

ProSales

From: [ProSales June-July 2013](#)

Posted on: June 19, 2013

Designed for a Lifetime

Universal design products and services can help you serve the “silver tsunami” and give your business a competitive edge.

By [Kate Tyndall](#)



Accessibility is key in this universally designed kitchen where multi-level countertops and high toe kicks allow seated users to move closer to work surfaces.

Credit: Golden Rule Builders

Bill McHugh has a story to tell, one that will resonate with a lot of baby boomers.

The Austin, Texas, custom builder's mother was turning 80, and she wanted to remain independent, a challenge for McHugh, who knew a lot about building but not so much about designing for the challenges faced by an aging body.

What he found was universal design (UD)—a philosophy that calls for 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.

McHugh learned as he went along, cobbling together information from a variety of sources. He did so well on

his mother's house that it sparked his interest in doing more homes with universal design.

Customers are coming, he says. In the past year, his company, Tier1 Group, has completed five UD remodeling projects. He only wishes dealers would key in. Finding suppliers was a challenge on that first job and remains so now, he says.

"Local suppliers didn't have the stuff. The dealers had no clue. They just don't," McHugh says. "In the past few years, they've just been trying to survive. I think it'll come, but they are still about selling the sticks and not being consciously aware of these lifestyle changes. "It's tough enough to educate the trades, but even harder to educate the suppliers," he says, "There is a great opportunity here."

Silver Tsunami

McHugh is an example of a trend that's reaching a tipping point if for no other reason than simple demographics. America is about to get hit by what some UD advocates call a "silver tsunami" of baby boomers, that tumultuous band born between 1946 and 1964. The first of the boomers turned 65 in 2011.

In less than two decades, every living member of that 77 million-strong cohort will be between the ages of 65 and 85 and account for 20% of the country's total population, according to U.S. Census estimates. And, 90% of these boomers report they want to stay in their homes as they grow older.

Boomers may be determined to defy the limitations of age, but they're certain to encounter the normal consequences of aging: reduced vision, a process that begins in the 40s; less strength; and a decline in fine-motor skills. These diminutions occur in the absence of any significant disability. At age 60, for instance, adults need three times the light they did at age 20 to see properly. On top of that, Census data reveal that more than 29% of Americans 65 and over suffer some form of physical disability.

Universal design can mitigate a lot of these challenges with the use of layered lighting to banish shadows; flat thresholds at all entrances to reduce tripping hazards; roll-in (curbless) showers equipped with adjustable showerheads, flip-down seats, and support bars; comfort-height toilets (higher than standard toilets); wide hallways and 3-foot wide doorways; multi-level counters; and pull-down shelves in kitchens.

But there's more than just products involved here. Universal design also calls upon the builder to think about such items as extra wood behind the walls to brace support bars and benches. "I look at universal design as advanced building science," McHugh says.

In Boone, N.C., where there are lots of second homes and wealthy retirees, you might think universal design would have some traction. Dwight Simmons sighed and gave a short laugh when he heard the question.

"Oh, I know about [universal design], but no builders are asking about it," the founder of [Mountain Lumber](#) says. "Dealers are missing a golden opportunity."

When Simmons built his own house in 2008, he built it to last employing design strategies that would make it possible for him and his wife to remain in their home for the rest of their lives. "We didn't have a clue about universal design then," he says, but as a green dealer, Simmons did know a thing or two about sustainability. "Our home is 50% better than code," he says. "We did tighten it up.

"Our third bedroom we made self-contained with a kitchen and private entrance and a bathroom with a no-threshold shower and support bars," he says. "This was our last hurrah and we wanted to get everything in place. I know it works."

In 2011, Simmons earned the CAPS (Certified Aging in Place Specialist) designation offered by the NAHB (National Association of Home Builders) because he thought it might open up some opportunities for his business and give him a way to differentiate Mountain Lumber from other dealers.

"Based on our experience building a new home in 2008, we were able to see firsthand the benefits of incorporating some design changes that have positive long-term benefits," he says.

Though he clearly realizes the opportunities that UD offers dealers, Simmons is frustrated by the lack of interest he sees from both builders and dealers in his area.

"Partnering [with builder customers] is the way to go for dealers," he says, but he acknowledges the difficulties that lie ahead. "We're all wearing six hats or more. I have found dealers to be very stubborn, you know. A lot of dealers are operating [based on] how they used to do things back in the '70s, and getting them to take on something new is hard."

Who You Calling Old?

Dealers are not the only group resistant to change. One major hurdle for a wider embrace of universal design comes from the very population who will shortly be needing its comfort.

No one knows better than Matt Thornhill, head of the Boomer Project, a marketing consultancy specializing in the boomer consumer, how resistant members of the silver tsunami are to talk of aging and the need to prepare for it.

"Boomers as old as 67 say, with a straight face, that 85 is old," he said in a keynote address at the recent Universal Design Summit in St. Louis. "They don't think they need universal design."

Designers, builders, and product manufacturers have struggled for years to find ways to talk about universal design without mentioning aging. At the Universal Design Summit, the consensus was—regardless of the term used—to make the concept aspirational. If the design isn't beautiful, if the products aren't desirable, boomers won't want it.

"We need to get away from the medical model," says designer Mary Jo Peterson, founder of a design consultancy in Brookfield, Conn.

For instance, a ramp makes it possible for a wheelchair user to enter a home without assistance. But ramps are unsightly and scream "disabled." However, a gently sloped paved pathway from the street to the entry door with a flush threshold accomplishes the same thing invisibly. Users of all ages and abilities, from a mom pushing a stroller to a teenage soccer player temporarily on crutches due to a sports injury to a wheelchair user, will find it useful.

But the small number of dealers who have heard the term, or its immediate (and still bandied-about) predecessor, aging-in-place design, think UD has more to do with grab bars and accessibility issues required by code under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 than a way of building that is appropriate for everyone.

Design for All Ages

A few, such as [Cascade Lumber](#) purchasing manager John Noonan, also fear more government mandates. Noonan regards UD as just using common sense.

"What we try to do when we design a home is design for all ages and abilities. I try to make sure we have a bath with a 5-foot turning radius and flat entries," he says. "Even if the customer doesn't, we bring it up as a talking point when working with our customers on new homes or additions, regardless of their age. This also applies to our kitchen and bath sales."

Older Folks Spend More...

Elderly homeowners spend considerably more on home renovations than younger ones. According to the Hanley Wood Housing 360 Survey, those 65+ years of age spend on average \$12,843 on additions to their homes. They'll average \$8,602 on major replacements and \$7,127 on alterations.

"The entire building community is confused about what universal design is," says Bill Owens, president of [Owens Construction](#) in Powell, Ohio. He believes so strongly in UD that he is involved in the creation of the Better Living Design Institute (BLD), along with sponsor AARP, to promote the concept of UD under the moniker of "better living design" (another example of a movement in search of a name).

Eventually, the institute hopes to offer a BLD Certification for builders, remodelers, and designers, which will assure homeowners that their homes have been built to the highest standards of universal—or better living—design.

Builders who are doing UD construction and remodels are still the exception rather than the rule, but they say they could sure use dealers' help. "Dealers could be the white knights in this scenario by providing educational materials and information to builders and retail customers, and holding Saturday classes in their showrooms," Owens says.

Anthony Palladino, residential designer for [Golden Rule Builders](#), agrees, saying, "It would add a lot of value if yards could give me information and knew what I was trying to achieve. I would pay more to go to a yard who helped me."

The Catlett, Va.-based builder specializes in green and energy-efficient design and has done a number of projects using UD principles, including a home for client Ron Knecht in Nokesville, Va., that won the 2012 GreenBuilder Best Aging-in-Place Home Award.

Palladino took one younger client, his pregnant wife, and their 2-year-old daughter to tour Knecht's house, and "they loved it. They loved the walk-in showers and wide walkways and no steps from the garage [into the house] and the package shelves at the front and side doors. I see large families really being able to use this," he says.

Jeffrey Hoag, a sales rep for ProBuild in St. Cloud, Minn., sees universal design coming into play in a greater percentage of his designs for customers. "Younger clients are easy to convert to the idea of universal design, as they see the resale potential," he says.

"Universal design is where building is going," says Bryce Jacobs, who teaches National Association of the Remodeling Industry's UD certification classes.

Jacobs, who is vice president of [Dave Fox Design Build](#) in Columbus, Ohio, says, "It would be hugely beneficial to us and to them [dealers] to be familiar with universal design. Each of us in the market is looking for a way to differentiate ourselves. Remodelers go with what they know, so if vendors and dealers can give them a reason to do things differently and supply what they need, it would be very helpful."

Related Articles:

[Convenience and Cool Sell](#)

[Universal Design in Practice](#)

Keywords

Subject

[Construction Trends](#), [Remodeling](#), [Dealers](#)

- [View more keywords](#)

More from ProSales

[Construction Trends](#)[**Consumer's Confident in Housing Market**](#)

Consumers are more likely to buy a home as the economy and the housing market rebound.

[Dealers](#)[**PSBU: Dealer, Distributor, and Manufacturer News**](#)

Roofing Supply Group appointed of Shaun Mara chief financial officer. More news from...

[Remodeling](#)[**Reimbursements Uncertain for Jersey Shore Homeowners**](#)

N.J. state funds to help homeowners rebuild after Hurricane Sandy aren't a sure thing...

[Kate Tyndall](#)[**Upselling From a Distributor's Perspective**](#)

Upselling is an art and to Waltham, Mass.-based Harvey Building Products, it's...

[FEATURE](#)[**101 Ideas to Improve Your Business**](#)[Construction Trends](#)[**Lightweight Framing Nailers**](#)

These sub-8-pound guns are comfortable to use and surprisingly powerful.

[Dealers](#)[**'Typical' Dealer Returned to Operating Profit Last Year, BMOCA Finds**](#)

One of the largest annual surveys to collect bottom-line numbers from dealers...

[Remodeling](#)[**Remodeling Set for Best Year Since '05, Metrostudy Predicts**](#)

Residential Remodeling Index show 192 markets beating old peaks, 364 markets growing.

[Kate Tyndall](#)[**Need Business Advice? These Outside Sources Can Help**](#)[FEATURE](#)[**Petro Gains Have This Texas Town Poised for Big Housing Growth**](#)

Comments

Please read our [Content Guidelines](#) before posting.



Post a new comment

0 Comments

[RSS](#) | [Subscribe](#)