



Expansive spaces and wide door frames are essential to “universal design,” as seen here at 4885 North Hermitage Avenue. (Photos: VHT Studios)

# Home Is Where Your Mother-in-Law Is

By Moira Lawler

If you’re standing on Hermitage Avenue, this newly constructed house in Ravenswood looks like a standard, albeit contemporary, single-family home. But, there’s more to it: In back of the 3,700-square-foot structure is a 700-square-foot private guest suite, what the architects at Searl Lamaster Howe Architects refer to as the “mother-in-law suite.”

The home caters to the rising number of people living in multigenerational homes. According to a [Center for American Progress](#) paper released in October, Chicago has 658,362 “extended family” households, which means adult children, elderly parents, or other relatives have moved in with nuclear families. Of those, 13 percent are older generations moving in with their adult children.

Multigenerational living has always been the norm for some cultures. “Generally the first-generation immigrant has that engrained in their culture where they live as a family in a multi-gen house and that carries over to the way they prefer to live here,” says Marc Hernandez, the Chicago-area manager of [Alterra Home Loans](#), a mortgage finance company.

But the Center for American Progress paper also points to the growing popularity of multi-gen living among other segments of the population. The number of Chicagoans living in an extended family household has jumped more than 15 percent since 2005. [Michael Menn](#), an architect and remodeler

based in Northbrook, says he's seen more families looking for this type of housing in the last five years than in the previous 20. One key aspect to making it work? Independence, no matter if it's an elderly parent or an adult child moving in, Menn says.

The Ravenswood home makes it happen with the standalone suite, complete with a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, that's connected to the main house through a skylight-lit hallway. "As a population ages, it's not unusual for parents or grandparents to need additional care and frequently come and live with the family," says Frances Kao, developer and principal of development firm PH2 Square, who spearheaded the 4885 North Hermitage Avenue project. "I wanted to reimagine housing for our present needs."

The five-bedroom home, which is listed for \$1.85 million, is rooted in universal design, meaning "a person can be born in the home and live there their entire lifetimes and never have to make a retrofit," Kao says. The home accommodates those faced with a disability or old age with a zero-slope entry to the front door, extra-wide hallways and door frames, and walls painted in contrasting colors that make them easier to see. "If you walked into the home, you would never know that this is a deliberate universal design home, other than it just happens to be convenient when it's necessary," Kao says.

The home has three green spaces, including themed areas like the salsa garden, which will be stocked with onions, tomatoes, peppers, and cilantro. "You can see a grandparent with a grandchild out there," Kao says. "It provides the maximum amount of relationship building, which is another aspect of the multigenerational home that I hope to nudge people toward."

It's certainly not your typical setup. "This is the kind of home that's not available on the market," she says. "People don't even understand that they have this choice."

Kao is currently working on three other projects—a home on Damen and Montrose, a mixed-use building and accompanying green space in Edgewater, and low-income apartments in the West Elsdon neighborhood—and she's hoping other developers will follow her lead.

"I wanted to bring multigenerational housing into the mass market and create a concept and a dialogue for why it's necessary," Kao says.

---