

PERCEPTIONS OF TERMINOLOGY ASSOCIATED WITH AGING IN PLACE

Carole Miller and Margot A. Olson

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to clarify terminology used by interior designers to describe issues relating to aging in place. A focus group of six college professors discussed 11 common terms and recommended further clarification of the following six terms: transgenerational design, universal design, accessible design, inclusive design, and lifespan/lifecycle design. A focus group consensus was that ADA-compliant design, designing for special needs, designing for seniors, designing for handicapped, and barrier-free design be eliminated from common usage due to negative connotations.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of professional educators concerning design terminology intended to facilitate aging in place. The concepts associated with terminology profoundly affect the profession of interior design and continue to play a major role in the work designers perform and in the work that interior design students do in the classroom in preparation for their careers. Confusion and misuse of the various concept terms are apparent in literature as varied as college textbooks on interior design, professional journal articles, and mass media including newspapers, magazines, and television. The psychological associations with several of the terms are negative. For example, terminology such as elder design (Bakker, 1997) implies advanced age, infirmity, physical disabilities, or impairment. Other terms refer to designing for the handicapped and disabled as well as other conditions for which individuals seem unwilling to prepare their homes but which they acknowledge as a part of the aging process (Olson & Miller, 2004).

Despite considerable advances in mandating the incorporation of accessible or barrier-free designs in communities, voluntary implementation into single-family

Carole Miller is Instructor, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, and Margot A. Olson is Associate Professor, Department of Technology, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

private residences is slow to gain full acceptance. The focus on design for people with severe disabilities has stigmatized the concept of aging in place to the point where people who are currently completely able-bodied do not seem to recognize the value of implementing the concepts before they need them. Additionally, some design features will meet criteria that are being established by state and local housing authorities. States throughout the country are looking at programs that relate to visitability, accessibility, and universal design in housing. The number of programs will only increase as ordinances are passed and incentive programs are developed at local, state, and national levels (Hartje, 2004).

Interior design educators must communicate the impact of changing demographics to design students so that they understand the characteristics of a large portion of their future client base. The client profiles with which new designers will be working will reflect the need to incorporate universal design features into private residences as standard good design practice. These design features will result in safe and beautiful homes in which clients can choose to age in place.

Review of Literature

A review of recent literature reveals an attempt to understand why the concepts of universal design and aging in place are not being more fully embraced by baby boomers and seniors. Possible reasons include lack of awareness by people about where to purchase appropriate products and services (Null, 2003) and lack of appropriate incentive programs for implementation of universal design into new, single-family housing (Hartje, 2004). Other concerns expressed include the fear of added cost to construction, general lack of consumer understanding or knowledge about housing, and failure to plan ahead for physical and family needs (Beitz, Brewer, & Kirby, 1993). Identifying self-images and lifestyles is a key to successfully appealing to consumers. Studies show that people over 60 see themselves as 15 years younger (Polyak, 2000).

Katz and Marshall (2003, p. 1) wrote: "As positive ideals for aging, buoyed by health agendas around independence, well being and mobility replace negative stereotypes of decline and dependency, market and lifestyle industries create an idealized culture of ageless consumers and active populations." Additionally, "for an aging population concerned with maintaining independence, there is frequent denial of need for products and home modifications designed to create a supportive environment for people with disabilities" (Null, 2003, p. 115). Therefore, careful selection of the terms associated with the concepts of universal design and aging in place is very important to the success of the acceptance of these concepts by clients of all ages.

Confusion with and misuse of the various terms associated with the concepts of aging in place and universal design may also be contributing to the lack of acceptance of the concepts. Ambiguous reference to the terms can be found in

several forms of literature. Newspaper articles feature information on design concepts that will improve the quality of our lives, facilitating function and comfort. One article (Derus, 2004, p. 4E) indicated that people do not admit to getting old and that “people won’t buy into the idea of improving the design of their home to facilitate aging unless they are already in a wheelchair.” The article pointed out that most people will not end up in a wheelchair yet a photograph included in the article showed a woman in a wheelchair at work in her kitchen. Many articles, though filled with valuable information, send conflicting and confusing messages about universal design to the general public.

An examination of advertisements by product manufacturers of kitchen and bathroom products found in the *Directory of Accessible Housing Products* (2004) also revealed the interchangeable use of various terms. Terms included were universal design, barrier-free design, and ADA-compliant design. A shower system by Aqua Glass that could benefit most users is referred to as “special care for the physically challenged” (p. 33). Some product manufacturers are finding that the key to successful market penetration is the avoidance of terminology that identifies the products as being designed for individuals with disabilities. Promotional literature, including advertising, contains information about the benefits of the features offered to all users. In an article for the *Boston Herald* by Restuccia (2004), Petterson made the following statement.

Making universal design home products mainstream has a lot to do with marketing. For years Kohler and other bathroom fixture makers made what they referred to as an ADA-compliant toilet, but now they are marketing seat adjustability as “Comfort Height,” broadening the appeal to include everyone from small children to those with bad backs. (p. 3)

Confusion exists among the housing and design professionals who write textbooks as well. A review of four textbooks—Pile (2003); Nielson and Taylor (2002); Allen, Jones, and Stimpson (2004); and Nissen, Faulkner, and Faulkner (1994)—used to teach interior design classes at the university level revealed the use of 11 different terms identified as or related to universal design. Typically the chapter or section of the textbooks in which this information was found was entitled “Designing for special populations” (Nielson & Taylor, 2002) or “Interior design for special needs” (Pile, 2003). Universal design was typically discussed in one area of one chapter. In the textbook *Beginnings of Interior Environments*, the authors Allen, Jones, and Stimpson (2004) wrote “universal design focuses on creating spaces and furnishings to meet the needs of individuals regardless of age and abilities” (p. 3). A different area in the book specified designing for the elderly, designing for children, and designing for the disabled (most often with references to wheelchair bound individuals). In their book *Interiors: An Introduction*, Nielson and Taylor (2002) wrote “Universal design implies that well-planned designs will meet the needs of every user without drawing attention

to persons with disabilities” (p. 48). Information regarding designing for the elderly and accessible design was discussed in separate sections of the chapter. Designing for mobility impairment, hearing impairment, and visual impairment were also separated into different sections.

In the book *Building for a Lifetime: The Design and Construction of Fully Accessible Homes*, Wilde, Baron-Robbins, and Clark (1994) wrote:

...advocating a change in the way we approach the design and construction of the built environment. This movement has assumed a number of terms and descriptions: accessible, barrier-free, universal design, inclusive-design, aging-in-place, and building for a lifetime. (p. 1)

In an article for *Architecture*, Slatin (2003) used the concepts of accessibility and ADA-compliance interchangeably with the term universal design. The author referred to the concepts of ADA-compliance in a brief discussion about aging in place and residential interior design. Although everyone is vulnerable to changes that could put him or her in the camp of those most affected by constructed barriers, it is a truth that humans rarely confront. Those changes, after all, will come about most likely from violent accidents or extreme disease (p. 144). ADA-compliance should be used in reference to public spaces. Aging in place relates to residential interior design. Slatin’s (2003) suggestion that age related changes come about due to violent accidents or extreme disease may lead the reader to understand that the concept of aging in place facilitated by universal design features are only for people with very serious disabilities, not for people of all ages and all abilities.

Even Mace (1990) who is credited with first using the term universal design recognized that the term was not ideal. There will always be individuals with very specific problems that will need very specialized solutions to their built environment (Hartje, 2004). Deardorff and Birdsong (2003) addressed the issue of the terminology associated with universal design. Their research article entitled “Universal design: Clarifying a common vocabulary,” addressed the need to make clear the definition of universal design as well as several other terms associated with universal design concepts. Their research included surveying professionals in the field of universal design. Several terms and their definitions were explored. Six terms associated with universal design were identified and defined. The respondents rated the definitions using a Likert-type scale.

The concept terms used by Deardorff and Birdsong were universal design, accessible design, adaptable design, barrier-free design, lifespan design, and transgenerational design. The highest level of agreement among the professionals surveyed was with the definitions for adaptable design and universal design, indicating 91% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the definitions presented. Of those surveyed, 82% agreed or strongly agreed with the definition of barrier-free design. The definitions for lifespan design, transgenerational design, and accessible design had less agreement among the respondents.

If confusion exists about the various concept terms within the design profession, product manufacturers, and the general public, then surely there is confusion among the students that are studying these concepts. Interior design students must be prepared to meet the needs and requirements of older clients. Clients in the later stages of adulthood comprise a growing segment of residential interior design work. Clarification of the concept terminology will facilitate the standardization of the principles associated with these concepts that will result in good design.

Method

A focus group was asked to review 11 terms (Figure 1) commonly found in literature such as textbooks, professional journal articles, and newspaper and magazine articles by and about the interior design profession. The focus group was made up of a moderator and five university instructors who participated in the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) regional conference in High Point, North Carolina, in November 2004 (Miller, 2004). The goal of the focus group was to reduce and refine the list of 11 concept terms to a shorter list to be included in classroom teaching. Focus group participants were asked to select the terms that they found to be most positive and those that most clearly illustrated the concepts needed to design spaces for clients to age in place.

Term
Transgenerational design
ADA-compliant design
Universal design
Accessible design
Designing for special needs
Designing for seniors
Designing for handicapped
Inclusive design
Barrier-free design
Lifespan design
Designing for the lifecycle

Figure 1. Design Concept Terms

Results

Of the list of 11 concept terms, the members of the focus group selected the following terms: transgenerational design, universal design, inclusive design, lifecycle design, and accessible design. Lifecycle design and lifespan design were thought similar enough to be used interchangeably (lifespan/lifecycle design). Agreement was not 100% in favor of any of the terms. Transgenerational design was favored by one participant. The feeling was that the term would cause students to recognize that the client represented an older generation than their own. However, another participant felt that the term was too cumbersome to say and write. This participant felt the term needed explanation; the term would not be easily understood by many.

Universal design was seen as a term commonly used and understood by design professionals but also was seen as one that needed clarification when used with the general public. The feeling was that universal design was typically associated with designing for wheelchair accessibility. The stereotype of the wheelchair was strengthened after discussing some of the more recent media coverage about universal design showing individuals in wheelchairs using the spaces and products designed to facilitate functionality and safety for people of all abilities.

Inclusive design was favored by one participant who felt that the term most clearly expressed what the concepts associated with designing for people of all ages and all abilities had to offer to the client. This focus group participant felt that the majority of current students are part of the Millennium generation (born after 1981)—one that is thought to be an inclusive yet diverse group.

Lifespan/lifecycle design was favored by one participant. The term implies considering all stages of lifecycle development from pre-birth (pregnancy) and infancy through advanced old age and any other scenarios that an individual or family may encounter through the lifecycle and with multiple generations.

Accessible design was favored by one participant. This participant felt that the term accessible design clearly represented design concepts associated with aging in place. The remaining terms were dismissed as having negative connotations (ADA-compliant, designing for special needs, and designing for seniors) and/or of being specific to one type of physical condition such as persons who are wheelchair bound (designing for handicapped). A focus group participant felt that the concept term barrier-free design implied having to overcome barriers.

Additional discussion by the focus group resulted in the identification of dissatisfaction with the term aging in place. The participants felt that the term was “too static” and that it had negative connotations and implied that people were going to “sit in their chairs and not move as they aged.” The focus group participants indicated that it was important that they find a term that reflected mobility, change, and flexibility. Clients in the 50-plus age bracket are often healthy, active, mobile, and independent. The terms associated with the design

concepts must reflect such positive characteristics. The concept terms need to transcend generational perspectives and overcome the current stereotyping of designing only for wheelchair-bound individuals. Additionally, the focus group suggested finding a term that did not assume human limitations in light of rapidly changing technology that is allowing people to live independently longer.

The result of the focus group session was the identification of five terms out of the list of 11 that were considered most effective in communicating the ideas behind the design concepts associated with aging in place (Figure 2). In addition to this information a new recommendation emerged—the need to find a new term to replace the commonly used term aging in place. This term was included, however, in the recommended list because of the strength of the concept and the lack of an alternative term.

Concept	Context
A. Transgenerational ^a	Considers the changes that occur across the lifecycle.
B. Universal ^a	Products/environments useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation.
C. Accessible ^a	Products and environments meeting code requirements; usually fixed in place and noticeable.
D. Inclusive ^b	Accommodates/includes people of all ages and all abilities.
E. Lifespan ^a /Lifecycle ^b	Allows people full function, regardless of age or physical abilities.
F. Aging in Place ^c	Accommodate changing needs over the lifetime; making living easier for all ages and all abilities.

^aDeardorff & Birdsong, 2003

^bMiller, 2004

^cAARP, 2003

Figure 2. Design Terminology Results

Conclusion

Based on the literature for audiences of both consumers and professionals, findings indicate usage of a variety of terms to deal with accommodation for those with disabilities and those whose level of functioning is diminished through a normal aging process. Terminology is ambiguous, is confusing, and often has

negative connotations. A focus group discussion, based on opinions of teachers of interior design at the college and university level, indicate further differences of opinion on the use and understanding of terms used to communicate design considerations related to aging in place. However, with considerable input, some closure on the issue of appropriate and positive terminology resulted.

Teachers in higher education teach interior design students to evaluate design in order to determine good design from bad. They analyze the materials and technology used with emphasis on ecological impact. They consider the style and aesthetic character of the design and the function of the design. Included in this analysis should be the usability by all people of the design.

Students must consider the following questions:

1. Can this object be used by the majority of the population taking into consideration individuals' varying abilities?
2. Is the design ergonomically sound?
3. Is the design safe?
4. Is the design visually pleasing?
5. Does the design result in the desired psychological effect?

If the answers are yes, then the result is good design. Good design is transgenerational. Good design is universal. Good design is accessible. Good design is inclusive. Good design is for the lifespan. Good design allows aging in place. Does it need to be called anything else but good design?

References

- AARP. (2003). *These four walls...Americans 45 + talk about home and community*. Retrieved June 16, 2003, from www.research.aarp.org
- Allen, P., Jones, L., & Stimpson, M. (2004). *Beginnings of interior environments*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Bakker, R. (1997). *Elder design*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Beitz, B., Brewer, G., & Kirby, S. (1993). Educating consumers about universal design. *Journal of Extension*, 31(Spring). Available at www.joe.org/joe.1993spring.iws.html
- Deardorff, C., & Birdsong, C. (2003). Universal design: Clarifying a common vocabulary. *Housing and Society*, 30(2), 119–137.
- Derus, M. (2004, May 20). Next trend in home design spans the ages. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 4E.
- Hartje, S. (2004). Developing an incentive program for universal design in new, single-family housing. *Housing and Society*, 31(2), 195-212.

- Katz, S., & Marshall, B. (2003, February). New sex for old: Lifestyle, consumerism, and the ethics of aging well. *Journal of Aging Studies, 17*(2), 3-16.
- Mace, R. (1990). *Definitions: Accessible, adaptable, and universal design*. Raleigh, NC: Center for Universal Design, North Carolina State University.
- Miller, C. (2004). *Selling universal design*. Round table conducted at the south regional meeting of the Interior Design Educators Council, High Point, NC.
- National Association of Home Builders Research Center. (2004). *Directory of accessible building products 2004*. Upper Marlboro, MD: NAHB Research Center.
- Nielson, K., & Taylor, D. (2002). *Interiors: An introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Nissen, L., Faulkner, R., & Faulkner, S. (1994). *Inside today's home*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Publishers.
- Null, R. (2003). Commentary on universal design. *Housing and Society, 30*(2), 109-118.
- Olson, M., & Miller, C. (2004). *Perceptions and attitudes toward aging in place*. Research findings presented at the annual meeting of the Interior Design Educators Council, Pittsburgh, PA.
- Pile, J. (2003). *Interior design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Abrams.
- Polyak, I. (2000). The center of attention—Courting today's older consumer requires a multi-dimensional strategy. *American Demographics* (November), 30-32.
- Restuccia, P. (2004, September 25). A trend with universal appeal: Home design concept is moving into mainstream. *The Boston Herald*. Retrieved January 12, 2005, from www.adaptenv.org/newsevents/ud_housing_herald.php
- Slatin, P. (2003). The carrot and the stick of universal design. *Architecture, 92*(12), 144.
- Wilde, M., Baron-Robbins, A., & Clark, S. (1994). *Building for a lifetime: The design and construction of fully accessible homes*. Newtown, CT: Taunton Press.