

Designing for the "Age Wave"

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In designing for the 90's, one reality is that the housing industry will be catering to a more mature population. A significant part of the nation will reach retirement age within the next decade. On a separate front, breakthroughs in medical technology have prolonged life expectancy of the total populace.

Escalating costs and the shortage of retirement facilities have increasingly caused the baby boomers to remodel their homes to accommodate their elderly parents.

These factors have spurred research in behavioral psychology, and performance analysis of barrier-free construction with the aim of achieving sophisticated interiors that foster the users' sense of well-being without compromising health and safety.

To understand our reaction to an environment, we must know how the mind works. Environ-

mental psychologists classify the amount of information environment per unit of time as either high-load (stimulating), or low-load (not stimulating). Upon retiring, executives and professionals who thrived in a high-load environment will be adversely affected by spending time in a home with a constant low-load setting.

It is, therefore, important that designers recognize this issue and arrive at design solutions that are sensitive to the clients' psychological needs.

The distinct relationship between a stimulating environment and feelings of well-being and happiness is particularly significant if the house's occupants start to spend a great deal more time there than before.

Research indicates that exercise, and various forms of entertainment allow people to modify their amount of environmental stimulus, and thus help maintain their intellectual, social and motor skills. The key, therefore, is to provide activity areas that are inviting and functional enough to encourage their frequent use.

As demographic studies attest to the onset of the "age wave", homes that are wheelchair-accessible to accommodate growing numbers of affluent, older people will enjoy increased market appeal and appreciation.

There is no reason why a barrier-free home cannot be as elegantly designed as a conventional structure. Statistics show that a majority of the people will suffer some disability in their lifetime.

The interior appointments of a barrier-free home are invaluable if the occupant becomes disabled, no matter how temporary.

An important step in planning interiors is to analyze whether the housing industry's conventions really meet the needs of the more mature occupant. The types of hardware on sinks, doors, cabinets, electrical outlets and switch plates etc. should be evaluated both for ease of operation and reach. Appliances are often installed without concern for the condition of anyone with less athletic prowess than a professional body-builder.

While there is a new trend of putting in more roll-out shelves for easier access, counters and built-in storage continue to be installed at impractical heights.

In the same vein, architectural elements such as steps and doors or wall openings should be simplified. Perspective-distorting wall configurations should be avoided.

Also, as detailing is usually applied to create visual focus and delineate the boundaries of different objects, care must be taken to ensure that such a design does not overload the senses and confuse the viewer.

Practical considerations regarding furniture selection suggests lightweight but sturdy armchairs with a firmer seat for ease of use. Low-maintenance materials and soil-hiding patterns for flooring and seating, and higher dining table to accommodate wheelchair-users should also be considered.

Slick and reflective flooring should be avoided since they are treacherous when wet, and heavily cushioned floor coverings make walking more difficult for anyone but the able-bodied. For furniture and counters, features such as radius or beveled edges are both attractive and practical.

An infusion of large quantities of light works wonders to visually expand the space. On the other hand, caution must be exercised against employing an overly dramatic lighting scheme that may overtax or impair the occupants' vision. As people age, their eyesight may become adversely affected by glares and strong brightness contrasts.

Wall, floor and window coverings and furniture should be chosen to avoid excessive reflections in the interior. Also, advanced lighting techniques such as light and shadow displays may not be as applicable for similar reasons.

Moreover, with time, the eyes lose much of their sensitivity to blue/green colors, so every effort should be made to establish an attractive alternative palette to help augment the users' depth perception regarding the furnishings and their relationship to the built environment.