

# Universal Connections

How to navigate the nuances of building and selling universal design projects

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**By 2020, the number** of Americans age 50+ is expected to reach nearly 120 million, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections. And with a majority of them interested in living in their own homes for as long as possible, universal design (UD) is going to be an area of importance for remodelers for years to come.

With that in mind, this year's Cost vs. Value report was the first to include a UD-themed project: converting a 'standard' bathroom into one that incorporates accessible features. According to the report, it's a decent investment, with an average 68.4% ROI. But in speaking with universal design experts, two things became clear: that creating a well-designed, accessible space isn't always so easy, and that (like many home improvement projects) the true value of universal design lies beyond its monetary gains.

## MASTER THE BASICS

Perhaps the first challenge for remodelers is understanding what exactly universal design is. According to Richard Duncan, executive director of The RL Mace Universal Design Institute in Ashe-

ville, N.C., "A lot of the design standards for homes were developed long ago when the number of older people and the number of people who could survive life with serious health problems just weren't what they are now." He adds, "Universal design does in fact respond to that."

While the main tenant of universal design—making a home safer and more comfortable for its occupants—sounds like a no-brainer, it can be a surprisingly tough sell. "UD principles are very misunderstood," says Erik Listou, co-founder of the Living in Place Institute in Denver. "Consumers typically perceive it as institutional design. The business community, remodelers and designers, they see it as something that's only for people who are aging or those with a current disability."

Contrary to these misconceptions, style and marketability are part of UD principles, says Duncan. "We say it has to look good and work well," he explains. "You [should] not have people walk into a bathroom and say, 'Oh, this is something for Grandma.' If that's their reaction, then you've done something wrong."



## Adapting to Change

This bathroom by Glickman Design Build, which won a 2015 Chrysalis National Residential Universal Design Award, features accessible and adaptable features such as removable undersink cabinetry.

Says Russ Glickman, president and founder of Glickman Design Build in Rockville, Md., “There’s different levels of finish and different styles. We can do really nice bathrooms that do not look institutional at all.”

For Glickman, the interest in universal design first came on a personal level: His son, born prematurely, experienced complications from cerebral palsy that limited his ability to engage independently in many daily activities. To accommodate their son’s needs, Glickman and his wife made extensive modifications to their home. Word of his skillset spread, and now, UD and accessibility are a major part of what Glickman Design Build offers.

### THREE KEY FACTORS

**1. LAYOUT:** The first thing to consider is if there’s enough space for a client who needs a bit more room to maneuver. Not only do the doorways need to be wider, Glickman notes, but remodelers need to consider the space inside the doorway—a 5-foot turning radius

**In Control** The threshold isn’t the only thing to think about in the shower: Glickman notes that it’s important to include a handheld shower and consider the position and accessibility of the controls.



Morgan Howarth

is the ADA recommendation. “You [also] want to have space for a wheelchair beside the toilet. ... You need space to approach the sink,” Glickman says.

When space around the doorway is at a premium, Duncan suggests considering pocket doors, which “avoid that big door swing.”

**2. DESIGN:** One feature that combines style and functionality is “a horizontal line, especially in the shower, at about 60 inches,” says Listou. “That contrasting line provides a perceptual level and also depth perception where the wall is.”

Listou also suggests using low-contrast colors on the floor to minimize tripping hazards. And when it comes to flooring, slip-resistance is critical, Duncan notes. “[Clients] might want a polished marble on the floor because they like it so much on their countertops, but you have to talk them down from that.”

**3. SELECTIONS:** Curbless showers are one of the most common UD features, since the lack of a threshold makes them easy for anyone to use. But with no barrier to hold in water, remodelers must be mindful of proper drainage during installation, Glickman says.

Grab bars and handholds are critical from both a safety and a design perspective. Luckily, the growing amount of attractive options in this category makes selection easier. Listou offers a practical pointer: “Never install them in a stud; use the appropriate hangers that are designed to hold the product in the wall.”

Another fixture to keep in mind is the toilet—though taller toilets have seen a rebranding lately as ‘comfort-height,’ they might be too tall for smaller people with limited mobility, Duncan says.

### THE NEXT STEPS

To get started in universal design, education is essential. Listou recommends creating “collaborative teams” with members of other industries that can facilitate a better understanding of what an accessible home needs.

Glickman suggests taking NAHB’s Certified Aging in Place Specialist course and NARI’s Universal Design Certified Professional course, as well as hiring an accessibility consultant, if possible, to help with some of the first projects. “Until you do a few of them, it can be kind of hard to get it right on your own.”

Beyond construction, knowing how to market universal design is a skill set of its own. Many clients aren’t sold by the idea of aging or a loss of mobility. Instead, Duncan says, remodelers should emphasize the positive features of UD that will appeal to everyone: “ease of use, spaciousness, and convenience.” Some clients, he adds, will respond to the idea of increased resale value.

When clients are reluctant to think about their future limitations, adaptable projects that can be easily modified to increase accessibility can be a good middle ground. “A lot of people don’t want to have anything that necessarily works for a wheelchair now,” Glickman says. “But if they can have a project that can be adapted [as they age], you can really do a client a great service.”

Listou advises that remodelers “don’t give options for safety—just include it.” That ultimately will help make UD more widely known and accepted, so that clients are already interested. Duncan compares this to how customers now think of green features. “Nowadays, for a lot of people, green is just cool,” he says. “We would love to get universal design to the point of being cool also.”