

Home Makeovers

An army of remodelers are eager to help you 'age in place.' Here's what to look for.

By ELIZABETH SEAY

Mary Zelle, an active traveler, recently found there was one place she was having trouble getting around: her own bathroom. At age 70, she was in good health, but after foot surgery, she found her balance was off. "I was always afraid of falling in the bathtub." That got Ms. Zelle and her husband, John, thinking about their future in their house just outside Chattanooga, Tenn. "We don't want to move unless we absolutely have to," she says.

The Zelles are one of a growing number of families across the country who find themselves at a crossroads: They wish to remain in their homes as they age, but they recognize that their kitchens, bathrooms, hallways and bedrooms need to be safer and easier to navigate.

The one issue that most experts agree on is that the sooner you plan for changes in your home, the better.

'I'll get to that when I fall and break my hip' is not a great approach," says Nancy Thompson, a spokeswoman for AARP, a membership group for older Americans.

Hiring a Contractor

A contractor is the person many homeowners automatically turn to when it comes to home improvement. But there are some contractors out there who are trained to deal with the specific needs of older homeowners.

The National Association of Home Builders says its certified aging-in-place specialists, or CAPS, help ensure that older adults get help from people familiar with their needs. Since the NAHB program started in 2002, more than 1,000 building contractors, as well as architects, occupational therapists and other professionals who seek to work with older adults, have been certified.

Vince Butler, a CAPS instructor and owner of Butler Brothers Corp., a design-build remodeling company in Clifton, Va., says CAPS contractors also can make suggestions that homeowners may not have thought of. For instance, if clients are already renovating a bathroom, a contractor who's thinking ahead can reinforce the spaces behind the walls so they can later put in "grab bars" to hold onto in the shower, or put electrical outlets in places where they won't prevent a doorway from being widened later for wheelchair access. Or if designing an addition, they may want to create space for a future elevator shaft by stacking closets on top of each other.

"A lot of solutions are design solutions," Mr. Butler says. "It's not just stuff that is listed in a book.... It's just as challenging as any other type of good design, and maybe even a little more difficult, because no client wants to make this look institutional."

Thinking Ahead

Larry Sanders, a CAPS client in Houston, says it can help to hire a contractor who knows how to design for the aging.

Mr. Sanders, 56, says he realized he needed help when the nurse attending his wheelchair-bound mother, 85-year-old Deloris Sanders, told him flat out: "You need to fix your momma's bathroom." The home-nurse service helped him find a CAPS contractor, Dan Bawden of Houston.

"We intended to do something, but it wasn't like we knew what that something was going to be," Mr. Sanders says. "These guys did. You could think all day and some of this stuff wouldn't occur to you."

His mother's new bathroom has a giant shower that her aides can roll her wheelchair into and move around in, a big shower bench, hand grips, and a special showerhead on a hose. She can run her wheelchair under the sink and easily use a one-handed faucet. Mr. Sanders also appreciated touches such as bathroom-door hinges that allowed the doors to open wider without requiring a bigger doorway, as well as a front-door threshold that flattens when a wheelchair runs over it.

The cost: just over \$20,000. He says the project came in at budget, with no surprises.

Plus, Mr. Sanders says, with input from his wife, Fran, the contractors put in new tiles that make the bathroom "the brightest, sunniest little room you've ever seen in your life," he says. "It doesn't look like a handicapped bathroom." Down the road, he says, when they have to sell the house, "someone is going to walk in and say, 'That's a great shower.' You could just frolic in it."

For Ms. Zelle's bathroom, the Zelles chose a local general contractor they had worked with before. This spring, they widened the doorway and put in a taller toilet. They also took out the bathtub so she didn't have to step over its side, and replaced it with a shower stall that featured a built-in seat. The job cost around \$4,000, Ms. Zelle says.

Next, she's considering easier access to the front porch. There is just one step, she says, but "if I have to have any more surgery, I would like a ramp put on so I could walk up. One step can be quite a barrier."

Other Resources

While experts on aging and accessibility agree that many homes will require alterations in coming years, some say remodeling that requires a contractor isn't always needed. Their advice: First, check other sources of information.

"Aging in place is not just architectural design," says Doug Usiak, executive director of the Western New York Independent Living Project family of agencies, which help people with disabilities. "And very few independent contractors look at the overall picture of the person's functional abilities."

"You should consult with a person who understands the aging process, the access issues, and can give you a written report, so you can sit down and make a decision," Mr. Usiak says.

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