

Insights from local  
experts and executives



# The Region

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## MAINE

### Aging in a Condo

Shaping Homes Before They Shape Us

[by Jack Carr, P.E., RS, LEED-AP]

**“Time and tide wait for ... ” well, you know the quote.** Sometimes aging comes on like a fast tide due to health or other circumstances and sometimes it sneaks up on us requiring family members or friends to gently remind us of the upcoming physical and mental limitations the future will bring.

Most of us never want to end up in a nursing home. Most of us say we want to live the rest of our lives at home. It is only natural. Home gives us freedom with dignity. Home allows us to make our own decisions. Home allows us to maintain established friendships and community ties. However, in the future, our homes can limit our ability to take care of ourselves, as well as be dangerous. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, “We shape our homes; and afterwards, our homes shape us.”

So, what are we to do? Many people buy their first condo unit to downsize to minimize maintenance headaches that went with the big family house. Many people buy into an over-50 age-restricted community to not just avoid the noisy kids in the street but also to surround themselves with the amenities currently associated with today’s

modern condo communities such as walking trails, health-related club facilities, emergency communication systems, social clubs, etc. But what about the unit interiors? Can they be shaped to allow us to live out our lives in the comfort of our homes, safely, and with a minimum of assistance?

There is a movement across Maine and around the nation to do just that. One of its primary tools is often called Universal Design. This is a philosophy of design used by architects and other forward-thinking senior care practitioners to develop interior spaces and home products to be useable by all people to the greatest extent possible. Creating condo spaces suitable for growing old in would address the results of an ASID Aging in Place Survey where age related difficulties in maintaining a home was the reason for 57 percent of all relocations in the country.

The three most important age-related restrictions in a condo unit are multiple-floor living, hallways and doors not wide enough for wheelchairs, and front entrances with one or more steps. Only 4 percent of all homes in the country have none of these physical restrictions. Only 1



percent of the nation’s homes have the next two most important age-related features, namely, lever handles on doors and light switches and electrical outlets reachable from a wheelchair.

As obvious as some of these recommended changes to the home environment are, people hesitate to make them. Some of the delay is due to financial circumstances, but more often it is our not wanting to recognize our mortality and the future aging will bring. This reaction is true for many human conditions. It is said change cannot occur until we accept what is. The good news is we do not have to do it ourselves. There are skilled professionals to guide us along the way to change. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) in conjunction with AARP has developed a design designation called ‘Certified Aging in Place Specialist’ (CAPS) for remodeling contractors and design/build professionals interested in Universal Design and other age-related design methods.



To conduct your own self-survey of the age-related problem elements in your condo unit, AARP has published the AARP Home Fit Guide. This easy-to-follow checklist can be downloaded for free off the AARP website. To provide further assistance, the American Occupational Therapy Association has developed a program called Certification in Environmental Modification (SCEM) to allow Occupational Therapists (OTs) who are licensed healthcare professionals who can provide home assessments of the improvements or changes needed for the condo unit to be suitable for aging in place.

Some of the room change recommendation are likely to be:

**BEDROOM**

- Path light to bathroom
- Wireless emergency call device
- Clapper sound activated lights

**BATHROOM**

- Shower: curbless or Roman-style with shower curtain
- Auto-sensor night light
- Grab bars for towel racks
- Doorknobs and faucets with lever handles
- Wheelchair clearance at sink and toilet
- Small chair

**KITCHEN**

- Lazy Susan in deep corner cabinet
- Slide-out shelves
- Replace knob cabinet pulls with D-pulls
- Sink suitable for wheelchair and motion-activated faucet
- Universal Design appliances

**LIVING ROOM**

- Clear clutter to allow navigation
- Motion sensor night light
- No area rugs


- No low tables
- High, cushioned furniture with no castors

Future renovations in any condo unit should consider these and many other age-related improvements to be incorporated into the project to minimize costs. This type of thinking should be present at all board meetings to ensure all future changes to the common elements to minimize age-related restrictions throughout the community. With some forward thinking, our future will be what we want it to be.



■ JACK CARR, P.E., RS, LEED-AP, IS SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT WITH CRITERIUM-ENGINEERS SERVING ALL OF NEW ENGLAND.

Know the law!
Protect your condo!
Protect your Association!



Demand the WHID  
*(Water Heater Isolation Device)*


When your water heater leaks, the WHID will:

- ◇ SHUT off the water.
- ◇ HOLD the residual water in the water heater.

Understanding the MA Plumbing Code (law) when there are occupants below: 248 CMR 10.12(1)(h)

“Policy: When installing a replacement water heater or hot water storage tank and it is not practical to install a safe waste pan and related safe waste drain piping, an acceptable alternate method to satisfy the requirements of 248 CMR 10.12(1)(h) may be to install a product approved **automatic water heater shut off device and a safe waste pan** without the related drain piping.”

( [mass.gov/ocabr/licensee/dpl-boards/pl/board-policies/product-policies/water-heater-storage.html](http://mass.gov/ocabr/licensee/dpl-boards/pl/board-policies/product-policies/water-heater-storage.html) )



MA Plumbing Approval #: P3-0416-427

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