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# HOME & DESIGN

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MTI Whirlpools

**PRACTICAL DESIGN:** This bathroom has all the elements for Aging in Place -- a zero barrier shower threshold for walkers and wheelchairs, shower seat, hand-held shower, a foot bath with whirlpool jets and an attractive grab bar.

## AGELESS DESIGN

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to help them age gracefully at home*

## Ageless design

### Manufacturers finally create stylish products for baby boomers to help them age gracefully at home



By Charlyne Varkonyi Schaub

Michael Thomas, an interior designer, and his design associate, Ann Huff, were working with a snowbird in her 60s who was preparing to live in South Florida full time. While discussing her bathroom remodel, they suggested putting plywood behind the shower to reinforce the wall for grab bars, creating two levels of counters and installing a curbless entry shower.

This bathroom looks elegant but it also has all the elements for Aging in Place -- a zero barrier shower threshold for walkers and wheelchairs, shower seat, hand-held shower, a foot bath with whirlpool jets and an attractive grab bar. - MTI Whirlpools

"I appreciate what you are doing, but I don't want any of that crap in my house," she said.

Her negative response is typical, South Florida designers say.

"There is resistance because people are in denial," says Paula Hesch, a Miami designer and Certified Aging in Place Specialist trained by a National Association of Home Builders' program. "It would be nice to educate everyone, but truthfully I don't think people want to change until something happens to them or someone in their family."

Not only do homeowners resist changes in the bathroom, the kitchen is also a denial zone. Designers suggest opening up cabinetry under sinks and stovetops to allow cooking to be done by someone in a wheelchair. They suggest two levels of counters so someone in a wheelchair can cut vegetables or season meat. And designers want to include plenty of pull-out drawers and place microwaves under counters so they can be reached. But denial can change to thankfulness. Thomas, co-author with Drue Lawlor of *Residential Design for Aging in Place* (Wiley, \$80), says his client was concerned what the design would say about her and her husband to the friends and family who visited them.

The designers didn't give up. They switched their strategy and convinced her that changes would make the property more marketable. A few months later, she had hip surgery and called to thank them for their perseverance.

Few people want to admit they are aging or that they may become disabled. The reality is that 76 million baby boomers, who have influenced every age bracket they have been in thus far, are turning 65 at the rate of 10,000 a day for the next 19 years, according to the Pew Research Center. These boomers, who have fueled "stay young" products such as hair dyes, anti-wrinkle creams and cosmetic surgery, reject thoughts of going into a nursing home or making their homes appear institutional.

Manufacturers such as Kohler and MTI Whirlpools recognize this emerging market. They are creating more "aging in place" products that look stylish but will help people navigate their homes as they become less agile. They are giving them names that don't sound like they came out of an Americans with Disabilities Act handbook. Grab bars are called balance bars or balance beams and have designs that match decorative towel bars and toilet paper holders. ADA height toilets are called Comfort Height or chair height. Barrier-free showers are called curbless showers and can be designed to look like they belong in an upscale spa.



#### What you can do

Michael Thomas, author of Residential Design for Aging in Place, offers this checklist for changes that should be made to your home:

- Wider exterior doors
- Level door thresholds
- Wider hallways
- Non-skid floors
- Enhanced lighting
- Good acoustics
- Higher toilets
- Curbless showers
- Residential elevators
- Low-maintenance finishes

#### Resources

Michael Thomas:  
[www.thedesigncollectivegroup.com](http://www.thedesigncollectivegroup.com)

Kohler: [www.us.kohler.com/bold-independence/product-solutions](http://www.us.kohler.com/bold-independence/product-solutions)

MTI Whirlpool:  
[http://mtiwhirlpools.com/designs\\_for\\_generations/aging-in-place](http://mtiwhirlpools.com/designs_for_generations/aging-in-place)

National Home Demonstration Project: [www.udll.com](http://www.udll.com)

Spokespeople for both Kohler and MTI Whirlpools said they have had products in their lines for several years that meet aging-in-place criteria, but are just starting to use that label. This concept, also called universal design or multi-generational design, recognizes needs and abilities of people of all ages, including the elderly or physically disabled.

"It is our belief that you don't have to have institutional looking products in order to have universally friendly products," says Michael Kornowa, director of marketing for MTI Whirlpools. "They can be designed nicely to integrate into a household."

#### Georgia home

He gave the example of a home in St. Simons, Ga., which features MTI Whirlpools' products. This large bathroom with a mixture of natural stone, glass and wood looks upscale, not institutional. The shower base was recessed into the floor and topped with a teak shower tray to create a zero barrier threshold, which allows someone with a wheelchair or walker easy access through the frameless, wide-entry shower door. The teak seat attaches to the wall and can flip up when it is not in use. A hand-held shower head makes it easy to rinse off while seated.

Outside the shower is a luxurious Jentle Ped, which features three full-size whirlpool jets, built-in foot exercise bars and an optional cleaning system. An attractive grab bar is hung vertically on the wall.

Nicole Allis, Kohler's manager of bathing and showering products, says the aging-in-place market, which started to become a factor in the last five years, can't be ignored.

"Kohler has always focused on design," she says. "If they want to stay in their home, we don't want to make it look like a nursing home."

One of Kohler's best example is the Comfort Height toilet, designed with attractive styles and a seat height the same as an average chair. It fits aging-in-place needs and has been on the market for several years. Another is the Belay tile-in handrail, introduced in 2009, which seamlessly integrates the rail into the existing tile surround.

Kohler introduced the Elevance Rising Wall Bath, a more attractive answer to the walk-in tub, at the International Builders' Show in January in Orlando. Allis says a lot of research went into what is right and wrong with a typical walk-in tub. (This adaptation, however, isn't for everyone; it sells for \$9,000 for a standard tub and \$10,000 with a bubble massage.)

"The bath has a wall that rises," Allis says. "It is more gracious and far more functional than a walk-in bath. It feels like a normal bath, but is easier to use. There is a manual pull-up that is less than 5 pounds or what we like to say is less than the weight of a half-gallon of milk. It rises and locks in place. It's a deep soaking experience."

Thomas, who is also national president of the American Society of Interior Designers and past president of the Florida South chapter, says he has been an advocate of educating members on business opportunities. He saw the potential aging-in-place market a decade ago.

“It was very clear that this would be a cultural revolution because of the aging baby boomers,” he says.

Joyce Shore, a Fort Lauderdale interior designer and ASID member, responded to this new market two years ago when she became an aging-in-place specialist.

“If the design doesn’t look like an institution, clients will do it,” she says. “Boomers are becoming more aware of these things. A number of them are taking care of their parents. I have a 92-year-old mother and it makes me think of my own future.”

Some of her suggestions include: widening doorways to 36 inches, building a seat or shelf in the back of the shower, adding lever handles on doors and faucets, remodeling kitchen cabinets with full extension drawers, locating a microwave under the counter, installing dishwasher drawers and replacing shiny tile with non-slip surfaces.

### **Changing needs**

Dalia Berlin, another ASID member who practices in North Miami Beach, says her interest in aging-in-place design began about five years ago when she was doing work for clients moving into the Hyatt Classic, a senior living facility in Aventura.

“I began to realize that as my clients aged, their needs were changing,” she says.

Many older South Florida homes have 24-inch doorways and it is impossible to get through them with a walker or wheelchair, she says. In many cases, she says, it is easier for people to move and downsize to a home that is easier to retrofit.

If the home can be remodeled to make it easier to navigate, it may be the answer — especially for those with Alzheimer’s who may get lost in a new environment.

“Some people are best aging in their home,” she says. “I have been around enough clients who lost their faculties and they don’t know who they or their spouse is,” she says. “They lose their dignity if they are not able to find the bathroom in the middle of the night.” If they have to be moved, Berlin tries to get the same furnishings to make them feel more secure in a new environment.

Hesch added aging-in-place work to her business about a year ago, although she had been teaching design students at Florida International University about universal design since the late 1990s.

She warns about waiting until it is too late. That is what happened with a 93-year-old woman who had a stroke, became paralyzed and was in a wheelchair. Her daughter hired Hesch to see what could be done to help her mother stay in the home she had lived in for 50 years.

Hesch found the doorways had to be widened, the pile of the carpet in the master suite was too high, the bathroom vanity needed an opening for the wheelchair, the shower curb had to be lowered, the shower door needed to be widened and a seat needed to be added to the shower.

“We hired a contractor, but unfortunately, the mother passed away,” Hesch says. “You shouldn’t wait until you are 93. We all need to start educating ourselves. As designers, we want to make people aware that they can age in a well-designed home.”

MTI’s Kornowa sums it up best: “We are designing today with an eye toward tomorrow.”