



Remodeling graceful for aging

Smart updates allow homeowners to live independently longer

By Jen Larson Roesler

It's not something anyone likes to think about, yet it's something that will eventually happen to all of us: We age. Along the way, things that once seemed simple require a bit more effort. Things like climbing the stairs to the bedroom; getting into and out of the tub; or carrying a basket of laundry up from the basement.

Many homeowners would like to stay in their homes and live independently as long as possible. Fortunately, forward-thinking firms like Sylvestre Construction (sylvestreconstruction.com) have found ways to make home modifications that allow people to manage the challenges of aging and live safely and happily in the homes they love.

Homes that fit our needs

Renovating to make homes easier to live in isn't just something for people with aging on their minds, says John Sylvestre, owner and chief architect of Sylvestre Construction. "We work with a wide range of people. From a





woman whose daughter lives with a range of physical disabilities, to a client who is 85 years old and wants to stay in her own home, to my contemporaries who are getting ready to retire and want their home set up so when they're retired they won't have to spend money on a remodeling project."

➊ The goal they all share is to make modifications that make their homes more livable. For someone who has never thought much about their home's layout beyond the basics, the most common renovations Sylvestre's team performs might come as something of a surprise.

The goal: One-level living

Think about the everyday tasks that require you to make a few trips up and down the stairs on any given day. Now imagine how you'd accomplish the same tasks (and stair climbing) with limited mobility. That's why Sylvestre says that while bathroom renovations are certainly a priority, other modifications make equal sense when it comes to livability.

"One of the goals is often to bring the laundry up from the basement," he explains. Simply eliminating the need for homeowners to climb up and down stairs — carrying heavy baskets of clothes — can mean the difference between remaining independent or needing outside help.

"In general, we try to make homes more user-friendly and get most necessary functions onto the first level," he says. While elevators and other devices are an option, usually a creative re-purposing of space is enough to make an upstairs laundry center

a reality. In addition, retirement living usually means an empty nest, so the large-capacity washer and dryer once needed for a growing family simply aren't necessary anymore and stacked space-saving machines make more sense all around.

In general, the more essential spaces that can be accommodated on the first level, the better. Bringing a bedroom onto the first floor by reconfiguring spaces can be a major upgrade in terms of livability. "Then if you've had a knee or hip replacement or something similar, people can still work from home if needed, and manage by themselves on one level."

Smoothing out steps and creating all-around accessibility

Most Minneapolis homes of a certain age have steps not only to get from the basement to the main level or from the first-floor to second-floor bedrooms, but also smaller sets of stairs here and there. "The few steps up from the garage or from the yard to the back door can present big challenges," says Sylvestre. Remodeling tweaks can remove these types of obstacles that might otherwise go unconsidered.

Of course, one of the trickiest areas of accessibility in the home is the bathroom, with its traditional narrow doorway, small footprint and a bathtub that can be difficult to get into and out of.

"When space is tight, we look to other spaces around the bathroom to see what we might be able to gain. In some cases, a small adjacent bedroom can be used," says Sylvestre. Above all, access is key. Doorways can be widened, and a variety of tub and

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shower options make it easier and safer for people to roll in or simply walk into a shower.

“Many homeowners choose to take out existing bathtub/shower combinations in exchange for an accessible shower,” he says. “That’s something to consider in terms of resale value; it’s best to keep one bathtub in the home and convert another space to an accessible shower if possible, so that both options are there for future residents. In other cases, where there’s a half bath existing, we can add a shower to create that one-level living that’s so important,” Sylvestre says.

Remodeling with an eye on the future

Even if homeowners aren’t thinking about remodeling for aging at the moment, current projects can include components that will make future accessibility modifications easier to make down the road.

In the course of a kitchen renovation for one client, Sylvestre shares that “we were able to rough in plumbing and electricity in a corner of the client’s kitchen, so that if she wanted to move the laundry upstairs in the future, the space would be ready for it.”

Above all, it’s comforting to know that there are steps that can be taken to transform the homes we love into spaces that will gracefully accommodate our aging or other physical challenges that may come our way. “We worked with people who have lived in their home for 50 years who want to make modifications as well as people who are looking at purchasing a new house and want to make sure they can make renovations so it will work for them, before they even buy it,” Sylvestre says.

No matter where you are on your aging — or remodeling — journey, it’s nice to know that the options exist to make our homes work better for us, no matter what stage of life we’re in.
