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USER-FRIENDLY HOMIES FOR THE ELDERLY

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Builders are now thinking for the elderly and the handicapped people while designing their new projects.

Builders and developers likes of Ansal Unitech, DLF, Tata Housing, SVP Developers, etc, are designing their residential, even commercial buildings, to make them accessible and user-friendly for the elderly and aging people.

You too can look after the needs of your old parents or family members with a physical handicap. Mind you, you will not have to spend huge sums to become a caring son or daughter in making life easier for your close relatives and provide some basic facilities in your home.

Rakesh Monga, an architect and a teacher, says that if there are senior citizens in the family, you must make a few advance plans before taking up the construction of your house. An architect can give you advice on the needs of the elderly members of the family.

A barrier-free design with easy and convenient passage to different sections of the home is crucial. Basically, the aged family members must be provided an obstruction-free movement.

"The room of your parents or elderly members in the family should be well ventilated and the windows should come with easy-to-handle shutters and curtain strings. Storage facilities in the room like almirahs and cupboards must be designed in a manner that they do not need much stretching or exertion in their operation," says J K Jain, a Delhi-based architect.

"You can also provide them handrails wherever possible including along staircase, in the bathroom, the kitchen and on the way to the entrance. This will offer support in their movement. Adequate attention must be paid to the placement of the switches to operate lights, fans and other appliances," Jain says.

The night lamp, television and fan or airconditioner controls must be located within arm's reach from the bed, so that there is no demand for much physical

movement. Jain also says that telephone cable points must be positioned in such a way that the instrument can be placed close to where the elderly or handicapped members sit or sleep; also, take care to see that there is not much cable hanging along to trip one.

There is even greater need to look after the comforts of disabled members of the family. Najma Rizvi, formerly of the School of Planning and Architecture, New Del-



hi, says that even though the real estate sector has taken huge strides in India, yet, not many real estate firms make buildings that are user-friendly for the elderly and the handicapped members.

For instance, there are not many buildings where one can find lifts in which wheelchairs can enter. Rizvi suggests that cabinets should be fixed in bathrooms, bedrooms and kitchens at a height which would not give jitters to people with disabilities.

Gaurav Mittal, the director of CHD Developers, says: "It is high time realty firms make necessary changes in their new projects in order to make the life of the elderly better and comfortable. I am sure that now all the prestigious real estate firms hire the best architects, who are better trained to ensure that adequate provisioning is made for the old and the disabled. Now all the newly-constructed buildings have bigger lifts, so that wheelchairs can easily be accommodated in them."

A senior officer of Ansal API says that there are not many buildings that are user-friendly for the elderly and the disabled for the simple reason that our town planners and architects hardly get any intensive training in creating such residential buildings, malls and commercial complexes in their colleges. "They have to be sensitive to the needs of the old and the disabled people while designing a building. It is time that architects and town planners think on these lines," says Javed Abidi, executive director of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People.

"I have observed that not many young buyers instruct us to make changes in their apartments according to the needs of their old parents. That is also possible because nowadays one hardly finds families where old parents stay with their children. In this backdrop, young buyers more often than not do not make changes in their homes to suit the old members of the families," says Sanjay Khanna, the director of Kailash Nath Projects Pvt Ltd.

Experts point out that apart from lifts, ramps and other necessary things, new buildings must have bathroom doors wide enough to allow the passage of wheelchairs. As far as training architects and town planners in the needs of the elderly and people with special needs while giving final touches to their projects, some say that if these professionals are sensitive, they do not need any course.

Abidi says that one has to understand that architects are professionals. If they are told to make the necessary provision for the needs of people with disability, they would naturally follow the instructions. He says that something in the nature of a fire-safety certificate must also be introduced to certify buildings for the facilities they provide for the elderly and the people with disabilities.

The silver lining is that some of the big corporate houses too are now working hard to make their buildings user-friendly for disabled.