

Universal Design

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By Amanda Newton

As we age we aren't able to bend as easily, can't see as well as we used to and our balance is a little shaky. These issues aren't always tied to age, though. Maybe an accident has left a loved one impaired or a grandchild is born with physical disabilities. Or, a mother of triplets is constantly questioning the fact she has only two hands (many mothers with just one active toddler have wished for additional hands, too.) Regardless of how a physical limitation comes about, there is a new design movement that is slowly catching on across the country that makes life easier for everyone: universal design.

Universal design makes sense for several reasons, one of which is the fact that one in four adults in the United States are 50 years or older and those in the 85 and older age group are the fastest-growing segment of the population. Another reason is that using principles of universal design makes sense for everyone.

So, what exactly is universal design?

According to a definition provided by the Center for Universal Design at the College of Design at North Carolina State University, universal design is "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

Universal design takes lifestyle changes into consideration and allows all individuals the opportunity to live in a home that supports their changing needs.

While some people might not be familiar with universal design, they might have heard of aging in place. The two ideas are similar, but not exactly the same. Certainly, either can be very helpful to someone whose home is not conducive to their needs as they age.

"What universal design tries to do is look at it as a more holistic or complete view of human factors," said Sean Vance, acting director of the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. "Aging in place looks at a very specific market trend. What happens with aging in place is that you have a specific market that may have issues or physical requirements that they are working towards. I look at aging in place as one notch up between accessibility and universal design. Universal design would be the ultimate in that you are not looking at just how maybe say an older audience would use something, but how a complete audience - small children, people with disabilities, older people and people with no physical ailments at all."

Vance said his work at the center promotes an understanding of the complete human spectrum. It is a way of "gaining independence instead of interdependence in your daily activities."

Universal design features provide both a higher level of comfort and increased safety. All members of a household benefit from changes that adhere to universal design features. The features might include:

- no-step entries into the home and all rooms;
- one-story living, with all the needed rooms located on one, barrier free floor;
- doors that are 32-36 inches wide to let wheelchairs pass through;
- hallways that are 36-42 inches wide;
- and extra floor space so that no one is cramped and those in wheelchairs can move freely.

Some universal design features are easier to implement than others. A few simple things to do would include:

- installing a non-slip surface in tubs and showers, in addition to grab bars.
- Good lighting is very important for those with poor vision and can be achieved easily with additional light fixtures and higher watt bulbs.
- Opening the curtains to let in natural light is a good idea, too.
- Replacing traditional door knobs and light switches with lever door handles and rocker light switches benefits people with poor hand strength. They also come in handy when you have your hands full.

If you desire more than a few simple changes in order to make your home work better for you, then it might be time to call in a professional. Just be sure to do your research.

Dixey Robertson, executive officer of the Home Builders Association of Northwest Louisiana had some advice for those who want to age in their home, but need to remodel it to suit their needs.

“Make sure your contractor is properly licensed and insured,” she said. “You can call the licensing board or search their database at www.lsbclouisiana.gov. Your contractor should be able to show you proof of insurance. Any objections to this request should raise a red flag.”

“Get at least three written bids or estimates. Get a written contract and read and understand it before signing. Do not pay in cash or prepay for any work that has not been done. Do not make a deposit of more than 10% or \$1,000, whichever is less,” she added.

George “Geep” Moore, Jr. is the current president of the Louisiana Home Builders Association and owner of Moore-Built Construction and Restoration in Elm Grove. He was the first person in the state of Louisiana to earn the Certified Aging in Place Specialist (C.A.P.S.) certification from the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). For a couple of years he was the only one, he said, although there are more now.

“It (the certification) means I can provide to my clients some expertise on living in their home for a lifetime and how to get specialized equipment in their home. We design the

house with their needs in mind...we call it 'home for lifetime.' As your needs change, whatever the reason, we can come in and help meet your needs."

Accessibility factor is probably the most important factor that he designs for, said Moore. Then, he tries to make it as aesthetically pleasing as possible. That, he said, is the biggest challenge. But, he added, there are ways to do it to make it look non-modified.

"It is not 100 percent feasible every time because there are restrictions to how far you can go to hide the fact," he said.

"Generally, the first modifications you make in a physically challenged home are that we widen doors, take out bathtubs and put in walk in showers, and put in a highboy commode (like those found in handicap restrooms). This toilet is taller than a standard toilet by about 3 to 3 1/2 inches. It is easier to sit down on and get up from."

Moore said he believes that the need for builders and remodelers certified in aging in place and familiar with universal design will absolutely grow in coming years. With baby boomers approaching retirement and starting to face physical challenges, he thinks this field will only grow to meet those needs.

"As they (baby boomers) become older, familiar surroundings are always the best thing," Moore said. "People do better, usually, at home. The problem with home is it has to be accessible, not only for them, but their caretaker. The caregiver has to have enough room to be able to come in and work. We design homes for both of those."

Although Moore has had his C.A.P.S. certification since 2004, he added that he was doing that type of work long before then. He also said that there are many people in the area who might lack the formal certification, but have "a lot of expertise on that subject because they have done that."

Jeb Breithaupt, president of JEB Design/Build in Shreveport, has done several remodeling projects that used universal design tenets in the design.

"(The biggest challenge) usually is the space involved in terms of floor space," Breithaupt said. "You have just got to, obviously, have enough. If you're working with a small bathroom, you have got to have enough space, not necessarily just for wheelchair maneuvering, but...if you are getting in and out of a tub, you don't want it to be so crowded it is impractical. That is probably the biggest challenge is working with an existing space."

"That is why a lot of people need help on the remodeling design," he said, "because they know what they want but not how to get there. They won't know all the tricks of universal design (and we) go by guidelines."

As to whether or not modifications have to look institutional, Breithaupt said they definitely do not. He mentioned a particular bathroom remodel he did for a couple who needed to

accommodate the husband's wheelchair.

"That (bathroom) we did really looks homey and inviting," he said. "I would like to have that bathroom. It is a challenge but you kind of work around it. I think you have to be a little creative to get over that hurdle. That's not too hard."

If someone wants to age in their home, but is concerned about the permanence of certain modifications as they relate to resale value, they might be relieved to find out there are two ways to approach making a space adhere to universal design principles: accessible features and adaptable features.

Accessible features include wide doors, sufficient clear floor space for wheelchairs, lower countertops, knee spaces under sinks and counters and an absence of steps or stairs. Most accessible features are permanently fixed in place.

Adaptable features can be added or removed with a minimum of cost and don't involve structural changes. They include grab bars, cabinets that easily fill in open knee space under counters, and countertops and closet rods installed on adjustable supports.

Both accessible and adaptable features can prove beneficial whether you are staying in your home or plan to sell someday. As universal design becomes more widely understood people will be thrilled to find a home with universal design features already in place.

"It (universal design) is still catching on everywhere," Vance said. "My job is to make that disappear. My job is to make sure people understand what the environments are that we live in and that we work in and teach them how they can make that a better environment for people's everyday lives."

Vance said lack of knowledge about universal design is not something that one community has a problem with and nobody else does. There are still problems in the United States addressing accessibility needs and large areas that are not completely covered by accessibility codes.

"There is always work to be done," he said. "We have not reached the plateau where we can say we at least provide for 50 percent of the people's needs that we have in the U.S. What does that mean for the northwestern portion of Louisiana? It means that they are not alone. The problems there are here in North Carolina, they are in New York, and Europe; the most remote places in the world and the most populated."

What makes universal design so difficult to understand and teach is that what you are asking is not for people to have a book that gives guidance and tells them what to do. But, rather, to be aware of the things they should be sensitive to be designing to, Vance said. "There are a lot of people out there promoting certain portions of universal design and I think that is absolutely wonderful," he said. "But then there is the holistic message. If someone were able to ball all that together that would be a more clear understanding."

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