



WHAT IS UNIVERSAL DESIGN?

By DANA W. TODD

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In addition to sustainability, another Schwetman family design goal was making their home friendly for easy maneuverability. Good universal design is creating a free flow of access throughout a home, suitable whether the inhabitants are able-bodied or have temporary or chronic disabilities. A universally-designed house enables its residents, despite physical capabilities, to live comfortably and assume responsibility for themselves whether they are nine or 90.

Universal design is more sweeping in scope than its predecessors – the accessibility movement and barrier-free design concepts – and includes both aesthetic and technological components. Required for many years in commercial structures financed by federal dollars, the concept is only recently catching on in the residential marketplace, particularly due to the aging Baby Boomer population.

“People came to work for large companies like IBM and Motorola in the ‘60s and ‘70s. They’re still here, living in houses that are paid for, and they want to retrofit their homes to stay independent and avoid assisted living facilities as long as possible,” says Bill McHugh, a certified professional remodeler and Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS). He focuses on helping active adults – those most likely to injure themselves – rework kitchens, bathrooms, lighting and general home navigation issues to avoid common tripping hazards. In addition, he adds transparent universal design components – such as pre-blocking in bathroom walls for grab bars and wheelchair accessible vanities – to erase hardships in future cases of limited mobility. His work with nursing and rehabilitation organizations has helped him better understand the necessary components of true universal design.

Industry-wide, universal design is being considered in renovation projects such as McHugh’s focus, but not practiced in new housing construction yet. “I have worked on many renovation projects where universal design concepts are implemented, but there has not been a high demand for universal whole-home design yet,” says interior designer Dawn Hearn, ASID, NARI, CAPS.

Universal design is not only meant to ease movement for the

elderly with impaired mobility. It is the process of designing for accessibility at all physical levels and all stages of life. It is also particularly helpful for those who have other conditions such as macular degeneration or a knee injury that mandates the temporary use of a wheelchair.

“My brother-in-law has Down’s syndrome and has trouble getting his walker through the doorways in many of the homes he visits,” says Hearn. “That got me thinking about aging-in-place and how simple choices – whether you choose a knob or lever on a cabinet door – make the difference in how long a person can comfortably stay in his home and not have to go to a care facility.”

For those who are interested in applying universal design to a custom home project, there is a Living in Place™ certification process to ensure a home is designed for ultimate flexibility as the family grows and ages. “The certification was founded to help homeowners and builders address the rapidly changing needs of the residential construction industry and the future needs of a demographically-changing America,” says Living in Place™ CEO Lynne Wilkinson.

For those implementing universal design, there is a return on investment (ROI), according to Hearn. “Elevators and special lifts are pricey, but often the homeowner’s insurance company will supplement costs. Some features have minimal additional expense associated with them – standard versus comfort height toilets or cabinet drawers versus doors,” says Hearn.

Hearn expects the ROI will increase as people discover the value of having a home designed this way. “It all comes down to people making mindful decisions. Universal design is good for everyone.” ❖

Dawn Hearn Interior Design

512.930.0250 Dawnhearn.com

Tier1 Group, LLC (design, build, remodel)

512.986.8306 Tier1-group.com

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512.658.8166 Livinginplace.co