

## In the News – *Easy Access*

### **"Easy Access" by Charles McKennon**

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Whether you're physically challenged or desire a home that will age gracefully with you, experts say accessibility is the key to making homes more user-friendly.

During the early 1980's, when Jane Hampton was designing luxury home interiors in Florida, she gained a reputation for sumptuous design and elegant details. Less noticed in those homes was the attention Hampton paid to accessibility -- adding features and products to render a home more user-friendly for a disabled person or a person who might become disabled down the road. Hampton, president of St. Louis Park-based Accessibility Design, a firm specializing in residential and commercial design for seniors and the physically challenged, says her "soft-shoe approach" to accessibility was essential in those days because most clients felt uncomfortable confronting the restricted mobility that comes with aging or the lifestyle implications of a disability, temporary or permanent.

But whether consumers care to acknowledge it, trends continue to point to a need for more accessible homes for people of all physical abilities, Hampton says. There is the oft-noted graying of the population, and with it a growing awareness that homes with sweeping staircases and multiple levels pose mobility challenges for aging legs and backs. Then there's the cost and supply of health-care services. Studies indicate that up to 60 percent of residents choose to live in nursing homes primarily for their barrier-free environments, not so much for the medical care.

"What this all leads up to is what we call 'aging in place,'" Hampton says.

"People are wanting to stay at home as long as possible, and that means the home should have a lot of functionality. The term we often use is *universal design*, which means designing a home so that everybody--no matter how tall, short, obese, visually impaired or physically impaired--can use that environment. What universal design is, basically, is good design. It's designing a home that meets the needs of the largest market possible."

#### **ACCESSIBILITY IN ACTION**

If the terms *accessible design* and *universal design* bring to mind institutional images of bathroom's with elevated toilets and metal grab railings, you're not getting the full picture.

For one thing, while accessible design does connote certain special-needs equipment, many aspects--such as easy-to-operate "rocker" light switches, an inch less overhang on stair

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treads, wider hallways and doors, and retractable doors under sinks, for wheelchairs--are quite subtle.

Beyond that, the term *universal design* was coined, at least in part, to convey the idea that homes can be designed to allow for the addition of special-needs equipment (elevators, grab bars, adjustable cabinetry) only as time, age and disability dictate.

Universal design also emphasizes that all of us, disabled or not, can stand a little more comfort, safety and convenience in our lives. In that sense, roll-in showers, zero-threshold doorways and no-trip flooring transitions are not just helpful for disabled people, they're downright sensible for almost everyone.

Dozens of user-friendly details are incorporated in the homes built by Inver Grove Heights-based Equal Access Homes. With each new house it builds, the company strives to meet the particular needs of a disabled person, while still making the home fit the entire family, says Charles Braun, president. "That means all the counters don't have to be down low," Braun explains. "You can have a high bread board and a low bread board. We put retractable doors under the kitchen sink so a wheelchair can get in, but you can also enclose the space when you like. We put electric outlets in front of the cabinets, on the stiles running between the drawers and doors, but we'll also put them on the wall. A lot of people come into our models and won't know it's an accessible home."

### EXPERIENCE COUNTS

To hear Hampton and Braun tell it, builders and designers don't just wake up one morning and decide to create an accessible home. To do an effective job, they must listen carefully to the needs and wants of disabled and elderly people. It also helps to research and experiment with the construction, design and product options that make it easier to get around a home.

The result can be a home with a remarkable number of carefully conceived details, some of which will go unnoticed to the untrained eye. For example, the extensive use of lazy Susan's and pull-out drawers in Braun's homes are a concession not only to convenience, but to accessibility. A kitchen cooktop with controls near the front edge (instead of in the rear or the middle) is another conscious design choice, not a happy accident.

And the list goes on. A dead-bolt lock placed slightly lower than most. A covered entry at the front door. An extra row of cement block on the basement, allowing a higher exterior grade and eliminating the need for a front step. Four-foot hallways and 3-foot doorways. Several pocket doors. Extensive plywood backing behind bathroom walls to stabilize grab bars should they ever be added. A slightly oversized garage door to accept a handicapped modified van. A circuit-breaker box located in the garage, not the basement, with the main breaker reachable from a sitting position. Tandem latches on crank-out windows, so operating the bottom latch automatically throws the top one.

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Is all this attention to accessibility expensive? Not as much as you'd think. Excluding the cost of adding extra square footage (for larger hallways and the like), Braun says including accessibility products and features in a home's design typically adds about 5 percent to the home's total cost.

### **KEY ELEMENTS OF ACCESSIBLE DESIGN**

If you are now, or soon will be, planning a new home, Hampton suggests considering these five aspects of home design where accessibility-oriented details can be addressed for maximum advantage:

**Surface-level changes.** Eliminate foot-catching thresholds in doorways. Provide smooth transitions between carpet, wood and linoleum flooring. Avoid steep slopes in landscape design.

**Clearance.** Allow roomy door and hallway widths, plus access between and around cabinets, furniture, kitchen islands, and the like. "One of the 'pinch points' most often seen is doorways," Hampton says. "What's the point of having an elevated toilet seat if you can't get a wheelchair through the door?" She adds that some newer Florida homes features doors off the bedrooms--doors wide enough for an emergency-rescue gurney--that make at-home surgical procedures feasible.

**Reach ranges.** How easy will it be for people of all sizes and physical abilities to reach knobs, shelves, racks, railings and switches?

**Lighting.** As people grow older, depth perception and glare can become problems. Extra lighting in certain areas and indirect lighting in others can reduce glare and make all the difference, Hampton says.

**Safety.** When was the last time you rehearsed fire-escape plans? When was the last time you did so while dragging a broken leg or propelling a wheelchair? From security and alarm systems to door and window configurations, safety is a prime accessibility concern.

"I'm a strong believer that often it's our home environment that makes us more disabled than our actual age or disability," Hampton says. "Aesthetics, maintenance, safety and accessibility--these are all considerations when you're looking to build a home that will enhance its owner's lifestyle."