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LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Designing for Time

The best decision you can make about the next chapter of your life in a home is one you make before the first line is drawn.

I recognize that is not a comfortable topic. Most of my clients are in the prime of their lives when they sit down with me, energetic, ambitious, planning a home that reflects everything they have worked toward. The last thing on their minds is a walker in the hallway or a wheelchair at the threshold. I understand that. I also understand that the house we design together today may well be the house they live in for the next thirty or forty years, and that the people who will inhabit it at the end of that span will have different needs than the people sitting across from me now.

My job is to design for both.

This is what the term “Aging in Place” means, properly understood, not a clinical accommodation grafted onto a design as an afterthought, but a set of considered, invisible decisions woven into the fabric of the house from the beginning. Done well, these decisions cost very little at the time of construction and save an enormous amount, in money, in disruption, and in dignity later. Done poorly, or not at all, they leave a family facing expensive retrofits at exactly the moment when the stress of those changes is hardest.

The Conversation I Always Have

When a client tells me they intend to build a legacy home, a house they plan to inhabit not just for years but for decades, a place that will support them through every chapter ahead, I ask them directly how long they expect to stay, and I tell them plainly what designing for that timeline requires.

Some clients in their forties or fifties resist the conversation initially. They are not thinking about limitations. They are thinking about possibilities. I respect that entirely, and I do not frame aging in place as a concession to limitation. I frame it as the intelligent exercise of foresight. The same quality that drives every other good decision in this process. A client who would never dream of designing a kitchen without thinking about how it functions daily is perfectly capable of understanding why they should design a hallway with the same long view in mind.

What I find, almost without exception, is that once clients understand what these decisions look like, once they realize that aging in place does not mean clinical corridors and grab bars protruding from every surface, they embrace the ideas readily. The goal is a house that accommodates the full arc of a life without ever looking like it was designed to do so.

What I Build In, And Why

The specific decisions I consider non-negotiable on any house intended as a long-term home begin with the plan itself. Main level living is the single most important aging in place decision in residential design. A primary bedroom suite on the main floor, accessible without stairs, connected directly to the daily living spaces of the house, means that a couple can inhabit the full

comfort of their home regardless of what mobility challenges may eventually arise. This is not merely a concession to age. It is simply good residential planning, and I advocate for it on nearly every project regardless of the client's current age or physical condition.

Adjacent to the primary suite, I often propose a room that can serve multiple purposes over time. Today it might be a study or a sitting room. Tomorrow it might be a caregiver's room, or an additional bedroom for a family member who needs to be close. Designing that flexibility into the plan costs almost nothing. Reconfiguring a plan that was not designed with it in mind costs considerably more later.

Corridor widths are another decision that is easy to get right at the design stage and difficult to correct later. Standard residential corridors are frequently too narrow to accommodate a walker or wheelchair adequately. A slightly wider hallway, one that reads as generous rather than institutional, solves that problem permanently and adds nothing meaningful to the cost of construction. The same principle applies to door widths throughout the house. Minor effort now can reap tremendous benefits later in life.

In bathrooms, I specify zero-clearance shower entries, flush with the floor, no threshold, no curb, as a standard practice. The absence of a step into a shower eliminates one of the most common and most serious trip hazards in a residential bathroom. A curbless shower also simply looks better, cleaner, more considered, more spa-like in character. This is a case where the aging in place solution and the design solution are identical.

I also specify wood blocking within shower walls, solid backing installed behind the finish material during construction, invisible once the tile is set, at the locations where grab bars may eventually be needed. Installing blocking costs almost nothing during construction. Installing grab bars without it means opening walls. The blocking goes in whether the client expects to need it or not, because I have no way of knowing what thirty years will bring, and neither do they.

Lever door hardware throughout the house is another one of my standard specifications. A lever handle requires no grip, it can be operated with a closed fist, an elbow, a forearm, and for anyone whose hands have been affected by arthritis or injury, the difference between a lever and a round knob is the difference between independence and assistance. Lever hardware also simply looks refined. There is no design penalty for choosing it.

Lighting control systems deserve mention. A well-designed lighting system, one that can be adjusted by a simple press rather than a traditional switch, that can be preset to different levels for different times of day, that can be operated remotely, if necessary, serves clients beautifully throughout their lives and becomes genuinely essential as vision changes with age. I consider these systems an investment in daily quality of life at every age, not merely a future accommodation.

The Elevator That Isn't There Yet

One of the most cost-effective aging in place decisions I make on any multi-level home is one that clients rarely notice at all: I stack closets above one another.

On a home with a main level and either an upper or lower floor, I position adequately-sized closets on each level directly above or below one another. This creates a vertical shaft in the house, a space that currently holds clothing and storage and costs nothing beyond what those closets would have cost anyway. If an elevator is ever needed, that shaft is already there. The structural modifications required to install a residential elevator in a pre-planned shaft are modest. The modifications required to create that shaft in a house that was not designed for it are invasive, expensive, and often involve relocating structural elements.

I have had clients who initially questioned why their closets needed to be stacked. Years later, when a health event in the family made the elevator a genuine consideration, the conversation I remember most vividly is the one where they thanked me for thinking of it before they knew to ask.

That is exactly what this chapter is about.

Beyond Mobility, The Future-Proofed Home

Aging in place is the most personal dimension of future-proofing, but it is not the only one. A house designed to serve its owners well over decades must also anticipate the ways that technology, family structure, and daily life will evolve in ways that are impossible to predict with certainty.

I design oversized garages as a matter of course. The immediate benefit is practical, there is room to open car doors fully, to move around vehicles without contortion, to store the things that accumulate in any active household. The longer benefit is flexibility. A garage that is generously sized today can accommodate a workshop, a home gym, an additional vehicle, or any number of uses that the client has not yet imagined. Space is the most adaptable material in architecture.

I provide dedicated closets or rooms for audio-visual equipment and home technology infrastructure, sized larger than what is currently needed. The pace at which residential technology evolves makes it virtually certain that whatever systems exist today will be supplemented or replaced within a decade. A house that was designed with accessible, expandable infrastructure for those systems will adapt gracefully. One that was not will require the kind of interventions, wires run through finished walls, equipment crammed into spaces never intended for it, that quietly degrade the quality of the home over time.

I always provide accessible routes into attic spaces and below-floor areas on lower levels. Future wiring, future mechanical systems, future technologies not yet invented, all of them may eventually need to reach places in the house that are currently concealed. Designing those access points in from the beginning is a form of hospitality toward the future owners of the house, including the current owners in thirty years.

Exterior walks, patios, and terraces deserve attention as well. Transitions between grade changes, gentle slopes integrated into the landscape rather than abrupt steps, make outdoor spaces navigable for everyone at every age, and they read as considered design rather than

accommodation. A beautifully detailed stone ramp alongside a single entry step is not a clinical intervention. It is simply thoughtful.

Rooms that are slightly more generous than strictly necessary offer the same kind of long-term adaptability. Furniture arrangements change. Families change. The way people use their homes changes in ways that are rarely predictable at the time of design. A space with a little breathing room will absorb those changes gracefully. A room sized to its minimum will eventually feel constraining.

Invisible Foresight

What I am describing throughout this chapter is a quality I think of as invisible foresight, decisions made early in the design process that leave no trace of themselves in the finished house except their effect. A house with wider corridors does not announce that it was designed for a wheelchair. It announces that it was designed by someone who understood proportion and ease of movement. A house with lever hardware and curbless showers and stacked closets does not look like a house that was planned for limitation. It looks like a house that was planned with intelligence and care.

That is the standard I hold myself to. The house you build today should serve you not just in the decade of its construction but in every decade that follows, through the full, unpredictable arc of a life well-lived. Designing for that arc is not a concession. It is the highest expression of what residential architecture is for.