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Doors Wide Open

Home design evolves to accommodate residents of all ages and abilities.

BY LORRIE KLOSTERMAN,
PHOTOS BY ANGELIKA RINNHOFFER

Awhile back I had a houseguest for a few days, an elder to whom I happily offered the bedroom with the nicest bed - to my thinking, anyway. It's a wide, firm futon on a platform about a foot high. One morning I noticed my guest was on his hands and knees on the carpet. It was not a yoga session; he was getting out of bed. It was too low for his back and knees to confidently maneuver from directly, so each morning he had been crawling to the floor first and tackling the full upright from there.

We had a few laughs about the literal meaning of "rolling out of bed," but it's a serious consideration when designing or remodeling a living space. Movements and activities we take for granted in our younger years can become difficult and even dangerous as we age. There's also the possibility at any age that an illness or injury will put us, or a family member, in a wheelchair. Then, even the entryway can become an insurmountable barrier, thanks to the step or two that most dwellings have, and indoors the too-narrow hallways and doorways literally close in on you.



For the home of Barbara Kay and Jan Paschelson, architect Richard Librizzi designed an access ramp to the garage.

Universal Design features encompass products and floorplans that make homes more livable.

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Resource Center For Accessible Living, Inc.

Kingston
(845) 331-0541
www.rcal.org

Concrete Change

www.concretechange.org

Disability Resources

www.disabilityresources.org

The Home Modification Resource Guide

www.homemods.org

Lisa Davenport

Designer, Glastonbury, CT
(860) 659-8476
www.lisadavenport.com

Richard Miller

Architect, New Paltz
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Creating a living space that allows access to people of all ages and physical abilities, including those using a wheelchair, scooter, or walker, is a strategy that's gaining momentum. The 70 to 80 million baby boomers in this country are now in their forties and fifties, and looking for ways to extend their years of independent living. That's one reason that "universal design" is finding increasing application in new homes, and in renovations of existing ones. Even if you plan to resell, your pool of buyers will be expanded by some simple choices that have everyone's needs in mind.

EVERYBODY IN!

The concept of universal design encompasses materials, products, floorplans, and building features that make a building suitable for all people. It circumvents or outsmarts the standard features of a home that become barriers to people with limited mobility, balance, or strength. Its principles are decades old, stemming from the practical experience of wheelchair-bound architect Ronald Mace, who helped found the still-vibrant Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University.

Universal design strategies include having at least one bathroom with grab bars in the tub/shower, or at least the required reinforcements for them built into the wall for installation later, and a pathway at least 32 inches wide to the toilet, which improves access for anyone but is essential for wheelchairs. Another universal design "must" is a step-less entrance to the residence - not just for wheelchairs but also for people with arthritis, muscle weakness, Parkinson's, or even just with a lot of luggage or furniture to haul. Stepless entries are far easier and lovelier to create during initial construction; retrofitting a dwelling can mean adding an unsightly, expensive wheelchair ramp. Unfortunately,

brand new developments are popping up everywhere, with colossal homes that still each sport those standard few steps up to all outside entrances.

A companion concept to universal design is visitability, a term borrowed from Europe, relating to its literal meaning of "able to be visited." Visitability promotes three features that are a visitor's bottom-line needs: having at least one entrance with no steps, a width of 32 inches in all hallways and doorways (36 inches is preferred), and a half bath (toilet and sink) on the first floor. An international movement is afoot to include these in all new construction. Concrete Change is an organization focused on that goal for single-family homes in the U.S. (Governmental or publicly used buildings already must meet access requirements, thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 requires the same of multi-family dwellings, though it's rarely enforced.) The woman behind the organization is Eleanor Smith, who has decades of experience with barriers to her wheelchair, like six months residing in a home whose narrow bathroom doorway required that she crawl to get in.

Local visitability ordinances, and thousands of compliant homes and developments, are springing up around the country. They're attractive and very resalable. Congress is considering a federal visitability mandate in the form of the Inclusive Home Design Act (HR 2352), introduced in 2003. (The U.K. is ahead of us on that one, with a Parliamentary mandate in effect since 1999.)

AGING GRACEFULLY

Aging brings to most people a lessening in agility, strength, and balance. Combine those realities with the features of a typical house

and you've got a formula for frustration, social isolation, dependency, and danger. Architect and professor Harvey Berg of Washingtonville has four decades of design experience and even more experience of living on this green earth, and he's not going to wait for his house to entrap him. He's designing a new home with gazillions of practical solutions, many of which can be incorporated into an existing home.

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Design for All



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ENTRANCES: accessible path and a stepless entry; covered entry

GENERAL INTERIOR: minimum door openings of 32 inches; lever-style door handles; light switches at 44 to 48 inches above floor; electrical receptacles at 18 inches above floor; low windows (sills less than 36 inches above floor)

KITCHENS: variable height work surfaces; pull-out shelves in base cabinets; knee space under sink; lever-type water controls

BATHROOMS: grab bars in tub or shower area; adjustable height, removable (handheld) showerhead

For further information, additional ideas, as well as publications, contact **The Center for Universal Design**, (800) 647-6777, or visit www.design.ncsu.edu/cud.

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Berg listed these key age-sensitive challenges: stairs ("It's easier to walk a mile than a flight of stairs"); weight of carrying groceries, garbage, and recycling; reaching and bending; low furniture; rigors of winter; and eyesight changes.

Here are some of his suggestions. "Keep everything the same level inside - not a single step." For carrying groceries from the car, use a cart on wheels at a comfortable height. He's also putting an opening in the wall between garage and house (with a door and shelf) where groceries can be placed and retrieved from the inside. Garbage and recycling bins on wheels eliminates the need to lift and carry them outdoors. Raise washer and dryer on platforms to minimize bending, and make sure both are front-loading; raise bed, chair, and sofa height or get those that assist you out with a little push ("though I've yet to see a design that looks half decent"); design a large bedroom shelf-closet along one wall with everything at knee-to-easy-reach height and an easy-open curtain instead of doors; build large storage pantries, which minimizes frequency of shopping, with shelves that pull outward so you can access each from the side.

Berg has other unique design plans that can't be incorporated in an existing home, but he points out that there are amazing appliances and gadgets out there for anyone. "You'd be shocked at what exists - the terrific ideas that are available." Some of the simpler ones are a tub with a door in its side - no stepping over required; overhead cabinets with shelves that automatically come down when you open them; a mini-dishwasher that fits into a kitchen sink; ovens that know how to cook something by just being told what it is.

He also recommends that elders (or anyone) enduring Northeast winters get an automatic backup generator that starts itself as soon as power goes out. For those repaving the driveway or making a new one, install heating wires to melt snow and ice. Finally, he adds most enthusiastically, "A sauna is the thing for cold, aches, and pains."

IN PURSUIT OF INDEPENDENT LIVING

Maryann Donaldson is an architectural modification consultant at the Resource Center for Accessible Living (RCAL) in Kingston. Her specialty is helping individuals with existing disabilities live independently.

By appointment, Donaldson will visit a home to evaluate what modifications it



Thor Badendyck's first-floor addition to his parents' home features a covered entryway, sunroom-style vestibule, and sky-lit art studio.

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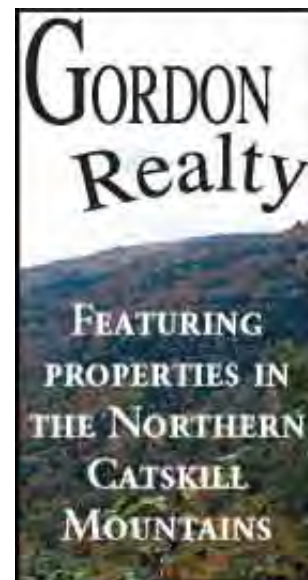
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needs. "I work with occupational and physical therapists and with family members to take into account an individual's existing and future abilities." She then provides the nitty gritty details for whatever might need to be changed, and offers lists of vendors, architects, builders, and contractors to do the job.

RCAL also offers a host of other services, from technical advice to advocacy to emotional support. They will work directly with landlords to make a rental space universally accessible, provide counseling about housing programs and funding sources, and advocate for services for schoolchildren. They also host support groups and educational workshops and house a resource library.

"New construction is a time to plan ahead," Donaldson says. "We're putting a bathroom on the first floor in our house, and designing it to accommodate a roll-in shower [for a wheelchair]. The family room on the first floor can be converted into a bedroom. We're putting in plenty of electrical outlets. And carpeting is an especially important thing to pay attention to. Plush pile can cause a tripping hazard for people with canes or walkers, so ceramic tile, linoleum or hardwood are useful."

BEYOND THE BASICS

To modify a residence, there are the basics, and then there is way beyond the basics. New Paltz architect Richard Miller worked alongside a host of builders to convert a ranch-style house into a dwelling with a separate living space for writer/illustrator Thor Badendyck to accommodate his wheelchair, assisted living equipment, and attendants. (A car accident left Thor a quadriplegic at age 27.) The elegant multi-room addition they put on Badendyck's parents' house features a skylit art studio, bedroom suite in the old garage, huge shower/bathroom (the "grotto"), family room, exercise/physical therapy room, kitchen, and staff area.

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There's also an Asian-inflected sunroom-style vestibule serving as an enclosed entryway. "In freezing temps, it's a nice in-between room," says Badendyck. "You can put on forty pounds of clothing without getting too hot." Indoors, radiant heating in the floor is a key part of maintaining a tightly controlled indoor environment. "Having the heat below you and fans above is the best way to keep temperatures comfortable." The existing house also got an upgraded heating and cooling system in the process, and a second level library. "And there's a porch with wonderful views where an old deck had been," says Miller. "So the house is greatly enhanced over the brick ranch it used to be."



Badendyck emphasizes the importance of one key outdoor feature: flat pavements. "Concrete is great, blacktop is great. But if they have cracks, dips, or are slanted - all of those make getting around in a wheelchair more difficult than it looks. If the ground is pitched, and your motorized wheelchair steers from the back, you have to do constant corrections to get up the hill."

Interior designer Lisa Davenport of Glastonbury, Connecticut, also got to create beyond the basics for client Greg Hughes, who explained that he "wanted to make the house visitor-friendly for special events and holidays. It's really a gathering place. I have friends in wheelchairs who can get around really well here." So a team, including Davenport, worked together to create an elegant, inviting - and wheelchair-friendly - home that people love to visit.

Davenport created a kitchen table the height of a pub table where guests sit at bar stools and which Greg can easily roll up to. She custom-designed sofas, based on styles that Hughes liked, with armrests and back heights adapted for his needs and sufficient clearance underneath to accommodate a mechanical lift that moves him out of his chair and onto the sofa. She upholstered the master bedroom's walls with blue suede and the dining room walls with tapestry for a sense of warmth. "It's not just a temperature and a feeling, but an experience. And we did in fact use area rugs - large ones with really good no-move pads. They don't bunch up when turning the wheelchair on them."

Other cool things at the Hughes residence include pocket doors, a two-door wide opening between rooms whose doors slide in opposite directions into the walls. The mechanics that operate them, at the push of a button, are decoratively hidden in crown moldings on shelves over the doorways - which Hughes notes are a great place for holiday decorations as well. Curtains and shades all open by similar, well-hidden mechanisms. Another point of pride is the spacious bathroom off the master

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bedroom that Hughes invites guests to use. "Any friends that need special accommodations can have plenty of privacy as well as space in that bathroom." Then there's a lavishly decorated recreation room designed after the Ford Theater, with the added fun of a custom bar, pub tables, pool table, television, and dartboard.

Let these last examples be inspiration that a functional home need not be a boring one with an institutional feeling.

So before you invest in new furnishings, drive another nail in that home improvement project, or put a bid on a new home, remember: choices you make today about room design, hardware, lighting, fixtures, furnishings, and even driveway materials could make the difference between a home with limitations, or one in which you can grow old gracefully and safely. 🏠

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