

Retrofitted Housing: Any Buyers?

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Attendees of APA's recent National Planning Conference had the opportunity to express their struggles with aging community members living in multi-story homes with no desire to relocate. The facilitated discussion, a component of the Aging in Place track, offered planners the opportunity to hear from their peers as well as experts. One solution to the multi-story home issue, is home modifications which enable successful aging in place. The next concern raised was the market for such housing once it has been retrofitted. Three key concepts must be considered:

- 1) Design for a lifetime can enable residents to function at their highest level possible, minimizing need for informal and formal caregiving and services, as well as reducing risk of accidents, and delaying institutionalization. All of which reduce costs to society by reducing a) lost wages of family caregivers, b) care services provided by community agencies and/or Medicare/Medicaid
- 2) Design which enables seniors is also enabling across the lifespan--therefore houses designed in this manner have a larger market of potential buyers. Zero-step entries remove obstacles to seniors with gait and mobility issues, as well as for young parents who use strollers, or any family member using a rolling suitcase or cooler, bicycle, or carrying groceries or heavy packages. Having a first-floor room which can be flexible in function, serving as a family room or a bedroom works for a variety of family members, as does a first-floor bathroom. Wider halls and doorways allow for wheelchairs, walkers, someone assisting a loved one, a parent carrying a sleeping child, carrying a laundry basket and a myriad of other scenarios which are likely to occur in one's home.
- 3) If designed based on [Universal Design principles](#), which specifically includes "*make the design appealing to all users*", rather than institutional-looking features, a wider range of buyers will be able to see themselves in the dwelling

because UD designs for a larger spectrum of ages, reaches, abilities, and scenarios than standard housing design.

Rodney Harrell, senior policy analyst with AARP, pointed out that when people buy houses at younger ages, they don't consider their possible needs in their later years. They choose short-term solutions, when they should consider options like Co-Housing and Visitability. Many communities nationwide have mandated homes which work for a range of residents across the lifespan and with varying needs by adopting [Visitability](#) ordinances. [Bollingbrook, Illinois](#) is an often cited example, and Pima County, Arizona likely leads the nation with the most Visitable homes. Whether mandated or voluntary, Visitability features include at a minimum:

- a zero-step entry
- 32" clear space at all main floor doors
- 36" clear path throughout main floor
- at least a half bath on main floor

to create sustainable homes which require little or no retrofitting to meet residents' needs.

One attendee objected to mandated enabling features saying "*Why should someone pay for them if they don't need them?*" Valid point, but consider:

- 1) **Life Safety:** we all pay for safety features such as proper structural engineering, to withstand certain acts of nature, or fire detectors and carbon monoxide detectors even though those scenarios may never come to pass.
- 2) **Environmental Press:** the greater the gap between our needs and our house's features the greater the press it causes on our abilities, pushing us down to a lower level of functioning and higher degree of dependence. This is preventable by design that respects human dimensions, abilities, and uses.

While some communities mandate enabling design features, others provide tax incentives, which may not be sufficient to address these issues because they are dependent on a) awareness, b) consumer demand, and c) voluntary compliance.

Resources

Visitability online publications, including reports and laws:

<http://www.udeworld.com/visitability.html>

ADU essay by Jordan Palmeri, March 8, 2013; www.accessorydwellings.org