lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

8 Essential Features of Aging-friendly Design:
How the wrong finishes can derail the best of designs

On March 18, 2010, Doug and Ellen Gallow will present **8 Essential Features of Aging-friendly Design: How Does Your Facility Measure Up?** at the American Society on Aging/National Council on Aging Conference in Chicago (www.agingconference.org). This cross-disciplinary workshop is intended for senior center professionals and anyone interested in learning more about the ways that their building and site may support (or hamper) their ability to comfortably and safely accommodate older adults of diverse abilities. This issue of Lifespan Perspective previews the kinds of information we'll cover on one of the most critical issues in aging-friendly design: *interior finishes*.

Color and Contrast
We were recently dumbfounded to encounter a stairwell (in a building designed specifically for older adults) decked out with perfectly matching cream-colored walls, steps, handrails, doors, and trim. It wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine someone misjudging a stair edge, reaching for a railing in the wrong location, or becoming disoriented—even panicked—trying to locate a door in the monochromatic chamber. We wouldn't recommend this color scheme in any setting, but in an environment expressly designed for older adults of various (and changing) physical and cognitive abilities, it's unconscionable.

This example brings to light the most important concept in color selection and application for aging-friendly environments: *contrast*. All it would take to make that same stairwell far safer and easier to negotiate would be a contrasting color. Applied to the trim, the nose of each step, and the handrail, a second color would differentiate and define the surfaces and components of the space at no added cost.

Illustration **A** simulates the way that people with some visual impairments may view a space lacking in color contrast. The application of contrasting flooring, trim, and accents in **B** makes it easier to identify critical elements and function effectively in the space.

Self Assessment Tip
Take a look at the way that color has been applied in your facility. Are critical edges and transitions made discernable through contrast, or do objects and surfaces melt into one another because they are too similar in color? Don't forget the furniture: someone with a visual impairment could misjudge the edge of a table or chair as they view it against similarly colored flooring.

Keep in mind that color is a matter of perception. Various age- or disease-related visual or cognitive impairments can affect the way that people perceive color: darker tones (especially blues and purples) may appear "muddy," and colors of similar intensity may look alike. To be safe, use white or light-colored trim to separate dark surfaces (or dark trim with light surfaces), and provide a bright, uniform lighting environment to support optimal color perception.

What's HOT in Color?

Facilities that serve current and emerging generations of senior adults are increasingly tuned in to the latest trends in commercial architectural and interior design. This is especially evident in color selection, with the rich deep tones often encountered in popular cafés and coffee houses showing up in senior centers and similar facilities. Keep in mind that darker tones can aborb a lot of light and create depth- and color-perception issues. Use them in moderation for accent walls and upholstery in spaces that also include plenty of white (or light colors); increase lighting to the area as needed; and define edges and transitions with light colored trim.
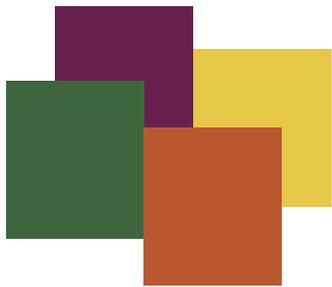
We're also seeing a lot of interest in color schemes pulled from nature: shades of wood and stone accented with splashes of sky blue and leaf green are applied in facilities that appear harmonious with their natural surroundings. These hues are often teamed with a lot of white/light colors to capitalize on the use of natural light. Colors and materials that help to communicate the owner or organization's commitment to environmental responsibility and energy efficiency are especially popular in projects that seek LEED certification.
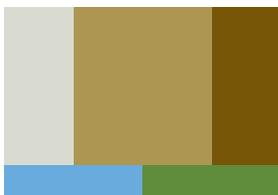
In search of the elusive "perfect floor"

It's no surprise that we get more questions about flooring than any other issue associated with finishes for senior centers and other facilities that serve older adults. Ease of maintenance and durability are significant concerns, complicated by an even more pressing issue: safety.

We've all heard horror stories about people who have taken falls that seem directly attributable to flooring. In some cases the culprit is the flooring material itself. In other instances faulty installation, poor maintenance, raised transition strips or thresholds—even lighting levels—create unsafe conditions. Some people are more vulnerable to falling than others, with a long list of physical, cognitive, and psychological causes potentially to blame. Fear of falling can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Given all of this, what can you do to protect your clients (and organization) from something that seems almost inevitable?

First and foremost, take a hard look at walking surfaces throughout (and outside of) your building for obvious hazards that are often overlooked or excused until someone takes a spill.

- Is the surface slippery, even when dry? How about when it becomes wet? Consider different shoe types: some surfaces that seem fine—even a bit "grippy"— with rubber soled shoes can be like walking on ice in leather-bottomed shoes.

- In areas with pavers or tiles, is the surface flat and uniform, or are there raised cracks or heaves on which someone could catch a toe?

- For safety and ease of navigation carpet must be dense and firm, with no discenable cushioning. It must be tightly secured, free of

buckling, and in good condition. Keep in mind that some people "shuffle" when the walk, barely lifting their feet from the walking surface. Imagine how difficult it must be to navigate in this way, or with a walker, cane, wheelchair, or scooter, on a surface that you sink into.

- Color and pattern are just as significant on the floor as they are on the walls of your facility. Large, busy patterns can be disorienting or dizzying for some people, and strong light-dark contrasts may cause someone to perceive the dark spots as holes or steps/level changes. Even on uniformly colored surfaces, changes in lighting level or bright spots and shadows may cause the darker areas to be mistaken as voids.

There's no perfect flooring material or fail-safe solution to safeguard against falls in your facility, but there are things you can do to provide a more supportive, less hazardous environment:

- Talk with a flooring product representative about flooring materials with an appropriate coefficient of friction (slip/grip factor) for the intended use and users. Ask how the product performs when wet.

- Create level transitions between different surfaces (ideally, no transition strips or thresholds would be required).

- Provide walk-off mats at all entrances (permanent installations preferred to "area rug" types).

- Review paper towel and hand dryer or waste basket locations in restrooms to reduce dripping on floors.

- Provide hand rails wherever they may be needed for safe navigation

- Create uniform (glare and shadow -free) lighting environments.