

Keep an Open Mind:

Underused spaces can easily be converted into fully functional In-law suites with features like a private entry, kitchenette or laundry facilities. You'll also want to plan ahead with aging in place features.

In-Law Suites

In today's society, it is not uncommon to have expanded or extended family living together under one roof. In some households, this family environment is a cultural tradition. In others, grandparents or older relatives may have offered to help out with child care and other household duties; providing a living space for these helpers just makes good sense for family dynamics. Finally, the rising cost of elderly care, specifically assisted living or nursing homes, also plays a dramatic role in determining where to house aging relatives once they decide they no longer want to stay in their homes. In-law suites have become a common request as families work to accommodate the elder generation comfortably in their homes.

"I liken it to the difference between renting and owning a place. What do you have to show for the investment in assisted living or a nursing home when it is all said and done? With the addition of an in-law suite, when all is said and done you've built an extra bedroom, bathroom, and living space," said Tom Weiher of Carmel Builders, Inc. "She'll stay with us; she'll be more comfortable, and we'll build more equity in the home at the same time. Of course, family dynamics come into play. You need to get along with your parent or relative. In-law suites allow you to keep family in tact, keep relationships growing, and increase the value of the property."

"The biggest limitation when designing an in-law suite is keeping the size compact and expenses under control. A full-blown in-law suite associated with a project is really a small apartment. The homeowner needs to also consider what that suite will become if needs change over time."

Bryan Tom, Architectural Development Services, Inc.



When determining the design of the suite, it is important for all the individuals who will be living in the home to sit down and decide:

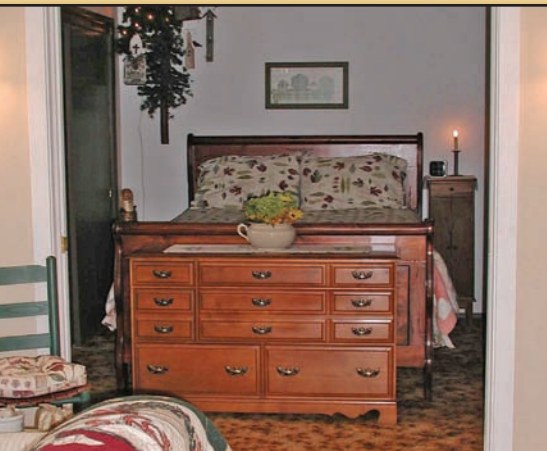
- How many individuals will be living in the suite?
- Will the suite be needed seasonally or year round?
- Will the majority of the time be spent in the suite or in other common spaces within the home?
- Are there any current disabilities that may impact the suite's design?
- What kinds of aging in place features should be included in the suite's design?

- What is the preferred location?
- Is a separate entry necessary? Is a separate garage entrance necessary?
- What is the tentative budget and the desired square footage?
- What type of family dynamics do you want this suite to support? Will interaction with family be daily or occasional?

Because each family's needs are different, ask your builder or remodeler to point out challenges that they have addressed in previous in-law suite designs. For example, talk to your builder about sound challenges, electrical and plumbing issues, as well as possibly including a separate HVAC zone so the suite temperature can be adjusted separate of the rest of the home.

While the rooms most commonly included in an in-law suite are a bedroom, bathroom and sitting room, you won't want to overlook storage. Providing adequate storage allows your parent or relative to hold onto sentimental items that he or she may not be able to part with yet. Keep in mind that downsizing from a home to a suite of rooms can be a challenge, so the more storage areas you are able to incorporate into the suite,





the better. Some families also include a kitchen preparation area that includes a microwave, small refrigerator, and sink. Check with your municipality on zoning issues prior to designing a full second kitchen and separate entry in a single family residence. Some zoning may consider this a duplex and not allow it.

Consider the location of your proposed in-law suite carefully. If you are planning on including it in the lower level or second floor, you may also want to add a chair lift to the stairway, or an elevator for easy access. In the majority of homes, the intent is to have the suite close to the main living area of the home for convenience, yet far enough away to give reasonable privacy for all parties involved. In some designs the residents of the suite spend the majority of their time in the primary living spaces of the home and the suite is only used for sleeping and private time. In other homes, the suite is treated as an entire separate entity from the house. It becomes its own area with a private entry and feels more like an apartment.

Budget and space are the biggest challenges most families face when adding an in-law suite to a home design or an existing home. Sometimes the aging parent or relative contributes to the cost of building an area for him or her to live in the home (this is especially true if an elder parent or parents sells their

“When an in-law suite is incorporated into a lower level, it is important to look beyond the egress windows required by code. If the occupant is handicapped or elderly, you may want to create a door going to an airing porch for easier access to safety. This also can give the individual a private outdoor sitting space off of their living or sleeping area.”

– Jim Pitzen, Pitzen Design, Ltd.

home to move in with their immediate family); other times, their children view it as an investment in family and take on the financial challenges of remodeling on their own.

Bryan Tom of Architectural Development Services, Inc., Tom Weiher of Carmel Builders, Inc., Bob Flanagan of The Flanagan Company, and Jim Pitzen of Pitzen Design, Ltd. shared their expertise for this article.

Photos: Opposite page, kitchenette photo & this page, exterior photo courtesy of Architectural Development Services, Inc. Photos in center courtesy of Carmel Builders, Inc.



“In-law suites are as varied as family dynamics. It is essential to sit down with all parties involved, including grandchildren, to come up with a design that works well for the entire family. Privacy is important, but so is the ability to interact with family in common areas of the home.”

– Bob Flanagan,
The Flanagan Company