

## *What is Universal Design?*

Sometimes an idea comes along that's so good we wonder how we ever did without it. Once little-known and even less understood, universal design is one such idea. The concept began with safety and accessibility in mind for all. Home owners and design professionals realized that homes should be respectful and inclusive of differences among people in all stages of life, health and physical ability, enabling them to grow, change and age in place.

Seven principles comprise UD, and these influence everything from the floor plan to the landscaping to counter heights, appliances, door handles and more. Increasingly, active seniors are choosing homes with the UD advantage for independent living whether or not they ever develop health or mobility issues.

A well-planned UD project is all about accessibility and being barrier-free, and all of this can be accomplished in new-home design, remodels, additions and renovations, without forfeiting style.

Universal Design Certified Professionals bring a deeper level of knowledge, insight and livability to new homes and remodels. Once homeowners realize that the features won't make their homes or renovation projects look institutional or "different," they readily accept the concept and greatly appreciate the advice.

~Les Thorpe, Universal Design Certified Professional, Thorpe Construction Company, Virginia Beach, Va. [www.thorpeconstructionva.com](http://www.thorpeconstructionva.com)



Builder Les Thorpe of Thorpe Construction Company in Virginia Beach, Va.



For a home assessment, consultation or more information, contact Les Thorpe at

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## *Thorpe Construction Company*

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## *Returning home with limitations?*

**We can help ease the transition.**

Apply these safety, comfort and accessibility tips from the Universal Design Certified Professionals at Thorpe Construction Company in Virginia Beach. And call us if you need us.



**5107 Estate Lever by Baldwin Hardware**

*“We want clients to be free of potential falls. Lack of safe accessibility becomes a big hindrance for the client and care taker.”*

*~Les Thorpe, Thorpe Construction Company*

*Preparing one's property for safety and comfort inside and out is essential, and it may be simpler and less intrusive than you'd expected.*

**Start here:**

## Exteriors

Assess arrival to the home's exterior:

- Evaluate the driveway and sidewalks (or lack thereof) and note cracks, holes and broken concrete.
- Identify the easiest access to inside. In some cases, this may be through the garage or a side door.
- Do you have handrails?
- Are the doors wide enough?
- Is lighting sufficient throughout the property?

After assessing, address tripping hazards, poor lighting and any other issues property-wide. When steps or steep grades present a barrier to front-door entry, we sometimes suggest a front yard re-grading and installation of a gradual sloped walkway to the front door. When planned right, this can actually boost a home's curb appeal. Ramps are effective, but they also call attention to a resident's disability.

To reduce attention-getting, we design ramps to merge discreetly with a few new landscape elements. “The less noticeable a ramp, the better for the clients,” Les Thorpe advises. “Always keep their feelings and privacy first and foremost.”

## Interiors

**Interior barriers** to mobility and accessibility include steps to different floor elevations, narrow door openings and hallways, and standard kitchen and bathroom design. These areas become hard to modify sometimes, due to original house layout and cost, but in many cases small changes can make a big difference.

Whether planning for universal accessibility early in a remodel or new construction or simply having to make quick changes to accommodate an illness or injury, consider strategies such as:

- Lower on/off switches throughout the house.
- One-level living or first-floor master bedroom.
- Bathrooms with roll-in showers and anti-scald valves.
- Vanity options for better positioning of wheel chair or walker.
- Comfort-height toilets.
- Grab bars.
- Widening doorways and hallways.
- Low-effort lever door handles.
- Kitchen layouts that require less bending and stretching to access things.
- Modify sink and wall-oven placement and select user-friendly appliances.

**Poor lighting** hurts everyone. Most older homes, and even many newer homes, are poorly lit. Consider different types of natural and artificial task and accent lighting. Think ahead about the layout of fixtures, what types to use and the areas to be lit. Automatic on/off lights allow for easy movement from room to room. It's important to understand lighting differences and how a specific beam of light applies appropriately to an individual area.

### Flooring

Merging multiple types of flooring can present hazards or challenges. When assessing homes, we identify these areas and recommend smart changes. These may include varying the floor patterns and selecting high-contrast carpets to help define spaces and identify clear paths for traffic; using non-slip ceramic tile in bathrooms; or choosing low-pile tight-weave carpet, which allows easier movement and less friction. Beware of glossy finishes, throw rugs and other surfaces that may induce falls and injuries.

The elements of universal design transcend what's listed here. Costs and options to renovate for accessibility can only be determined by an on-site assessment, as properties and needs vary. We can help. Call (757) 426-8796 to consult with our Universal Design Certified Professional.

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