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Designing for Connection: Intergenerational Living and Shared Spaces

What was once a cultural norm is becoming a practical solution. Shared living is gaining traction as families seek affordability and connection.

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For centuries, living with multiple generations under one roof has been a way of life in many cultures around the world. In countries like India, China and Italy, grandparents, parents and children often share a home, pooling resources and responsibilities while building strong bonds. In these societies, family isn't just about immediate relatives; it includes extended networks that thrive on shared care and support. Latin American cultures also have a deeply rooted tradition of multigenerational living, where [32% of Latino households](#) in the US already embrace this way of life. Driven by immigration, financial hardship, and a strong sense of cultural identity, many Latin American families continue this tradition as a means of both economic support and familial closeness. By contrast, others in the West have long leaned towards privacy and independence, with single-family homes as the ideal. However, times are changing. Rising housing costs, financial pressures and a growing yearning for deeper family connections are nudging Western societies, especially in the United States, to reconsider intergenerational living.





An ADU in Altadena, California designed by Yan M Wang of Cover Architecture for his mother and partner. Photo courtesy of Leonid Furmansky



Photo courtesy of Leonid Furmansky



Photo courtesy of Leonid Furmansky

A Global Perspective on Intergenerational Living

In many parts of the world, extended families living together isn't just practical – it's cultural. In Japan, for instance, the concept of *oyako* (parent and child) often includes grandparents, who play an active role in childcare and managing the household. Mediterranean cultures, too, embrace the idea of family homes bustling with multiple generations. Communal meals and shared responsibilities are staples of everyday life.

These living arrangements reflect a commitment to caring for the elderly and nurturing children within a supportive environment. In these cultures, family ties are strengthened not through occasional visits but through the daily rhythm of life together. Meanwhile, Western societies have traditionally prioritized independence and self-reliance, resulting in nuclear family setups that can sometimes feel isolating. [Studies](#) have even shown that an increased sense of individualism is linked to reduced wellbeing outcomes.

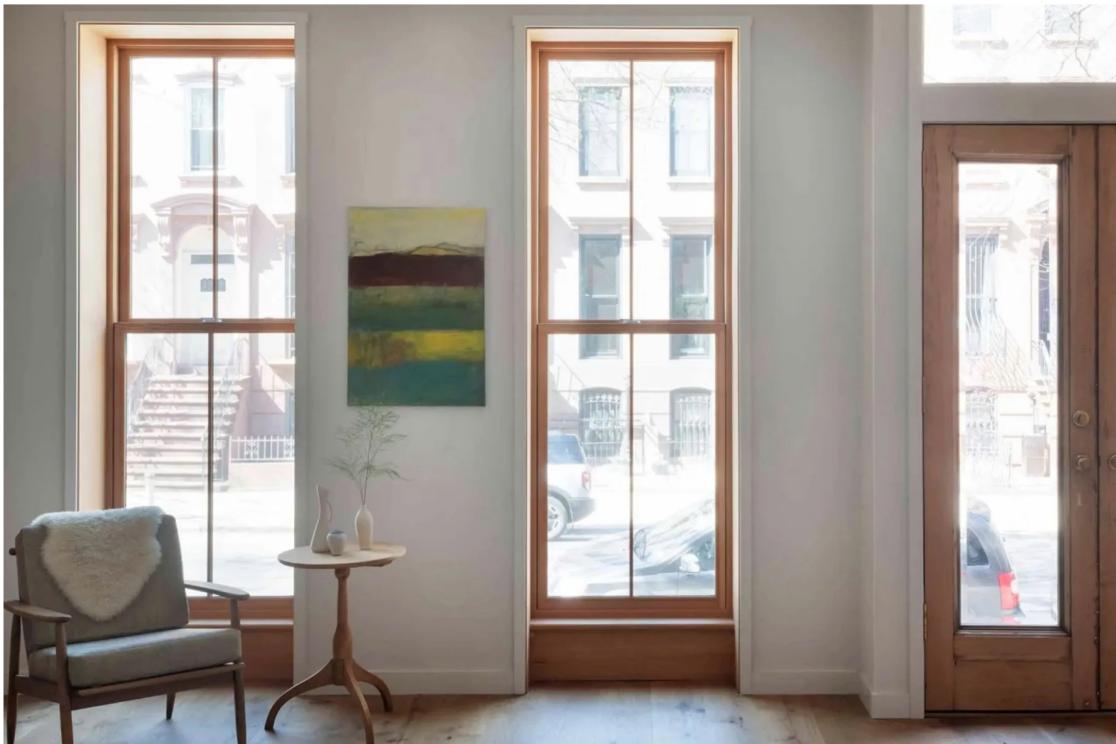
"Studies have even shown that an increased sense of individualism is linked to reduced wellbeing outcomes."

The Western Shift Toward Intergenerational Living

While nuclear families are still the norm in the West, economic realities are driving more families to embrace intergenerational living. In the United States, high housing costs, student debt and stagnant wages make it [harder for young adults to move out](#). At the same time, aging parents often need extra support.

These factors are creating a practical case for families to come together under one roof.

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs), often called “granny flats” or “in-law suites,” are becoming a popular solution. These smaller, self-contained living spaces are built on the same property as a primary residence, offering privacy and independence while keeping family members close. ADUs exemplify how families are balancing connection with the Western emphasis on personal space.



Studio TBo designed an extension on a Brooklyn townhouse that could accommodate a multi-generational family. Photo courtesy of Matthew Williams



Photo courtesy of Matthew Williams



Photo courtesy of Matthew Williams

Balancing Privacy and Connection

Privacy remains a key concern for Western families considering intergenerational living. Unlike cultures that embrace collective living, Western families often value individual space and autonomy. Designing homes for intergenerational households requires striking a delicate balance between shared and private spaces.

Architects and designers are stepping up with innovative solutions:

- Flexible Floor Plans: Adaptable layouts create distinct living areas while preserving communal spaces for gatherings.
- Separate Entrances: Many ADUs and multi-generational homes include separate entrances to enhance privacy.
- Soundproofing: Enhanced insulation ensures that each generation can maintain their own routines without disruption.
- Shared Amenities: Spaces like kitchens, living rooms and outdoor areas encourage connection while respecting boundaries.

These thoughtful designs cater to the needs of both younger and older generations, making intergenerational living more feasible and harmonious.



Home in Melbourne, Australia designed by Austin Maynard Architects with areas that can be converted over time allowing space for grandparents to move in. Photo courtesy of Peter Bennetts Studio

The Benefits of Intergenerational Living

The advantages of intergenerational living extend far beyond cost savings. For aging parents, it offers emotional support, companionship and practical assistance with daily tasks. Young adults, meanwhile, gain financial relief and benefit from mentorship and guidance. Children thrive in these environments, with grandparents often serving as additional caregivers and role models.

Research also highlights the mental health benefits of intergenerational interaction. A study in India found that older adults [report](#) lower levels of loneliness and depression when living with family, while younger members of the household gain a sense of identity and purpose. These arrangements also help

preserve cultural traditions, as stories, values and customs are passed down naturally.

Navigating Challenges

Of course, living with multiple generations under one roof isn't without its challenges. Differences in lifestyles, habits and expectations can lead to tension. Open communication and mutual respect are essential for creating a harmonious household. Setting clear boundaries and ensuring everyone has their own space can also help prevent conflicts.

Financial and logistical considerations are another hurdle. Renovating a home to accommodate more family members or building an ADU requires careful planning and a significant investment. Families must also navigate zoning laws and other regulations, which can vary widely by location.



Dorschner Kalh Architects and Heine Mildner Architects designed a multi-generational housing project in Germany set around a communal garden. Photo courtesy of Philip Heckhausen

Designing for the Future

As intergenerational living becomes more common in the US, architects, developers and policymakers are adapting. Innovative housing designs and zoning reforms are making it easier for families to embrace these living arrangements. NYC's [One Flushing](#) is a notable success story, with 66 units of this project reserved for senior residents. This development deliberately serves mixed ages and offers social services and community amenities.

Across the country, California has passed [legislation](#) to simplify the construction of ADUs, addressing both housing shortages and the growing demand for multi-generational homes. Other states and cities are following suit, recognizing the social and economic benefits of intergenerational living.

A Cultural Shift in Progress

The resurgence of intergenerational living in the West reflects a broader cultural shift. Families are rethinking what it means to live together, prioritizing connection and community alongside modern values of privacy and independence. This trend invites us to reimagine how we design homes and

approach family life in the 21st century. By embracing innovative designs, families can create spaces that honor both individual needs and collective bonds. In doing so, they join a global tradition that has thrived for centuries, adapting it to meet the unique demands of today's world.



A family in one of the Blue Zones, Okinawa, Japan. Photo courtesy of Blue Zones

*Feature Image: Schwartz and Architecture designed an ADU in Sonoma, California.
Photo courtesy of Bruce Damonte*

Photography: Leonid Furmansky, Matthew Williams, Peter Bennetts Studio, Philip Heckhausen, Blue Zones

FURTHER INFO

[NYC Housing Preservation and Development: One Flushing](#)

[Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies: Blueprint](#)

[Why US Adults Live in Multigenerational Homes](#)

[Generations United](#)



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