

## **In the News – Universal Design**

### ***"Universal Design: Accessible to everyone"***

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by Joyce Krisko

Jane Hampton, president and senior designer of Accessibility Design in St. Louis Park, describes Universal Design as a "renaissance field." Originally used to describe a home designed to grow old with its owners, it has become a popular term among designers.

As baby boomers' age, they're going to force technology to keep pace with them," Hampton stated. "They're used to going to health clubs and using exercise equipment; they're not going to want to be in an institutional environment. Studies have shown that because of governmental funding cutbacks there will not be enough nursing homes to house baby boomers. People will be forced to -- and will choose to--renovate their homes."

The concept behind Universal Design, Hampton explained, is the global, all-encompassing effort to remove any and all barriers from the environment and to create accessible, comfortable, responsive spaces for the most extensive population. "Aesthetics is the key for accessible designs to be accepted as the norm," she added.

Hampton also said it is estimated that there will be 65 million people in the United States older than 65 years by the year 2030.

Recent polls show that 85 percent of the population hope to "age in place," or continue to live as independently as possible in their own homes.

Local builders are responding to the demand for universal and accessible home designs. Joseph Nastepniak, owner/president of JMN Builders, Inc. in Golden Valley recently built a home for a Golden Valley couple. "He has muscular dystrophy," Nastepniak said. "Originally, they had talked about remodeling their existing home, but putting the money into that house wouldn't have been feasible. We were able to build them a house within their budget--we kept it affordable and gave them everything they needed."

Features of this home included a wheelchair ramp in the garage and a number of alterations in the bathrooms and kitchen.

Denise Boczek, with Conlin Construction in Oakdale, said that her company builds "user-friendly" homes. "These are homes that allow people to age in place," she explained, "which means people can stay in their homes and don't have to worry about taking care of things as they grow older. And, they can remain independent. By being accessible, a person's ability may change but they can stay in their home and be self sufficient."

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To Hampton, Universal Design is a step in concept beyond an accessible home because it considers all levels of ability, including the frail, the injured, the thin, the obese, and the "non-disabled."

"There is really no extra cost for most items when they're done at the time of construction," Boczek stated, "such as widening doorways to allow a five-foot turnaround space for a wheelchair, or putting electrical outlets higher and light switches lower. These are all things that aren't noticeable. If they're done after construction they can be quite an expense."

To Nastepniak, an accessible home is one that is accessible to all persons, regardless of age or disability. "We try to build the house so there are no steps," he said. "We build a house with wider doors; if ramps are needed we build ramps so that a disabled or elderly person is able to access any part of the house, whether it's a closet, bathroom, or anywhere they want to go without being hindered."

Nastepniak urges his clients to think ahead. "I suggest they ask themselves whether they're planning on staying in the house for an extended period of time and plan on retiring there," he explained. "I encourage them while they're young to think about possible changes as they get older. Or, if an accident should happen and they become wheelchair bound or must use crutches--they should take these matters into consideration so that if an accident were to occur, they wouldn't have to do major remodeling. They might want to build a rambler, wider doorways, and keep steps to a minimum."

Kitchens are pretty universal, Nastepniak said. "The only time a kitchen needs to be accessible is if someone in the family is wheelchair bound," he added. "Then, we would lower the countertops, for instance."

Studies have shown, according to Hampton, that 43 million people in the United States have some limit to their mobility and one out of every four families in Minnesota has a family member who has some form of physical limitation.

"Combined with an aging population and the reduction of housing funding by the government," she added, "today's Universal Design may well be the housing choice of the future."