BASICS OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN

While the tenets of universal design are ever evolving, the term is generally understood to encapsulate "enabling rather than disabling" home design features, such as wider doors and hallways, non-skid flooring, no-threshold entries and showers, raised electrical outlets, ergonomic faucets and cabinet hardware, multi-height countertops and workstations, pull-out cabinet shelves, and the list goes on. The basic philosophy is that a home should be navigable and accommodating to people of all different shapes, sizes, ages, and abilities.

Matt Thornhill, founder of The Boomer Project, a market research initiative based in Richmond, Va., focusing on the 50+ market, noted that there are many universal design lessons to be gleaned from recent consumer product makeovers. When Heinz redesigned its ketchup bottle as a plastic squeeze bottle a couple years back, consumers were liberated from the ritual of turning the traditional glass vessel upside down and banging the bottom – or, alternately, sticking a knife into the neck, only to cause half of its contents to come pouring out. Although a nostalgic few glass bottle lovers protested the change, legions more lauded the packaging modification as an ergonomic masterstroke – one that is just as user-friendly to messy kids as it is to older individuals with arthritic hands.

The challenge for today's builders, architects, designers, and product manufacturers, Thornhill said, is to find ways to make homes just as functional, intuitive, and user-friendly as that ketchup bottle.

Universal design advocates, meanwhile, are facing a different sort of uphill battle: debunking the misconception that anything universally designed must inevitably look institutional or hospital-like. Major manufacturers such as Masco Corp., Kohler, and others have already begun breaking down such misconceptions by example. Today's universal design is the sleek, lever-handle faucet that's easier to maneuver than a knob. It's the in-drawer dishwasher or raised platform washing machine that can be loaded from either a standing or seated position. Or the art-glass task lighting that makes a style statement while simultaneously making it easier to read a recipe, thread a needle, or peel a head of garlic. The part you notice is the aesthetic. The part you appreciate is the functionality.

Experts provided countless other examples of universal design's universal and are quick to point out, for example, that a threshold-free front entry

may be wheelchair accessible, but it also allows parents to roll a stroller inside without waking a sleeping baby. Pull-out base cabinets in the kitchen are a godsend not just for older people, but also for anyone who is not tall – including the 28-year-old woman who is 5-feet tall, lives alone, and can't reach conventional upper cabinets without a ladder. And then there are reinforced grab bars in the bathroom (now available in high-style designs that look like fancy towel racks), which, unlike standard towel racks, will not rip out of the wall if small kids attempt to hang from them.

The great news is that universal design doesn't have to cost a whole lot more than conventional design from a construction standpoint. "You can easily do a 2-foot-8-inch-wide doorway instead of a 2-foot-six-inch with virtually no price difference," Binghamton, N.Y.-based builder and remodeler Mike McGowan said in a press conference. And besides, a wider door feels luxurious in the same way that a taller ceiling height does. If anything, it's more of a design plus than a minus.

One litmus test that McGowan uses to ensure the user-friendliness of his homes is whether a person can navigate and use every feature in the house while wearing mittens. That simple exercise informs specification choices in appliances, door hardware, lighting, and more. "It just requires some retraining and rethinking with our trades," says McGowan, the immediate past chair of the NAHB's 50+ Housing Council. "I've found it's easier to train my guys one way, so everything we do is universal design."