

What is Better Living Design?



Learn the definition of "Better Living Design," its history and its application in your home to maximize accessibility and usability for all people in your family.

Introduction to Better Living Design

Better Living Design is a phrase coined in 2012 to help consumers identify products that conform with the standards of Universal Design. In the 1970s, the late Ron Mace, an architect and founder of the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, combined the words **universal** and **design** to describe what would become a standard of usability for people of all ages and abilities.

Better Living Design describes products and environments meant to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialization. The intent of Better Living Design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Better Living Design benefits everyone.

True Better Living Design is unobtrusive, even invisible. If you've ever been through an automatic door, you've experienced a version of Better Living Design. A ramp or curb cut is just as welcome to someone with a baby stroller as it is to someone in a wheelchair. In addition to those whose mobility is limited, the design is intuitive to those who cannot read or hear or those who read or speak a foreign language.

Ironically, the "conspicuousness" of a person having to deal (often awkwardly and

unsuccessfully) with the barriers of most built environments is what brings attention to their dilemma. "We" have created the handicap and disability. The handicap is the structure itself. The disability comes from dealing with it. In addition to access and inclusion, Better Living Design brings with it an extra margin of safety. However, Better Living Design isn't about ramps and grab bars, although devices such as these remain necessary for assistance. It isn't a clinical, "special" look.

This article is intended to introduce the concept of Better Living Design, not to provide specific construction advice. While many design features are simple, others require an experienced contractor. When in doubt, always consult a professional.

Principles and Guidelines of Universal Design and Better Living Design

The Principles and Guidelines of Better Living Design are founded in the Universal Design Standards, as defined by the Center of Universal Design at North Carolina State University:

Equitable Use

The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

- Provide the same means of use for all users: identical whenever possible; equivalent when not.
- Avoid segregating or stigmatizing any users.
- Provisions for privacy, security, and safety should be equally available to all users.
- Make the design appealing to all users.

Flexibility In Use

The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities

- Provide choice in methods of use.
- Accommodate right- or left-handed access and use.
- Facilitate the user's accuracy and precision.
- Provide adaptability to the user's pace.

Simple and Intuitive Use

Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

- Eliminate unnecessary complexity.
- Be consistent with user expectations and intuition.
- Accommodate a wide range of literacy and language skills.
- Arrange information consistent with its importance.
- Provide effective prompting and feedback during and after task completion.

Perceptible Information

The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

- Use different modes (pictorial, verbal, tactile) for redundant presentation of essential information.
- Provide adequate contrast between essential information and its surroundings.
- Maximize "legibility" of essential information.
- Differentiate elements in ways that can be described (i.e., make it easy to give instructions or directions).
- Provide compatibility with a variety of techniques or devices used by people with sensory limitations.

Tolerance For Error

The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

- Arrange elements to minimize hazards and errors: most used elements, most accessible; hazardous elements eliminated, isolated, or shielded.
- Provide warnings of hazards and errors.
- Provide fail safe features.
- Discourage unconscious action in tasks that require vigilance.

Low Physical Effort

The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

- Allow user to maintain a neutral body position.
- Use reasonable operating forces.
- Minimize repetitive actions.
- Minimize sustained physical effort.

Size And Space For Approach And Use

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of user's body size, posture or mobility.

- Provide a clear line of sight to important elements for any seated or standing user.
 - Make reach to all components comfortable for any seated or standing user.
 - Accommodate variations in hand and grip size.
 - Provide adequate space for the use of assistive devices or personal assistance.
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What Does Better Living Design Mean to Me?

Statistics show that you or a family member will undergo a physical transition at some point in your life. Whether it's a temporary impairment, like a broken bone, or a permanent disability, we or one of our loved ones will be faced with change.

The simple process of aging naturally increases our dependency on others. Better Living Design features allow us to move through these changes and still enjoy equal opportunities, self-determination, self-respect and quality of life.

When building or remodeling, it's more cost effective to add many Better Living Design features during the planning stage. There are a number of design features that can be built for little or no cost. Their addition at the beginning saves the need for future retrofits.

What are Some Common Examples of Better Living Design?

You may already be using Better Living Design concepts and didn't realize it. Here's a quick list:

Lighting

- Additional task lighting is needed for "older" eyes.
- Added lighting is also advised in areas to increase safety, such as for stairs.

Kitchens

- Push/pull lever faucets for those with limited hand strength or dexterity.
- Side-by-side refrigerators.

Doors

- Lever style entry or interior door handles.
- Wide swing hinges allow use of the entire doorway.

Baths

- Barrier-free showers.
- Add reinforcement into the wall substructure now in the event the addition of grab bars is needed later.

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