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CHICAGO HOMES



Universal DESIGN

Opening the door to accessibility and livability | Page 4



COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH PH

Rosemarie Rossetti shows off her new kitchen, which includes staggered levels of countertops to more comfortably accommodate different tasks, a lower microwave and oven and a roll-up stove top. The Columbus, Ohio, house is known as the Universal Design Living Laboratory, built to showcase accessibility and sustainability.

Making life easier at home



LINDA OYAMA BRYAN PHOTO

An elevator to the Toback family's finished basement takes into account universal design from the ground up.

Universal design strikes a balance between function and style

BY LESLIE MANN
Special to the Tribune

Living in a two-story house became a challenge for Susan and Paul Toback and their two sons, one of whom is physically and cognitively disabled.

Their newer one-level house in Bannockburn makes life much easier.

"It wasn't just the stairs, which didn't work for my son or for my back problems," Susan Toback said. "The new house means my son is safer and more independent."

Built in 2009 by Lake Bluff-based Orren

Pickell Builders & Designers, the Tobacks' home incorporates basic principles of universal design, including simplicity and flexibility.

By definition, the concept involves making a product or environment "usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design," according to the Center for Universal Design in Raleigh, N.C.

Universal design at the Tobacks' house begins with stepless entries into the house and garage. The home also has an elevator to the finished basement, a basement bedroom suite for a future caregiver and grab bars in the hallways.

The Tobacks insisted that the house not look institutional. The result is a home that blends function and style.

The open floor plan, with 4-foot-wide hallways for easy mobility, is attractive and

suitable for all ages and abilities. An accessible bathroom features a walk-in tub and raised toilet and sink. The layout of the kitchen keeps drawers within easy reach, while the center island is at a convenient height for seating.

"Universal design is all about making the house comfortable and safe for everyone in the family," said David Roberts, president of Roberts Architects & Construction Group Inc. in Evanston. "It combines home design with (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards. You have the wider doorways, for example, not just for a wheelchair turning radius but for the guy who breaks his leg in a skiing accident."

Approaching universal design with a client can raise eyebrows, Roberts said.

"I can't say, 'Boy, you're getting old, I think you need grab bars,'" he said. "But I do ask their needs, and most families have

them. You may not have an older or disabled person in the family, but you have a toddler or a visiting grandparent.”

Roberts talked about a client who wanted the freedom to live in her home even if she became sick or injured.

“After her husband died, she wanted to stay in her home with her dog, though friends urged her to go to a retirement home,” he said. “She could still get upstairs but asked us to build a first-floor bedroom-bathroom, with easy access to the backyard. Since then, she broke her hip but was able to stay.”

Incorporating universal design elements can be as simple as installing illuminated light switches or lever handles instead of door knobs.

“Usually, the homeowner’s reaction is, ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’ ” said Art Wehnert of Country Remodelers in Camp-ton Hills, Ill.

A first-floor master suite is the typical starting point for making a house more user-friendly.

“In new construction, it just doesn’t make sense to not have (a bedroom) on the first floor,” Wehnert said. “For a remodel, we try to save the homeowner money by converting a large unused room like a den. But more often, we need to add a bathroom to it.”

Cheryl Daugvila of Cheryl D. & Co., a kitchen and bathroom design firm in La Grange, said it’s ideal to build a room that can be a den or guest room now, with a Murphy bed and built-in cabinets. Later, the space can become a bedroom with a bed and built-in drawers.

In addition to baby boomers needing first-floor bedroom suites for themselves, more homeowners prepare them for elderly parents, Daugvila said.

“More often, we have more than one generation in the house, so someone in the family needs that room,” she said.

Bathrooms that can accommodate a



Design elements in the Tobacks’ user-friendly kitchen include lower counters and a table-height island for wheelchair access.

wide variety of users are safer for everyone, said Chicago-based interior designer Leslie Markman-Stern.

“Forget the polished marble floor of the ’90s; everyone slipped on that,” she said.

For safety, her bathroom designs have textured flooring or smaller tiles because it is the grout, she said, that reduces slipping. She also suggests lights in showers and tubs, towel bars anchored in wall studs, hand-held shower heads and night lights disguised as wall lights.

First-floor master suites are a selling point no matter buyers’ demographics, Markman-Stern said.

“They work for nannies, live-in grandparents and parents who don’t necessarily need to be on the same floor as their babies because of the new baby monitors,” she said.

Modifying the kitchen to make it safe and comfortable can mean less bending, reaching and lifting.

“Even without a disability, it helps to have everything at counter height, at that sweet space where you don’t have to climb

a stool or bend over,” Roberts said.

Wehnert added, “All the little things should be thought out, like task lighting where you prepare food and dog bowls in pull-out drawers so you don’t trip over them.”

Designers can help you find products not seen in showrooms, like faucets with touch controls, upper cabinets that pull down, shelves that pull out and appliances with easy-to-see controls.

Consider a counter-height, not bar-height, breakfast counter, Markman-Stern said. “Then you can use chairs instead of stools that tip over,” she said.

The market for aging-in-place remodeling continues to grow as more homeowners choose to remain in their homes as they age. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry and the National Association of Home Builders offer programs and courses that promote standards of universal design in residential projects.

According to a June study by the American Association of Architects, the percentage of clients who asked their architects for “flexibility in accessibility” rose to 64 percent in 2012 from 58 percent last year.

D.R. Horton Inc. is one of the production builders that has jumped on the universal-design bandwagon.

At its active-adult developments in Aurora, Naperville and Pingree Grove, D.R. Horton offers upgrades like taller vanities and toilets, walk-in showers with seats and wider doorways. Company Vice President Chris Naatz said a key feature is an extra garage bay for storage instead of a basement to avoid stairs.

Despite gains in universal design, the concept is confusing to many homeowners.

“Slowly, we’re getting there,” Wehnert said. “People get it when they see it in another home or on TV. It’s all about changing expectations. We’ll get to the point where this is the norm.”

A showcase for accessibility

The Universal Design Living Laboratory, a state-of-the-art home in Columbus, Ohio, serves as a learning center and resource for builders, remodelers, designers, architects and homeowners. The 3,500-square-foot ranch-style home incorporates universal design principles to demonstrate how a more comfortable and accessible living environment enhances quality of life.

The home was created by project founder Rosemarie Rossetti and her husband, Mark Leder, after Rossetti suffered a spinal cord injury 14 years ago that left her paralyzed from the waist down. After returning home from the hospital in a wheelchair, Rossetti realized just how unaccommodating her two-story home was for this new reality, which drove her and her husband to create the Universal Design Living Laboratory.

For more information, visit udll.com.



LINDA OYAMA BRYAN PHOTOS

Aesthetics and function coexist in the Toback home, designed by Orren Pickell Builders & Designers. Features like hardwood floors and proper furniture placement aid mobility.

STREET VIEWS IN CHICAGO

BY LESLIE MANN

Does your house have any universal design features?



No. But I'll only be living there for a few years. Even then, though, I'm still

too young to think about things like grab bars yet.

— Nancy Palmisano, of Chicago, attorney



No, not at all. Eventually I will need them. But now we're only in our 50s, so we don't quite have one foot in the grave yet.

— Mike Kaage, of Des Plaines, newsstand owner



We have two bathrooms with walk-in showers. One bathroom has a seat in the shower. Otherwise, no.

— Bob Sampey, of Chicago, firefighter



My house is 125 years old, so no, not at all. In fact, it has small rooms and narrow hallways. It would be very challenging to live there if I was disabled.

— Nicole Bujewski, of Chicago, pastry chef