



# Ten Essential Elements For Aging In Place

A Checklist For  
Independence

By

Michael A. Thomas, FASID  
The Design Collective Group, Inc





**A Time For Independence.  
A Time For Freedom.  
A Time For Aging In Place.**

**“Beginning January 1, 2006, on average, a new 60 year old was celebrating a birthday every seven seconds, and these celebrations will continue for another 18 years.**

**The impact of the Baby Boomer and this demographic shift will affect every level of our social, economic and political systems.”**

--The White House  
Council on Aging  
Executive Summary



The concept of residential design for aging-in-place is simple: create houses and homes, condos and retreats that can adapt to an elder population, segments of the society who are or will begin to endure the aging process. Pretty simple concept really but not an easy task when one considers that most typical American housing has all sorts of physical obstacles that can confront its occupants and restrict them from freely moving about during routine and normal daily living activities. Add the element of the natural human aging process and the situation can get more complicated. But it doesn't need to be that way.

*The time to make changes to one's living environment is before the need arises, before a crisis or an incident occurs that forces immediate change.*

This checklist was developed from more than two decades of design experience working for a variety of clients from millenials to boomers, most of whom never considered that aging in place and “universal design” was something for them.

I am pleased to share these best practices in this guide to help you create spaces that are safe and secure, no matter age or ability and design living environments that are accessible and adaptable for a lifetime of use and enjoyment.

- Isn't that what independence is all about?

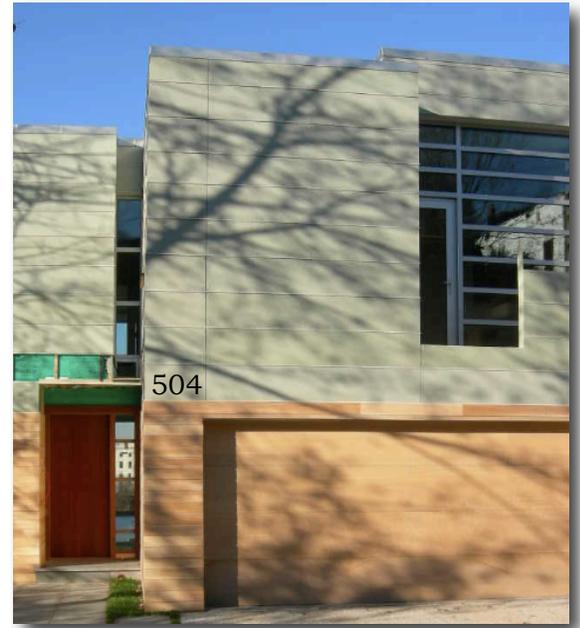
~ Michael A. Thomas, FASID





## 1. Make The Home Accessible To All.

- Make it clear whose home it is with numbers that can be seen easily from the street by family, friends, guests ( and for emergency personnel.)
- Provide a clearly defined path to the entry without curbs, steps or stairs.
- Use a ramp when there are changes to the landscape elevation then build up earthen berms and add plant material for aesthetics.
- If it is necessary to use steps, use a full length handrail to provide support. Create a visual clue at the edge of stair treads with a contrasting material to make it clear that there is a change in elevation.
- Use textured surface pathway materials to avoid the possibility of a slip and fall with a possibility of an injury to those approaching the home or entering doorways.



## 2. Provide One, Preferably A Second Fully Accessible Entry.

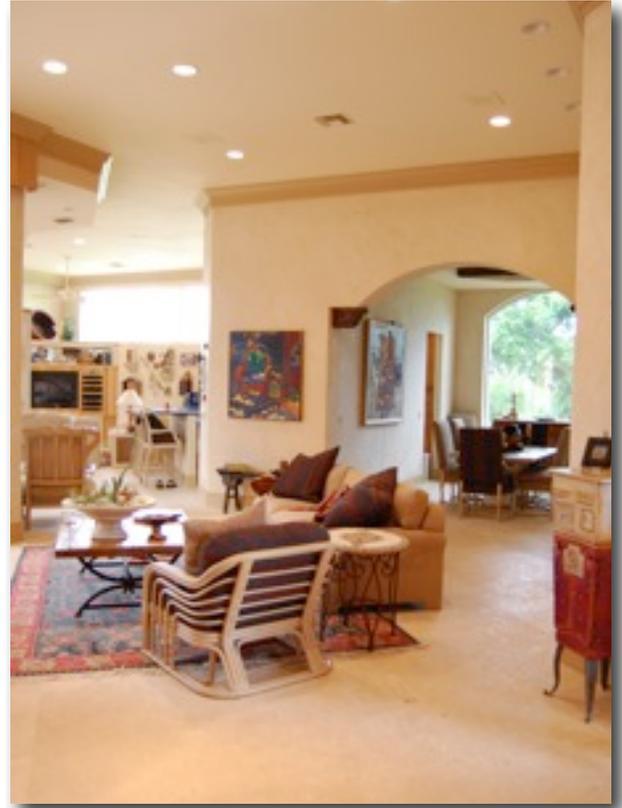


- There should always be an easy and accessible way to get into and out of the home ~ especially if there is an emergency.
- Guests to the home should feel welcome so make all accessible entries attractive. Those who might have disabilities shouldn't have to use only a side, rear or garage door that might make them feel a second class citizen.
- Install two peep holes, one about 30" below the other to permit the owner to see who might be standing - or sitting (crouching) - at the door. This will increase occupant safety as well.
- Provide a shelf, a recessed niche or perhaps a bench near the side of the door to rest packages when opening a door.
- Avoid the use of mats at the door unless they are recessed or anchored in some manner.
- Entryways should be covered and protected from rain, wind, snow and ice.
- Install an illuminated door bell and a door knocker to alert the occupants of guests, delivery people or neighbors
- Plan on adequate lighting around the entry and consider using long-life lights such as compact fluorescent or LED bulbs to reduce maintenance.
- Use handles on doors rather than knobs for easier access.



### 3. Plan For Wide Open Spaces

- Avoid the use of excess furniture that will clog up important paths between the rooms and spaces.
- Ideally there needs to be a minimum 32 inches, preferably 36", of clear width between door jambs to achieve better accessibility.
- Use off-set hinges when doors are small to permit the door to swing out and away from the jamb.
- Use textured flooring materials. And there should be smooth and nearly level transitions between flooring materials to avoid tripping.
- Open floor plans, double doors, pocket doors, bi-fold doors and accordian doors can give better access to spaces and increase sight lines.
- Halls should be as wide as possible with a minimum of 42" in width at any one point.



### 4. Use Seating To Fit Every Body.

- Arms on chairs and sofas should extend to the front of the seat to help getting in and out of the seat.
- Seats should be comfortable but firm and generally about 17" in height from the floor. Knees should be level with the hips when in a seated position.
- Consider adding an armless chair to permit someone in a wheelchair to slide out and over on the the seat of the chair without having to work around an arm.
- Allow open space around furniture so that someone in a wheelchair or using a walker can move into the conversation grouping and not feel left out.
- Keep maintenance under control by the use of fabrics and covers that require little or no maintenance and are easy to clean should there be an accident.
- Vinyls and leathers make it easy to slide on a chair seat or bench.
- There should be lamps on tables that are easy to turn on and tables around the favorite chair that can be pulled up easily. Choose finishes that are easy to clean and require little or no maintenance.
- Ottomans and benches make great additional seating but avoid using casters as they can make the furniture piece slip easily away often without warning.



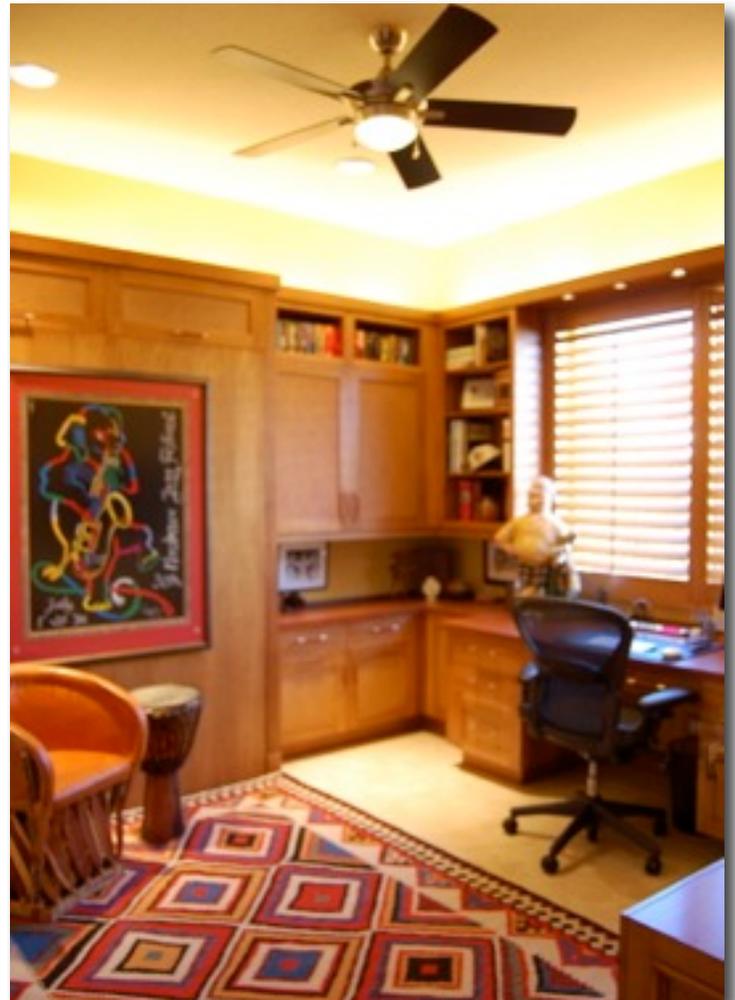
## 5. Use Pulls Everywhere.

- Use lever style handles on cabinet, passage and entry doors to make them easier to operate.
- Knobs and pulls can often make it difficult to open doors and drawers especially if they are heavy or filled with items.
- Choose handles that contrast well with their backgrounds to make them easier to find in the dark or in unlit spaces.
- For people with arthritis, wrapping a towel or washcloth around a handle may make it easier to open a door, cabinet or appliance.
- At the sink, handles on faucets make turning them on and off much easier than knobs, particularly when hands are wet.
- Pullout shelving makes life so much easier when needing to reach items stored deep inside base cabinetry.
- Large pantry doors and sliding glass doors can be heavy to operate. Use ready-made handle hardware that will fit over or adjacent to the door hardware.



## 6. Create Flexible Retreats.

- Caregivers, from family to friends to healthcare professionals are vital for some folks. They assist them at home and help them to maintain a measure of independence. But it is important to remember that caregivers need their own space too.
- Consider converting a bedroom or den into a multi-use, multi-purpose space for sleeping, reading and resting.
- In tight spaces, a wall bed or a sleeper sofa will provide the sleeping spaces while keeping the room less of a full time bedroom area.
- Include storage cabinetry, dresser or chest or outfit a closet for the caregiver who must frequently stay over for a few days or for an extended period of time.
- Provide the caregiver with their own TV, phone and Internet access so they feel connected to their families and the rest of the world.
- Caregivers need privacy. So give them easy access to a separate bathroom, ideally one not used by resident members of the household.





## 7. Plan For A Main Floor Accessible Bathroom & A Bedroom

- Guests who visit will appreciate simple and thoughtful accommodations made for their needs should they have a disability and for instance can't climb stairs.
- A family member or friend who can't stay in their own place alone for a period of time will be able to find comfort and security in spaces that suits their needs for accessibility and privacy.
- With 76 million Baby Boomers, studies seem to indicate a first floor accessible space may increase the value of the real estate.
- Keep in mind that a wheelchair requires a turning radius of a minimum of 60" so plan bed and bath spaces accordingly.
- Whether planning a new or remodeling an existing space, consider attaching the accessible bath and bedroom together as a suite or a least keep them close and available to one another.



## 8. Choose Appliances For Safety, Access & Convenience.



- Drawer style or side-by-side refrigerators provide greater access to what's inside and makes it easier to see what's behind or beneath upper or lower shelves. Look for ones with glass shelves, too.
- Choose a cook top with the controls on the front or perhaps on the side but never on the back side of the unit.
- Consider the placement of the microwave so that it can be used by someone in a seated position. And consider those that have well illuminated controls and place them at eye level.
- A side opening oven keeps individuals from having to reach over a hot oven door to remove what's inside.
- Install the dishwasher at 6" to 18" above the floor to make loading and unloading easier on the back.
- Laundry is a chore but is easier to manage when the washer and dryer are located near the sleeping spaces.
- A stack washer-dryer combo will save space but a side by side set on raised pedestals will make their use more convenient.
- Keep a fire extinguisher in a location that is easy to reach in the event of an accident. Consider a location that is not under the sink buried behind other items.



## 9. Choose The Right Kind Of Surfaces

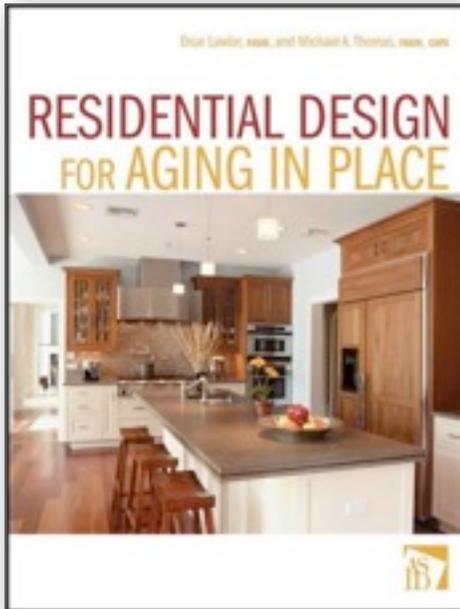
- Select flooring materials that have a texture to their surface to increase traction and to help reduce the possibility of a slip.
- Carpeting should be of a type that has a lower pile or nap to make walking over it or rolling on it easier. Avoid thick carpeting pads, too.
- Avoid the use of tiles or natural materials like marble that have a slippery, shiney surface. When wet these materials can make floors dangerous.
- If there are to be area rugs, make sure that they are secured in some fashion. Better yet, recess them into the surface to keep them level with the materials around them.
- Flooring materials such as wood and cork will help to reduce the noise factor~especially in large open spaces. And use a cork underlayment to reduce the sound of hard show heels over those hard surfaces.
- Consider how the materials are to be maintained and choose those that are easy to care for or that resist stains and dirt by their very nature.
- Carpet tiles like those used in commercial spaces can help keep a space looking fresh and can be easily replaced should something happen that would spoil their appearance.



## 10. Make The Home Personal

- One's living environment should be a reflection of one's taste in style and design but it also needs to be functional and safe.
- Keep one's personal mementos such as favorite books and pictures displayed but avoid cluttering spaces that make it challenging to keep clean and neat.
- Light, bright and/or contrasting colors will help to improve visibility especially in darker environments but color will also add to the personal aspect when favorite colors are incorporated into furnishings and fixtures.
- Use windowcoverings that will make it easy to bring the natural light into the rooms. Windows with sill heights of no more than 30" above the floor allow one to look out at nature and feel connected to the environment.
- One of the concerns is that there are limited choices in design for aging-in-place and using certain kinds of products will make the spaces appear too institutional. Grab bars for instance often bring about thoughts of being in a hospital. However there are many great, well designed choices that will keep the aesthetic level high while keeping the spaces safe and secure.





*“This great book is the professional’s definitive guide to designing a home to gracefully age in place.”*

## Residential Design For Aging In Place

By: Michael A. Thomas, FASID and Drue Lawlor, FASID

For More Information, Visit [www.iageinplace.com](http://www.iageinplace.com)



301 N Palm Canyon Drive, Showroom #103  
Palm Springs, CA 92262

760 . 322 . 3784

Visit Us On The Web: [TheDesignCollectiveGroup.com](http://TheDesignCollectiveGroup.com)