

At Home *with* Universal Design

by Mary Keen

Leslie Markman-Stern provided expert advice on local TV during a recent appearance on ABC Channel 7. She discussed designing for disabilities.



LESLIE MARKMAN-STERN

The term “universal design” was created in the 1980s by architect Ronald L. Mace to describe the concept of designing all products to be aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of their age, ability or status in life. His pioneering work in accessible design was instrumental in the passage of national legislation prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities, the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 and The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Today, interest in Universal Design is growing considerably driven by the fact that many older adults want to stay in their homes to “age in place.”

While the obvious choice may be for a senior to move to a home or apartment that appears accessible, like a ranch or elevator building, that might not be the preferred decision or even possible. And, there is no guarantee that an older single-level home will have accessibility features such as doorways that can accommodate a wheelchair or special handles in the bathroom in order to prevent a fall.

The good news is that installing accessible features can actually

add value to a home. So instead of thinking of this process as a necessary but expensive outlay, think of it as making your home more marketable when it comes time to sell. New buyers may be more inclined to purchase a home with Universal Design because it will meet their own future needs and because it’ll be good for resale. Features like walk-in threshold-free showers, roll-out kitchen drawers and anti-scald bathroom fixtures are accessible and safe, and they can also give a home an attractive, contemporary look and feel.

In 1997, the late Mace and seven of his colleagues wrote the seven principles of Universal Design which are still followed today:

1. **Equitable Use** — Marketable to people with diverse abilities.
2. **Flexibility in Use** — Accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. **Simple and Intuitive to Use** — Easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level.
4. **Perceptible Information** — Communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.
5. **Tolerance for Error** — Minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
6. **Low Physical Effort** — Can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.
7. **Size & Space for Approach/Use** — Appropriate size and space is provided regardless of user’s body size, posture or mobility.

Keeping these principles in mind, here are few ways to make a home accessible and safe:

- Lighting with motion detectors
- Touchless water faucets
- Elevators
- 42-inch wide hall and doors
- Microwaves below counter
- Cabinet cutouts for wheelchairs
- Waist-high refrigerators
- Bathroom grab bars
- Accessible landscaping

For Home Safety and Accessibility Assessments, CJE SeniorLife utilizes the services of Leslie Markman-Stern, a residential and commercial interior designer with 30 years of experience in working with homeowners with special needs. Markman-Stern suggests construction enhancements such as adding a lift in an attached garage or using a side or back entrance instead of building a wheelchair ramp in front of the house.

Staying true to the requirements of Universal Design, there are many innovative, attractive ways to remove architectural barriers for the older adult and those with limited mobility. Markman-Stern’s philosophy is to take an “holistic approach in creating a safety conscious, functional and beautiful environment so older adults and those who have special challenges can live independently and safely at home—with thought given to creating a resalable product for the future.” ♦

To learn more about this CJE service, call 773.508.1000 for a fee-based, one-hour assessment.