

Builder

TRANQUIL SPACES

15 projects that
embody the ingenuity
and practice of
residential design

PLUS

SEE HOW IMPROVING THE
'VISITABILITY' OF NEW
HOMES BENEFITS ALL

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Cover: Anice Hoachlander; This page: Adam Potts

Volume 46, number 6. Builder (ISSN 0744-1193; USPS 370-600) is published monthly except combined issues in Jan/Feb, Mar/Apr, July/Aug and Nov/Dec. by Zonda Media, 4000 MacArthur Blvd Ste 400 Newport Beach, CA 92660-2543, and printed in the USA. Copyright 2023 by Zonda Media, a Delaware corporation. Reproduction in whole or in part prohibited without written authorization. Single-copy price: \$8.00. Periodicals postage paid at Newport Beach, CA, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Builder, P.O. Box 3494, Northbrook, IL 60065-9831. Member: American Business Media

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THE

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By 2034, older adults will outnumber children. The time is now for builders and developers to construct aging-ready homes.

BY LYDIA LEE

Some home builders and developers are providing options to support multigenerational communities as they anticipate an imminent, important demographic shift.

Come 2034, there will be more adults age 65 and older than children, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections. This change has significant implications for the home building industry, as well as others such as health care. Statistically speaking, more Americans will be wondering if their homes will be a comfortable place to live out their later years or if they can afford to move to a place that would be better suited for them.

GAME



LONG



Courtesy CultivateLAND

Community Builder
In Houston's Indigo development, 85% of the homes will be within a five-minute walk of Indigo Commons, a new commercial and retail center.

“Thinking about aging is the future of the building industry,” says Rodney Harrell, vice president of family, home, and community at AARP’s Public Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

IMPERILED AT HOME?

According to AARP’s most recent Home and Community Preferences survey, nearly 8 in 10 adults who are 50 and older would prefer to stay in their home or community; for adults who are 65 and older, about 9 in 10 would prefer to stay put.

“It’s a misconception that most people want to move to Florida when they retire,” says Harrell. “Most of us want to stay where we’ve built community.”

But the likelihood that people’s living environments will need to change is high. By the time people reach 70, 35% will have limited mobility; and the majority of people older than 85 will have mobility issues. Falls become increasingly common with aging, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns that falls can “threaten the health and independence of older adults.”

Meanwhile, very little of the current housing stock is designed for those with mobility challenges. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) addresses public spaces and businesses, and the Fair Housing Act covers multifamily housing, designing single-family homes to help aging in place is largely voluntary, except for in a few rare cases.

Fortunately, it is not that difficult to design a home through this lens. Stairs and steps pose the greatest difficulty, and negotiating the bathroom is the next biggest issue, according to a 2020 report from the U.S. Census Bureau titled “Old Housing, New Needs: Are U.S. Homes Ready for an Aging Population?”

The report found that only 1 in 10 homes is “aging-ready.” These aging-ready homes address the two core needs—single-floor living and bathroom accessibility—by providing a zero-step entry, a first-floor bedroom, and a full first-floor bathroom with at least one accessibility feature.

“Aging-ready” and “universal design” are among the terms that have been developed to describe homes that accommodate limited mobility. (Because

“accessibility” implies full wheelchair access—as in “ADA-accessible”—home builders and policy advocates tend to avoid using that term for anything short of ADA accessibility.)

But another word may be ready for its breakthrough moment. Advocates for the “visitability” movement have been working for decades to make three key features standard in all new-home construction: an entrance with a flush threshold; ground-floor doorways and hallways with minimum clearance for wheelchair access; and a ground-floor powder room large enough for a wheelchair user.

“[The] spirit [of visitability] says it’s not just unwise but unacceptable that new homes continue to be built with gross barriers—given how easy it is to build basic access in the great majority of new homes and given the harsh effects major barriers have on so many people’s lives,” states Visitability.org, a website produced by the Washington, D.C.-based National Council on Independent Living. Another key idea behind the term is that people should be able to visit others easily—that our social lives shouldn’t be impeded by mobility issues.

A few jurisdictions, including Pima County, Arizona, and the entire state of Vermont, mandate visitability in their building codes. The Inclusive Home Design Act, which would require

Ground-floor doorways and hallways with minimum clearance for wheelchair access should be standard in new construction, according to the “visitability” movement.

►
Open Spaces
An open floor plan, bright natural light, and flush thresholds make this house by Sparano + Mooney Architecture pleasant to live in for all ages.

visitability for single-family homes and townhouses constructed with the help of federal funds, has been introduced several times, most recently in 2022, but hasn’t yet become law.

UNIVERSAL APPEAL

Among those leading the way is national home builder Tri Pointe Homes, No. 17 on the latest Builder 100, which is leaning into this market. A few years ago, it launched a brand of active-adult/55-plus communities called Altis, and it unveiled its LiveAbility program for the general home buying audience in November 2022.

LiveAbility is a strategic marketing effort that repackages existing features and options to highlight how homes built by Tri Pointe are designed for long-term use. LiveAbility features that are standard in all Tri Pointe Homes include open floor plans, closets with variable-height rods, touch faucets, and rocker or toggle switches; other features are optional, such as microwaves in lower cabinets, sit-down showers with built-in seats, comfort-height toilets, blocking for grab bars, and motorized window shades.

LiveAbility focuses on greater maneuverability, comfort solutions, and limitless style, according to the company. The program is an example of how to market these features in a way that skirts the topic of aging. While the demographic shift is real, it would appear society still needs to come to terms with it. Ageism is one of the last socially acceptable prejudices, according to psychologists. Home builders can be sensitive to this stigma by talking more about the convenience that designing for the future offers to buyers of all ages.

“It’s always important to keep in mind that the 55-plus demographic doesn’t see themselves as old, and that ‘aging in place’ applies to their parents and not them,” explains Paul Hanson, president of franchising and product development for Epcon Communities, which ranks No. 50 on the Builder 100. “But talking about the benefits and the features and how they will give them more longevity and permanence in the house resonates with them.”

This strategy is working: Nearly 75% of buyers in its 55-plus communities (Epcon builds in about 90 of them, says Hanson) have opted for the universal design upgrade, which includes wider doorways and hallways, more space around the kitchen island, and a curbless shower in the primary suite. Epcon has started to offer the universal design op-

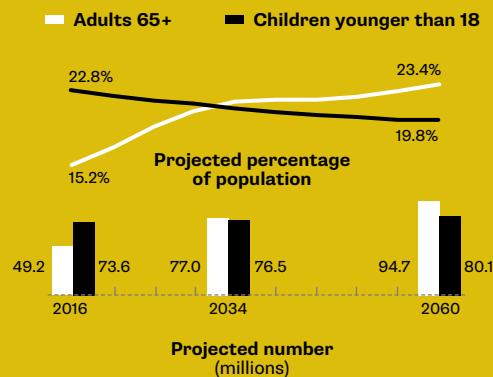


* An Aging Nation

For the first time in U.S. history, older adults are projected to outnumber children by 2034.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Projected Number of Children and Older Adults



Note: 2016 data are estimates not projections.