

A landscape architect explains why safe and accessible outdoor environments are important for all ages

Universal design, within homes and community buildings, is on the top of many 'to do' lists. Unfortunately, the implementation of universal design principles in outdoor environments is slower to gain acceptance. Yet at the same time, an increased focus on maintaining access to nature has given rise to a need to strengthen our indoor/outdoor connections. It has been proven that our interactions with the natural world improve health, increase physical strength, boost mental alertness, and encourage socialization. Simply put, outdoor environments with universal accessibility offer an improvement in quality of life for everyone, especially older adults.

Research has shown that a view of nature helps us to recover quicker from illness; that there is a natural absorption of bone-strengthening Vitamin D from sunlight; that blood pressure and stress levels drop simply by viewing the outside world. In a more intuitive way, we know that people generally feel better after they have taken a walk in the park, experienced the vibrant colors of a sunset, or picked an arrangement of wildflowers. Maintaining our connection to the natural world around us is essential to who and what we are as inhabitants of this planet; therefore, providing access to outdoor environments for seniors is a basic necessity of a balanced lifestyle.

Thoughtful design considerations are key in creating outdoor settings for senior communities. The need for shade, comfortable seating, appropriate walking surfaces, and minimally sloped walks are just a few of the elements that allow a person to move about safely in the outdoor landscape. The ability of an older adult to be able to move easily from one place to another is the foundation of the outdoor environment's design. We all want to be able to decide in which direction to go, how we would like to get there, and the opportunity to do this effortlessly: Maintaining this independence is extremely important for older adults.

Easy in, easy out

Physical access to the outdoors is the first step to eliminating obstacles. Many homes and/or buildings prohibit outside access because of steps or changes in grade that limit

unfettered movement. Eliminating the steps to a front door and/or porch is one of the first places to begin.

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A ramp that is minimally sloped (2 to 3 percent) and connected to the door makes it easy for a person to move in and out freely. Other universal design considerations include—but are not limited to—a landing in front of the door, a ledge to hold a packages, easy-to-use handrails, sufficient area lighting, and a wide, level walkway. Appropriate landscaping that allows a person to see their way clearly can also provide a secure and comfortable feeling.

The value of a good garden

Gardening is America's favorite hobby, and elders are no different in wanting to enjoy time in their yard. Either a porch or deck can prove very beneficial in allowing older adults to transition from inside to out. A porch also offers shelter in case of inclement weather, giving a senior much-needed time to move indoors if it starts to rain or the heat becomes too intense.

An elder's eyes can take up to approximately 8 minutes to adjust to the brightness of the outdoors; an overhang can give them an opportunity to pause and adapt to sunlight. Raised planters help older adults garden by providing convenient opportunities to get their hands in the soil at a variety of heights. Stable, comfortable, and attractive outdoor furniture encourages elders to simply sit and enjoy nature. The seat of a chair should be 18 to 19 inches high and have sturdy arms to provide support for getting in or out. Furniture should be movable, allowing for a variety of inviting areas to socialize.

Safety first

Moving from the yard to the surrounding neighborhood should also be a simple transition. Sidewalks should be a minimum of five feet wide and have smooth, level walking surfaces to provide easy access. Street trees that provide ample shade are important so that heat from the sun does not become excessive. Glare can also be reduced by coloring or tinting the concrete pavement surface.

Maintaining plantings adjacent to the sidewalk is important so the walkway does not become overgrown and unsafe. Low hanging branches from street trees, shrubs that grow over the walks, and leaves on the pavement can make for hazardous conditions as well. Not only is it important to provide a safe physical environment, but also one that is psychologically safe. Perceiving that the neighborhood is walkable goes a long way in increasing willingness to participate fully in the outdoor environment.

Providing access to outdoor environments for seniors is a basic necessity of a balanced lifestyle.

When outdoor environments are created applying the principles of universal design, everyone enjoys them the same way. There are no differences due to age or abilities, and nothing screams "disabled adult." Aesthetics, access and design are all interwoven, and everyone feels welcome. Eliminating obstacles will allow a person to remain independent and stay connected to both nature and the world around them. People need opportunities to interact with nature, whether visiting a neighborhood park with family or simply going to the local store to buy a newspaper and cup of coffee; it is truly essential to maintaining quality and enjoyment of life for everyone.

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