

# When Home Is Forever

*Understanding Universal Design, Aging in Place,  
& Implications for Home Renovations*



**A Thought Paper by Morse Constructions, Inc.**

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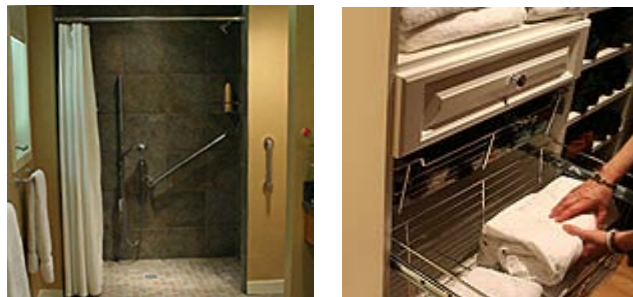
## Aging in Place: Golden Year Myth or Reality?

Maybe your current home is your dream home. Maybe it was an old fixer-upper that you fell in love with decades ago for its personality and historic charm. Maybe it's the place you raised your family and where you host your grandkids for sleepovers. Right now, it may be the place your kids, your business, and your parents all reside.

Of course, you're a realist as well, and you might be wondering what life will be like as you, or a family member, becomes older or experiences limited function or mobility. Most of us are reluctant to contemplate a time when we are not able to climb stairs, haul laundry to and from the basement, or retrieve the seldom-used china or seasonal decorations. Small, even temporary changes in health status or ability, however, can make the familiar home suddenly seem very alien. As much as you may resist saying it out loud, you may find yourself wondering whether your home will be supportive enough to stay in forever.

Sound familiar?

You are in good company. According to the [National Council on Aging](#), 90% of elders say they want to spend the rest of their lives in their own homes. And the marketplace is shifting to support this trend. The [Aging in Place Initiative](#), developed "to help America's communities prepare for the aging of their population and to become places that are good to grow up, live in and grow old," says that by 2030, nearly one in five Americans—71.5 million people—will be over age 65. And despite Hollywood depictions of seniors heading south or being moved into nursing homes, most Americans will choose to "age in place."



*Pictured: curbless-entry shower with grab bar and easy-to-access closet shelves*



## Universal Design Defined

Across the US, more and more people aged 50 and over are exploring ideas for staying in place for the long term and taking steps to determine what is necessary to do that. One trend in new housing construction, as well as in remodeling, is Universal Design, also known as 'design for all'. Think of it as a framework for creating a product, a whole house

or architectural feature, such as an addition or entryway that can accommodate differing types of users exerting the least amount of effort.

Related to, but distinct from, the rules and regulations put in place to accommodate persons with disabilities [the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990], Universal Design "addresses the scope of accessibility and suggests making all elements and spaces accessible to and usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. This is accomplished through thoughtful planning and design at all stages of any design project," according to North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design.



## Universal Design: Why It Matters

Good design is the key to making spaces and products broadly useable. With good design, almost any kind of challenge is manageable. Consider OXO cooking tools, developed with one group, arthritic users, in mind, that are useable by almost everyone to open a jar, peel a vegetable, or spin a salad. OXO tools are high in quality and value with worldwide distribution. The OXO Company is committed to making their entire line of distinctive, attractive products universally accessible.



Consider another example: the typical doorknob. Suppose your arms are full of groceries, a baby, a briefcase, or, you have arthritis or another condition that makes opening doors a challenge. Faced with a traditional doorknob, something has to be shifted or put down—somewhere—before getting through the door.

Replacing a doorknob with a levered door handle operable with an elbow or forearm creates a different experience that addresses the above awkward situations, as well as many others. Suddenly the door and everything beyond it is more easily accessed. Adding a shelf next to the door also provides a space to place things when your hands and arms are too full!

Swinging doors can also be a barrier or hazard rather than an entry point. If so, they can be replaced by substituting pocket doors, a modest modification with enormous utility for people with limited strength or mobility, or to create privacy in a room with small dimensions. Designing for maximum utility is by no means only for persons with specific disabilities. Since the 1990s, the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State, the Institute for Human Centered Design in Boston, and the Center for Supportive Housing and Home Modification at the University of Southern California have advocated using Universal Design as a framework for making homes livable for the long term.

## Here are the Seven Principles of Universal Design:

[1] Equitable use: the design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

[2] Flexibility in use: the design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

[3] Simple and intuitive to use: use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Most of all this guideline encourages the elimination of unnecessary complexity.

[4] The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

[5] Tolerance for error: the design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions, i.e., fail-safe features are built in.

[6] Low physical effort: the design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

[7] Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's size, posture or mobility.

See Sources below for a link to The Center for Universal Design including guidelines for each principle.

The Principles of Universal Design were developed by The Center for Universal Design in collaboration with a consortium of Universal Design researchers and practitioners from across the United States. Funding for the project was provided by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.



## Renovating with UD in Mind: Become Proactive

**1. Use a contractor experienced in Universal Design.** Not all are. Working with a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) ensures that your contractor has gone through training and understands the principles behind Universal Design. In the next section, you'll find questions to ask contractors.

### **2. Don't wait. You can implement Universal Design principles during your next renovation.**

You can make changes in your current space now, rather than wait until you retire or are faced with an unexpected physical challenge. Universal Design is about function and inclusion and can be the cornerstone of your next renovation project. Many adaptations, such as rimless showers and adjustable height cabinets, provide a measure of safety and practicality and are non-institutional looking. Widening doors and leveling thresholds allow children, pets, and people with walkers or canes to safely and smoothly navigate in and around the house.

**3. Become part of the process.** This is your space—and it will be your space for years to come. Understand why the builder is recommending certain specifications, products, etc. While there is a wealth of information on the subject available online, here are three great resources that will help you feel more confident and qualified in making decisions.



- [AARP - Sweet Spots in Home Design](#). Take a look at the room-by-room "checklists" in this article that will (as the article states) help "increase safety, comfort, convenience, and livability for everyone."
- [Universal Design in Housing and Its Benefits](#) (this will open a PDF)
- [The American Occupational Therapy Association](#)



## Vetting Contractors - 4 Revealing Questions

Here are four questions to ask contractors :

**1. Are you a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS)?** An easy way to discover and/or verify the contractor's answer is by searching the [CAPS directory on the National Association of Home Builders website](#).

**2. What's your "Aging in Place" philosophy?** Certification is a must, but so is passion. Work with contractors who really care about helping people stay happy forever in their homes by preserving the home's integrity while improving accessibility. You will hear the passion and excitement in their voices, and you will see the proof in their portfolios.

**3. Please describe a couple of recent Universal Design challenges and their solutions. Ask if the contractor has before, during, and after pictures that would help you more fully understand the process.**

**4. May I talk to one or two of your past clients?** The contractor shouldn't hesitate and should willingly offer up contact information for past clients. Here's the thing: **Call these references.** Ask probing questions. Ask what the person would have wanted the contractor to do differently (because there's always something). Ask what the person likes best about the renovation. Ask whether the renovation was worth it and if he or she would do another project with the same contractor.



## Next Steps: Ready to Renovate?

You deserve to stay in your home as long as you choose. Universal Design is one method that helps you "age in place" gracefully and with dignity.

At Morse Constructions, when we work with you on a renovation project, we take the time to help you define all aspects of how your space will be used and by whom. We want to understand your goals, your aesthetic sense, your family situation and your long-term plans. Then together, we create designs and complete renovations that take all of this into account, including accessibility and environmental responsibility. If you are thinking about renovating an area of your home, [let us know](#). We'd love to work with you on your renovation project.



### ***About Morse Constructions, Inc.***

Morse Constructions, Inc. is an award-winning residential remodeling company with over 35 years of experience. Through clear and thoughtful communication, the firm strives to exceed its clients' expectations in every stage of the renovation project, whether an addition, whole house renovation, kitchen, or bath. Specialties include Universal Design, historic restorations, and sustainable (green), highly efficient homes. To learn more, visit [www.MorseConstructions.com](http://www.MorseConstructions.com).

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Paul Morse, President, CAPS, CGP, GCP, CR  
Morse Constructions, Inc.  
57 Central Street  
Somerville, MA 02143

617.666.4460 / [paul@morseconstructions.com](mailto:paul@morseconstructions.com)