

In the News – Smooth Sailing

"Smooth Sailing: Universal design concept geared for home buyers with physical limitations"

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by Shelley Kerber, Special Sections Writer

There's no place like home -- to grow up, raise a family, and grow old. But for many people, living at home can be practically impossible if their vision, hearing, or mobility begins to fail, whether due to an accident, illness or the aging process. One answer lies in a concept called "universal design."

It's an approach that seeks to provide barrier-free homes, buildings, and products that accommodate people of all abilities.

In the home-construction industry, it's a hot topic, especially as those influential Baby Boomers approach retirement age.

"We do have a population urgency on our hands," said Jane Hampton, president of Accessibility Design, a Minneapolis interior design and consultation firm that specializes in environments for the elderly and physically challenged.

Hampton, an interior designer, speaks nationwide on universal design, and works with builders and Realtors on new and existing homes.

She also worked with Conlin Construction in Oakdale on a townhome utilizing universal design features as a special project for the Parade of Homes Spring Preview, sponsored by the Builders Association of the Twin Cities.

The townhome, a two-bedroom, two-bath home in Bayport, covers 1,400 square feet on one level. It's one of 12 townhomes that Conlin Construction is building overlooking the St. Croix River.

"We had built one other townhome in this development with some of the (universal design) features," said Denise Boczek, a broker with Conlin Construction. "They're appealing to people who want to 'age in place.'"

This is an environment where they can be self-sufficient and remain independent. They don't have to rely on others for care."

For example, the entire home is wheelchair accessible. The garage was designed to include a ramp, a safety measure for the occupants because it avoids any exterior clues that the homeowner might be vulnerable.

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Other features include the following:

- Motion detectors automatically turn on exterior lights.
- The front door has two peep-holes, one at eye level for someone standing; the other at eye level for someone seated.
- All doorways and hallways are wider than normal to accommodate a wheelchair. At each doorway there is a 5-foot turn-around space for a wheelchair.
- Electrical outlets are higher than usual so they're easier for someone in a wheelchair to reach. Each outlet also has a cup hook next to it to hold an unplugged cord.
- The Andersen Windows feature larger cranks that are easier to grasp. The windows can also be locked with a pole in one movement.
- Door handles throughout the home are levers instead of knobs, making them easier to operate.
- All lighting is uniform and indirect to reduce glare.
- The master bedroom features a "wheel-in" closet.
- Bathroom walls are reinforced so grab bars can be added in the future.
- The home features Honeywell's TotalHome System, which allows the homeowner to control temperature, lighting, appliances, and a security system with one unit. In addition, during the Spring Preview, a home office was set up by Tele-Commuter Resources, a local non-profit group, to demonstrate the possibility of working at home.

Although the features sound obvious, they're not. "We put up 70-some placards (during the Spring Preview) to point them out," said Hampton. "Otherwise people didn't notice them. I think that's a compliment to my design."

Neither does the home seem institutional or sterile, she emphasized. "Accessible home environments have to be aesthetic to be accepted."

The features didn't increase the construction time, or add significantly to the cost. (The home was priced at \$99,900 for the Spring Preview.)

"On new construction, it doesn't take that much more money to make a home accessible," Hampton said.

She estimated that, at most, it might add between 5 and 15 percent of the cost. On a \$100,000 home, that means an extra \$10,000.

That \$10,000, however, could make the difference between living at home or moving to a nursing home.

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"There are so many little things you can do," Boczek noted. "Most of the things that were done would not add expense."

Building an accessible home is cheaper, however, than trying to remodel later and incorporate the same features.

The home evidently stirred interest during the Spring Preview. Boczek said it attracted nearly 1,000 visitors from throughout the Twin Cities.

"For a lot of people, this was what they were looking for," she said. "It was really eye-opening for us. When we switched our focus, we didn't realize how much demand there was for this."

In fact, the home sold even before the Spring Preview. The couple who bought it had looked last summer, without luck, for a single-level home that would accommodate the husband, who has multiple sclerosis.

After failing to find anything, they considered remodeling their existing home, and came upon the Conlin townhome while looking for remodeling ideas.

Although they've only been in the home since April, they noted that they're extremely pleased with it and have received compliments from everyone who has seen it. And the only change they mentioned was a desire for more electrical outlets -- in the garage.