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Right ambience for the elderly

Pavithra S Rangan

All aspects of a home from paint, lighting, furniture, ventilation to flooring come under the scanner when creating a space for the elderly, writes Pavithra S Rangan.

Perfect home: Sensitive design can ensure that elders feel independent and relaxed.

As the baby boomers of our country are reaching their retirement age at a rapid rate, providing for comfortable, aesthetic and safe housing options for senior citizens today has gained utmost relevance.

While you are busy getting that insulated roof, pleasantly coloured wall, soft white lighting, wide window, earthy-brown furniture and rocking chair ready for the elderly in your house, remember that you are only tacitly designing that perfect home for your future.

Ease of maintenance, safety and ease of senior citizens should be priority while venturing to modify a space to suit them. All aspects of a home from paint, lighting, furniture, ventilation to flooring come under the scanner when creating a space for the elderly.

Sensitive design can ensure that elders feel independent, protected, relaxed and also involved at the same time. "It is of utmost importance that floors of the room are not slippery. Leather-finish flooring requires less maintenance and is ideal," says Supraja Rao, city-based interior designer.

Ensuring the right piece of furniture, keeping in mind the specifics and requirements of senior citizens living in the space is another vital aspect of design. Seating for seniors must be higher than average because of the loss of muscle tone in thighs, hence, a greater seat height makes it easier for them to sit and rise from chairs and sofas.

Firm cushions

Firm cushions and not soft ones, designers say, are ideal to provide comfort and maintain the seating height. Round tables are considered more friendly and preferred because of lack of corners, and chairs with arms are necessary to help them arise.

As most elders tend to have a diminishing hearing, using sound absorbing material in the room, such as carpets, curtains, cloth upholstery and tapestry on walls, interior designers says, will go a long way in reducing echo and enabling better hearing.

While elderly are more prone to dangerous falls in the bathroom, measures to make the bathroom fully secure should be taken. “Anti-skid flooring in bathrooms is a must and grab bars which are convenient to hold should be installed. Shielded fluorescent lighting ensures evenly distributed light with no glare,” says Supraja.

Additional ceiling lighting should be provided throughout the bathroom to adequately illuminate all areas and provide good light for personal grooming and safety.

Since older adults get up frequently in the night to use the bathroom, she suggests soft and indirect nightlights to help them find their way safely.

Such lighting will not disturb the sleep cycle and interfere with their ability to return to sleep.

“Ample natural and sufficient artificial light should be provided for in the room. It is important to balance natural and artificial light and make certain that light is evenly distributed leaving no spots and shadows,” says Samyukta Raman, an architect.

Windows in a room are very important as they provide a view of the exterior. Lower window sills, 24 inches above the floor, architects say, give residents a feeling of spaciousness and allow easy viewing.

Paint is one of the most popular and vital elements to design the perfect living space for senior citizens and it also allows for a great deal of flexibility.

It is important to select proper finish to ensure problems of chipping, fading and cleaning do not occur.

“While senior citizens may often lose the ability to discern colour, a very light coloured paint causes considerable glare and a very dark colour reduces the ability to see clearly. Light reflectance of 50 to 60 per cent depending on the colour is ideal,” advised another architect, Kalyani.

A space for the elderly to read or watch television should be identified in the room, besides providing for shelves to store medicines and a telephone close to the bed.