:

- Stairless entries
- A gradual outdoor incline up to the entry instead of ramps
- Low or no thresholds at doorways
- Doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers
- Widened hallways
- Lever-style doorknobs
- Lever-style faucet handles
- Shallower countertops to put items in easier reach

- Curbless shower stalls
- Open-concept floor plans that provide better lighting, shorter hallways and easier movement
- Single-floor living that includes a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and laundry on the same floor
- Flexible living spaces that can change size or be used for more than one purpose
- Slip-resistant floors and lighter-color floors for greater visibility
- Lower placement of light switches and higher placement of electrical outlets
- More windows for better indoor light

You can learn more from the Home Today, Home Tomorrow design competition [toolkit](#) for homeowners that was released this spring.

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[The Power And Potential Of Purposeful Aging](#)

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