

UNIVERSAL DESIGN: building for the future

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A man's home maybe his castle, but sometimes he (or his wife) can be shackled inside their own home by their physical limitations. Taking a shower, washing the dishes, or just moving from room to room can be a big challenge,

especially for people in wheelchairs.

A growing concept in the housing industry called Universal Design (UD) is helping homeowners break the chain. Simply put, Universal Design means all spaces and equipment in a home are useable and accessible to anyone.

"The idea of Universal Design is so a house doesn't have the appearance of being handicapped accessible, but it has the structural elements," explained Glenn Getyina.

Getyina is the Community Director for a new housing development in Niles being built specifically with UD in mind. The planned community, Lexington Pointe at Longmeadow, is being developed by Lutheran Homes of Michigan, a Christian-based agency that runs nursing homes and assisted living centers.

Getyina says Lexington Pointe will consist of 48 single-family homes and 32 villas, designed with the aging, but still very active, adult in mind. Their target audience is baby boomers, age 55-plus years.

"Many boomers don't want to be reminded they are aging," explained Getyina. "Our layouts are designed so people won't have to move out of their home if their ability and mobility change," said Getyina. Layouts are very open and free flowing. According to Getyina, Lexington Pointe will also coordinate concierge-style services for homeowners.

Scott Peacock's remodeling company has been modifying homes in this area for 24 years. He has not seen a remodeling trend toward Universal Design by homeowners in this area just yet. He says it's important that homeowners know what's available.

"It's not like there is anything revolutionary going on," explains Peacock, "it's pretty much the same thing. But it's just making people aware they have an option."

Options include not only wider doorways and grab bars in the shower explained Peacock. Those are essential. He suggests you can also replace

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Roll-in showers with grab bars are solid future planning for baby boomers.

doorknobs with levers and faucets with bigger handles that can be easily grabbed. Light switches can be lowered and electrical outlets raised, so you can reach them from a wheelchair or without bending as far.

"It's not too exciting, but it's really nice though for those who need it," adds Peacock.

Design consultant Betty McKinney says many homeowners are asking for changes in their bathrooms, including grab bars and curbless (roll-in) showers. "They are taking out their tubs and putting in showers. They don't have to bend their knees to get in and out," explained McKinney. Grab bars will insure you won't lose your balance while getting in and out of the tub or shower. McKinney says if you don't install grab bars during a renovation, you should put in the wall supports so you can install grab bars later.

Another feature growing in popularity is a higher bathroom vanity. Instead of the standard 29", some homeowners prefer 32" to 34".

"Baby boomers are not leaning over as far and reaching. When people find that out, they say 'wow, that's what I want,'" explained McKinney.

What about the kitchen? Peacock says you could consider adding kitchen counters with various heights, including some without cabinets underneath. That way a person in a wheelchair could use the counter.

With the baby boomer population growing, Peacock says his business

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will remain busy with clients who need modifications to their homes. He's considering adding a bathroom display in his showroom that showcases what can be done to give a bathroom universal design. The products now available mean homeowners no longer must sacrifice style for function.

"Manufacturers are becoming more and more aware of the market for baby boomers and universal design with their products. Their designs are now more stylish and less institutional," said McKinney.

How about the exterior? An accessible home means more than just building a wooden wheelchair ramp at the front door. Steve Fidler, President of Kuert Concrete, has noticed

some homebuilders are planning for the future. "A few of the forward thinking homebuilders are starting to build homes that are adaptable," said Fidler. That means a step-free entrance on a gradual grade. Fidler says you don't need to sacrifice style on the outside of your home either.

"They can decorate the ramp through colored concrete or a pattern on the concrete to soften the look," said Fidler.

McKinney says there

are plenty of ideas for home design on cable TV and the Internet, but she urges homeowners to be careful.

"Do your homework, get ideas from magazines, before you start knocking down walls." suggests McKinney. Needs vary among homeowners, depending on your physical limitations, lifestyle, and budget. But for people who want to stay in their homes, changes can be made to keep you in your castle in style. ▲