Universal Design - Benefits for All Seniors

By Ed Sullivan

Summary: By demanding accessibility, seniors can help increase the supply of universally-accessible housing, allowing them to stay in their own home longer.

Article provided by Best Bath Systems

The challenge of staying in one's own home versus being forced into a nursing home because of disabilities or infirmities is now being tackled from a new avenue. Architects and household fixture designers are now acknowledging that millions of seniors can continue to live in their homes through the incorporation of Universal Design: the providing of access to people regardless of age or abilities that makes access throughout the household much easier.

The huge demand for Universal Design

Due to the skyrocketing need, many universities are incorporating the subject into architectural studies - North Carolina State University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the University of Wisconsin, to name a few. "If you look at population statistics, you can only conclude that Universal Design is vital to the quality of life of the majority of Americans," says Laurence Weinstein, a 40-year veteran architect, developer and space planner for residential and commercial buildings across the U.S. "In 2001, over 54 million Americans had a permanent disability, and millions more had some form of temporary or short-term disability. With our aging society, there is an enormous amount of people that could benefit greatly from homes that incorporate Universal Design features."

To promote this purpose, Weinstein formed Shared Solutions America, a non-profit organization that advises architects, designers, builders, and consumers on how to successfully apply the principles of Universal Design in both existing and new living environments. Located in the San Diego area, he is also AARP's State of California Affordable & Accessible housing Specialist, and the developer of the successful AARP National Event's: Homes, Gardens, and Outdoor Living Pavilion. "I came out of retirement because I feel that the cause of Universal Design is a crucial mission that can enhance the lives of many people," says Weinstein. "For seniors and people of all ages with disabilities, we can create living environments that maximize independent daily living activities, providing people of all ages the ability to function comfortably and safely in their own homes and avoid the need to move to special institutional facilities."

Universal Design allows universal access

In practice, some architects and developers of production housing still resist the Universal Design concept. They feel that it adds to costs and requires fixtures that are reminiscent of nursing homes. And while some builders may feel it is a bit presumptuous for others to advocate design standards, it is our role as consumers to make known what design features and built-ins are necessary to making our lives more comfortable and inclusive so that we can stay in our own home longer. "Universal Design is a growing trend and a good one," says Weinstein. "The universally-designed home accommodates all family members at all stages of life... from infants to grandparents, all of whom benefit from homes that impose fewer restrictions on daily activities and maximize independence and safety."

"Universal Design is a much more holistic view of the lifespan and people's changing abilities throughout their lives, so that regardless of their experiences and the nature of their lifestyle they can still use the facilities," says John P.S. Salmen, AIA, President of Universal Designers & Consultants, Takoma Park, MD. "That's a much different concept than accessibility and demands a market-based aesthetic which dictates that Universal Design must look good, and must be appealing to many people." Salmen says the added cost of Universal Design dwellings may be exaggerated or even result from inopportune planning. "When we start to include Universal
Design concepts at the very beginning of the design process, the costs may be minimal. However, the cost of aesthetics and features that are appealing to everyone is a broad question that is often borne by marketing. By appealing to a larger market, as true Universal Design does, marketing costs may actually be offset.

Still, one of the barriers to Universal Design has been the institutional appearance of some bathroom and kitchen fixtures. Recently, though, high-quality, stylish and unobtrusive choices have become available. "Until recent years many of the safety fixtures and design features in areas such as bathrooms and kitchens reminded people of nursing homes," says Susan Mack, a Certified Aging-In-Place Specialist and Licensed Occupational Therapist. Mack is a universal design consultant who advocates for inclusive design in single-family and multi-family dwellings. "But today there are many attractive fixtures and design choices that can make access for everyone aesthetic as well as functional." Mack, a graduate of the University of Kansas in occupational therapy and home modification, has advocated design features that accommodate independent living for over 30 years. Located in Murrieta, California, Mack's Universal Design consultancy, Homes for Easy Living (www.homesforeasyliving.com), was founded to create homes that incorporate the design principles that provide safe, convenient, and adaptable homes to meet the diverse needs of their homeowners.

"The vast majority of homes, whether houses, condominiums or apartments, are designed for a healthy male who is relatively tall, has close to perfect vision, and is generally fit," Mack says. "It's no wonder that the home is the place where so many injuries occur." Mack points out that many parts of the home are not as safe or accessible as they could be. Seniors who fall in bathtubs or showers can be badly injured. Insufficient light in hallways and closets can lead to accidents. Kitchen appliances such as low-level dishwashers often cause back strain. Steps in front of thresholds can cause tripping or prevent access to people using walkers or wheelchairs.

At the very least, all homes should be "visitable" Mack says. That term was introduced a few years ago by Eleanor Smith, an access advocate who was stricken with polio as a child in the mid-1960s. By "visitable," Smith means that homes should provide on-grade access from the outside through an entry without steps. Ground floor hallways and the bathroom door should be at least 34 inches wide, to permit access by a person in a wheelchair. In Atlanta alone, where Smith lives, 800 houses incorporate her visitability guidelines. Smith's web site, www.ConcreteChange.org, addresses the misconceptions of visitability as well as practical approaches to making homes more accessible for everyone.

Mack says that Universal Design goes considerably beyond visitability. "It enhances work efficiency within the home, provides ergonomic benefits that reduce stress on joints and back, increase comfort, and promote healthy living by reducing accidents."

"Safe" never looked so good

The concept of Universal Design aims to make homes safer and more comfortable for seniors. It can also make homes more attractive. While the question of elegance versus function may still exist, there are highly tasteful options available that can make Universal Design an attractive concept. Incorporating these options into the construction of new homes ensures that the effects will be more economical, lasting and integrated more suitably into structures. Perhaps the most noteworthy design choices are those affecting bathrooms and kitchens. The ground floor bathroom is a key area in accomplishing Universal Design. In the past, this was the area that most suffered from the use of fixtures and accessories that appeared to be straight out of a nursing home. One of the downsides of that unfortunate effect was that it often reminded seniors and physically challenged people of their disabilities - both present and future. But, today there are design alternatives that put this issue to rest.

"Because it is used by family and visitors, the ground floor bathroom is an important space that can provide Universal Design functionality with highly attractive fixtures," Weinstein advises. "In the bathroom one of the things that I advocate is a larger curbless shower, which allows access of a wheelchair or walker. A Universal Design featured show home that I'm designing right now for our forthcoming AARP 2004 National Event will have a 48 x 60-in curbless shower made by Best Bath systems." Best Bath Systems (www.best-bath.com), a
Boise, Idaho-based manufacturer of high-end bath and shower systems, is one of a growing number of companies to have embraced the concepts of universal design with aesthetic appeal. "Best Bath has really worked out this technology with a neoprene water dam that depresses as you roll over it and it pops right back up," adds Weinstein. "The shower walls have blocking behind on all three walls of a shower, so that if somebody doesn't want a grab bar now, but needs it later on, they can be installed easily and provide the needed 250-lb. load capacity. Best Bath has really embraced the concept of Universal Design and has developed a broad line with a wide array of tasteful tile designs."

"They are very attractive and can be accessorized with colors, which is quite unusual in many products," concurs Victor Helfand, a member of the Canadian Standard Association barrier free design committee and owner of Barrier Free Architectural located in Toronto, Ontario (www.barrierfree.org). "The other thing about Best Bath is they are quite concerned about how people will 'age in place' so they have products which can be adapted to some extent. What in many other instances is impossible, suddenly becomes possible."

Aside from fixtures, Universal Design bathrooms require a 34-inch entry door and sufficient area to maneuver inside the room. "A spacious bathroom is both attractive and more accommodating," says Susan Mack. "It provides necessary maneuverability for the disabled, and allows plenty of room for those who want to assist the elderly."

**Kitchens are another vital area for convenient and safe access that can benefit everyone.**

"The Universal Design featured show home for the AARP 2002 National Event featured a dishwasher that was raised 12 inches off the floor so that the resident didn't have to bend down to load and unload the dishwasher," explains Weinstein. "Many of the people who visited the model said, 'What a great idea!' So, we're incorporating that feature into homes we're helping design for major developers and national home builders such as Genesis/Champion Homes."

Weinstein advises that architects, developers, and builders should plan for the future needs of homeowners; when they grow too old to climb stairs. For example, he says that architects who design two-story homes might design closets on both floors, one directly above another, at a logical place in the home. "This could easily be converted into the shaftway for easy installation of a residential elevator at a later time if the homeowner may find it physically difficult getting from one floor to the other."

Weinstein also advocates taking Universal Design outside the home. He says that steps approaching the home can be often eliminated thus creating a no-step entry, by creating a gently graded or sloping walkway so that stairs are totally eliminated. "I've done this in a number of instances, and the landscape effect can be dramatic and beautiful," he says.

For more information, contact Best Bath Systems, 4545 Enterprise, Boise, Idaho 83705; Phone (800) 727-9907; Fax (800) 627-0929; Email sales@best-bath.com; Visit the web site www.best-bath.com.

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