

Designed for All

Creating homes that function for any type of occupant

by Beth Luberecki

When L. Maxine Corbett was in her thirties, she was injured in a serious car accident and was laid up for almost six months. She lived in a three-story Victorian up North at the time, and she found it very hard to get around her home in her condition.

Today, as the principal designer and owner of Richlin Interiors in Naples, Corbett draws on what she learned from that experience when designing spaces for her clients. She creates what she calls “a nice easy flow,” with plenty of room for anyone to maneuver through the space. She uses a lot of drawers in the kitchen instead of stationary cabinetry where the homeowner needs to squat down in order to reach things. Decorative ledges in showers and tubs also serve as handholds. Floor surfaces have a little bit of friction to them, to prevent slips and falls. Upholstered furnishings have sturdy arm rests and slightly raised seats so that they’re easier to get in and out of.

In short, she designs her spaces with the concept of universal design in mind. “I try to include it in everything I do, whether the client asks for it or not,” she says.

She’s not alone, as more contractors, architects, and builders are embracing the idea of creating spaces that function for everyone at any time. “What we used to call good old-fashioned common sense is

what universal design is,” says Robert Black, founder of remodeling and building firm Access of Sarasota and a certified aging-in-place specialist. “It’s making things usable by the most amount of people without any type of special adaptations or modifications.”

There are seven basic principles of universal design, which were developed by the Center for Universal Design at the College of Design at North Carolina State University in collaboration with a consortium of universal design researchers and practitioners from across the United States. The design must provide for equitable use, offer flexibility in use, be simple and intuitive, convey perceptible information, have tolerance for error, require low physical effort, and provide size and space for approach and use.

That means anyone should be able to function in a universally designed space or operate a universally designed device, whether they’re a child, a baby boomer, or a senior using a wheelchair or walker. “The most perfect example of universal design is the lever door handle, because it can be used by everyone and meets most of the seven principles of universal design,” says Black.

A home that adheres to the principles of universal design allows its occupants to “age in place,” an idea that’s increasing in popularity as the baby boomers

reach retirement age. “The market is changing; our whole country is changing,” says Brian Connell, president of Naples-based Connell Builders and a certified aging-in-place specialist. “America is an aging population. About seventy million-plus baby boomers will be retiring and turning sixty over the next twenty-five to thirty years. It’s going to be a market that can’t be ignored.”

“The baby boomers are going to drive this market,” agrees Corbett. “This new set of elderly people we have coming up on us have been very active. They’re going to want everything at their fingertips. Even if they have physical limitations, they’re going to want to be a contributing member of society and do everything they did before a physical impairment. They have the funds, and they can do what they need to do [to achieve that].”

Though more people are becoming aware of the idea of universal design, others don’t understand the concept or think it’s something from which only “old people” can benefit. That’s why folks in the building and design industry are working to educate their clients about the widespread benefits of taking a universal design approach when building or remodeling a home.

“We really look at all the uses a client is going to have for spaces now and in the future,” says Abbie Sladick, president of



A universally designed living area, such as this bathroom project for Abbie Joan Enterprises, takes into account future needs as well as those of the present.

Health Tip

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance produced by the body and found in every cell. At normal levels it is not a health threat and, in fact, is used by the body to build cell walls and as a building block in the production of hormones such as estrogen and testosterone. The problem occurs when excessive amounts accumulate in the body.

High cholesterol can cause damage to the heart. Too much cholesterol in the bloodstream can build-up in arteries, blocking oxygen-rich blood from reaching the heart or brain, and can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

The good news is that high cholesterol is largely preventable. A healthy diet, regular exercise and specific lifestyle changes—like losing weight and quitting smoking—can go a long way toward reducing cholesterol's negative impact. "High cholesterol is generally related to genetic or diet-related history," says Jack Barone, a certified personal trainer and fitness supervisor at Sanibel Harbor Resort & Spa. "Both can be countered with an exercise program to help increase blood circulation to all parts of the body." Losing even five to ten pounds can lower cholesterol levels. Barone recommends starting off with a basic cardiovascular and strength training program. "The exercise helps to flush it out," he says.

Heart-healthy foods can also have a significant impact on lowering cholesterol. A diet rich in fiber and other cholesterol-reducing foods, can have the same effect as medication for some people. It is important to avoid saturated and trans fats. Instead, stock up on whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Also consider eating more fish; tuna, cod and halibut are heart-friendly alternatives to meat and poultry.

—by *Cristina Barone*

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Naples design and construction firm Abbie Joan Enterprises and a certified aging-in-place specialist. For example, a sit-down vanity area in a bathroom would accommodate someone in a wheelchair but might also be a good place to change a grandchild's diaper. Attractive grab bars for the shower and tub could help prevent accidents for seniors and little ones. Sladick says she focuses on showing clients the beauty and convenience of these types of features, not the future accessibility aspects they might provide. "By having plenty of room in the bathroom, with plenty of maneuvering space in it, it's really [about creating] a more luxurious bathroom, and not that we're making access for a wheelchair in the future," she says.

"A house should enable people by design, not disable people by design," says Black. "The trouble with most of the existing housing stock we have today is that houses disable people because of their design. We add a lot of things we don't need that just end up becoming barriers.

Universal design principles work for everyone, not just the very small percentage of people who may have a mobility problem." He points out how wider halls and doorways make it easy to maneuver a baby stroller through a home or "to move in all this big furniture we have today."

Some people think that incorporating universal design will lead to a home that has a sterile, hospital-like or institutional feel, but that's not the case. "There are attractive options," says Eric A. Wiedegreen, a professor and chair of interior design at Florida State University. "A lot of universal design now is seamless; you just don't recognize the difference."

Sladick designs a line of stylish and functional safety bars called Great Grabz, intended to blend in with rather than stand out from the decor in modern-day, luxurious bathrooms. She came up with the idea around four years ago, when many of her clients "didn't want anything to do with a grab bar but really did need safe bathrooms," she says. "A lot has changed in the last four years; there's been a huge



Abbie Sladick, president of Naples-based Abbie Joan Enterprises, shows off a few features of a universally designed kitchen.

shift. Clients will say they want a bathroom that will accommodate their needs in the future. They have a better vocabulary now. They don't want to slip and fall, and they know that for sure."

If the concepts of universal design are considered during the beginning of a building or remodeling process, it doesn't

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really cost any extra to create a home that functions for anyone at any stage of life. But it can be very expensive to adapt a home that was originally built without any of these concepts in mind.

“I remember working with a gentleman who was probably sixty-five years old. He had moved down here from Chicago, bought his dream home on a golf course, and within six months of moving had a stroke,” says Douglas Morris, an assistant professor in the occupational therapy and community health department at Florida Gulf Coast University. “At that point in time, he and his wife realized essentially they weren’t going to be able to live in their dream house, because it wasn’t accessible to him once he had to live in a wheelchair. Had he bought a universally designed home, he would have been able to stay in his dream home and it would have remained functional for him.” 🦿

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and features editor of Times of the Islands.



Elegant but functional, this universally designed kitchen features drop down shelving, accessible drawers for storage, a raised dishwasher and a lowered microwave.

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