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Universal Design: More than a Boomer Benefit

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By Kathleen Furore

For many people—tile dealers and contractors included—the term 'universal design' brings to mind 'Baby Boomers' or 'aging population.' But while the concept does include features appealing to older adults, members of that demographic group aren't the only ones who enjoy the benefits universal design brings.

"Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design," according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), an organization that offers a Universal Design/Build course.

"The principles of universal design can apply to anyone—not only Baby Boomers!" stresses Dan Taddei, director of education and certification at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). The Association offers a Universal Remodeling course designed to help participants sell and conduct remodeling projects based on Universal Design principles. "Universal design is attractive not only to those who wish to age in place but also to families with special needs and those that are simply forward thinking."

As the NAHB says, "Everyone can use universal design! It doesn't matter if you are young or old. You could be short or tall, healthy or ill. You might have a disability. Or you may be a prize-winning athlete. Because of universal design, people who are very different can all enjoy the same home. And that home will be there for all its inhabitants even when their needs change."



Interest on the Upswing

According to the NAHB, universal design it is a trend showing promise for 2013 and beyond.

"Universal design is becoming stylish through open floor plans and curbless showers. Additionally, remodeling projects are including design elements that allow for home owners

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to age in place," information from NAHB says, noting that emphasis is shifting "from 50+ housing to more integrated communities with universal design features."

Manufacturers agree that consumers are becoming more aware of and interested in universal design.

"We have definitely seen an increased interest in universal design principles," reports Earl Maicus, architectural services manager at the Plattsburg, N.Y.-based offices of Schluter-Systems L.P., a company that offers innovative installation systems for tile and stone. "One of the main factors has been the economy and its effect on the reduction of new home construction. This has increased the desire for current homeowners to remodel their existing homes to the greatest extent possible, without the need for future adaptation or specialization for longer ownership."

That concept, Maicus explains, is called "aging in place" and involves remodeling with future needs in mind.

"So a barrier-free bathroom may be designed today for its design attributions, with the idea that later it will be convenient because it enables more freedom and independence," Maicus says. "This concept I believe has also caused a ripple effect into other market segments causing them to incorporate these universal design principals into their building design standards."

Farrell Gerber, executive vice president of Tile Redi in Coral Gables, Fla.—maker of Redi Free™ barrier-free shower pans—concur.

"Universal design is a major trend in both residential and commercial design," Gerber says. "It is creating environments that are inherently accessible to people both with and without disabilities."

Tie-in with Tile

The tile industry is an important player in any discussion of universal design.

"Tile has many attributes that make it the ideal finish for universal design. Tile is durable, hygienic, versatile, and has high-end appeal, which will add to the longevity of applications such as floors, walls, counter tops and shower or wet areas," Maicus says. "With aging in place being a common reason behind remodeling, the durability of the material and installation systems become paramount since the homeowner may be designing for his needs that may be many years in the future."

Gerber adds that universal design allows for barrier-free showers to be designed with tile instead of acrylic or cultured marble shower bases, bringing "an upscale flush tile look into the bathroom floor."

Schluter Systems and Tile Redi are two of myriad companies that offer products easily incorporated into projects employing universal design principles.

The Schluter-Shower System, for example, includes the Schluter-KERDI-LINE drain, Schluter-KERDI pre-sloped shower tray and the Schluter-KERDI waterproofing membrane "that together allow tile dealers to provide a complete solution for home owners looking for a more universal design option to shower areas," Maicus says of the company's barrier-free



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shower installation.

Tile Redi offers Redi Free™ barrier-free shower pans designed without a curb to provide accessibility into the shower, appropriate whether a client is removing a bathtub and replacing it with a handicapped shower, or doing a complete bathroom renovation, Gerber says.

And while Maicus notes that additional design considerations must be addressed when incorporating universal design features, the cost usually doesn't rise.

"If I build a barrier-free shower and there is no shower curb to stop the water, then I must continue the waterproofing into the drying area of the bathroom so that the substrate does not get negatively affected by the water that will transfer onto the tiled bathroom floor," he says. "This being said, the tile and products such as Schluter-Systems, would not be more expensive."

Taddei agrees that adding most universal design features typically doesn't impact price. "It often involves just a slight change in how you design [a room] so it usually doesn't cost more money. The only cost might be something like getting less space in a room because you've made the hallways wider," he says.

Selling Clients on Universal Design

Helping clients understand how they can benefit from universal design features is key to selling the concept.

"Remodelers should frame it as a full-faceted concept that adapts a home or a space in the home to all its occupants," Taddei says. "You should do a needs assessment when you speak to clients, and explain that [universal design] modifications can be something as simple as widening halls and doorways, installing upper and lower cabinets based on a client's height, or adding door levers instead of round handles—it is about make adjustments based on clients' needs."

Taddei uses his own situation as an example. "I built a ranch house with three bedrooms upstairs and a bedroom and master downstairs so when the kids moved out we could live on the first floor. We also have laundry on the first floor and easy access to the outside—our family situation changed but our living style has not," he says. "My wife and I have bad knees and I have back problems, so we recognized the need."

Maicus suggests letting clients know universal design is worthwhile from multiple perspectives.

"From a design concept, customers can achieve beautiful open spaces that make for attractive homes. Universal design is really not only about needing barrier-free spaces, although the nice thing about creating these spaces is that if you do happen to need this in the future, the remodeling is already conducive to your needs," he says.

There is also an often-overlooked plus. "If you don't need this accommodation, and decide to leave your home, then you've added value to your home from a resale perspective," Maicus concludes.

Industry Resources

National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). The Association offers several educational options including the new Universal Design/Build course and The Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) designation program. For more information about NAHB's educational programs, visit www.nahb.org/page.aspx/landing/sectionID=1 or call 800-368-5242.

National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). The Association offers classes including the Universal Remodeling Education Program, which provide the tools needed to sell and conduct remodeling projects based on universal design principles. This course also serves as a prep course for the Universal Design Certified Professional (UDCP) designation. For more information, visit www.nari.org/education/universal_remodeling.asp or call 847-298-9200.