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### Senior Real Estate Matters

### Quarterly Newsletter – April 2010

## Universally Designed, Universally Appealing

By Elyse Umlauf-Garneau

Sleek, chic and stylish. Those are rarely adjectives applied to products or properties that cater to an aging population. But universal design has evolved in ways that allow residential environments to be universally functional and universally appealing.

For just one example of how slick universal design can be, see the kitchen options at [http://www.snaidero-usa.com/italian-modern-kitchens/skyline-lab-modern-italian-kitchen\\_\\_kc-11.html](http://www.snaidero-usa.com/italian-modern-kitchens/skyline-lab-modern-italian-kitchen__kc-11.html). The designs are a far cry from an institutional aesthetic, yet they're tailored to serve those with physical limitations.

Leslie Shankman-Cohn <sup>ASID, CAPS</sup>, an interior designer and partner with JHID Jill Hertz Interior Design, Memphis, Tenn., calls universal design, "Design for all ages and abilities. It's thinking and planning for the future." Moreover, she points out that it can also be a good selling point and broaden a property's appeal when it's time to sell. "It says, 'This house is ready for anyone who wants to move in.' An older person can age in place. And because universal design tends to have an open, modern style, it's also pleasing to a younger crowd."

So whether you're renovating a parent's home, building a new one, or making modifications to accommodate multigenerational living, consider incorporating universal design principles.

"A lot is just common sense," points out Shankman-Cohn, who outlines a few design basics, including:

- **One no-step, accessible entrance:** Providing one barrier-free access point to a house is important for all, from seniors trying to get into a house with a bag of groceries and boomers pulling luggage into the house after a vacation to 30-somethings with a baby stroller or a teenager with a broken a leg. "It's one solution that serves different reasons," Shankman-Cohn points out.
- **First-floor bedroom and bathroom:** A room on the first floor can serve as a study or a home office, but can be quickly transformed if residents can no longer climb stairs because of age-related challenges or if they're temporarily side-lined by a broken ankle.
- **Wide doors and hallways:** Aim for doors and hallways that are 48 inches wide. Wider doors and halls benefit those in wheelchairs or those who need an aide to assist them with walking. "A mother with a toddler walking beside her also benefits from such width, so it works for both ends of the spectrum," notes Shankman-Cohn.
- **Curbless showers:** For younger clients, a no-step shower delivers an appealing contemporary look, and it's practical for older residents who find stepping up or down to access a shower troublesome. For a person in a wheelchair, the approach allows wheel-in access. Also incorporate a seat, grab bars and a handheld shower.
- **Kitchens:** Installing multiple levels of counters can make kitchen space universally

accessible. Opt for counters at heights ranging from 28 inches to 48 inches, or install adjustable ones. And instead of high sit-at bars, Shankman-Cohn opts for table heights for such bars. "Someone in a wheelchair can roll up and someone older doesn't feel uncomfortable teetering on a bar stool."

Shankman-Cohn also points to a handful of dangers that can lurk in any house. They are:

- **Clutter:** Newspapers, bags, books and other items piled up in corners and elsewhere can be hazardous for an elderly person with physical limitations, for a baby boomer rushing to leave for work or for small children charging down a hall.
- **Flooring:** Cushy carpeting may feel great, but it's a huge impediment for someone trying to maneuver a walker or wheelchair. An elderly person gets around better on bare floors, points out Shankman-Cohn. If carpet is an absolute must, she recommends choosing one with a short pile and padding that isn't thick. Area rugs also are tripping hazards. And a gleaming marble floor in a bathroom may look terrific in shelter magazines, but for anyone using the shower, that slick surface turns the room into a potentially dangerous skating rink, observes Shankman-Cohn. Eliminate thresholds to create barrier-free transitions between rooms. And bamboo or cork kitchen floors are gentler on the joints and they're green options for those concerned about the environment.
- **Kitchen hazards:** Placing a microwave above a range seems like a terrific way to use empty space. But how practical or safe is it for anyone to be reaching over a hot stove and maneuvering scorching liquids above their heads? That's why Shankman-Cohn suggests locating microwaves at the level of the counter or lower, no matter the age of the user.

For more on universal design principles, see "Additional Resources." And before planning for universal design, it's beneficial to consult with someone familiar with aging challenges. Professionals with the National Association of Homebuilders' Certified Aging In Place (CAPS) designation, for example, are trained to address design topics associated with successfully aging in place.

Shankman-Cohn says it not only teaches CAPS designees about the physical requirements for effective design, but also touts a team approach, allowing them to work effectively with doctors, occupational therapists, and remodelers to assess clients' needs and deliver suitable environments. "It gives you training on basics and the nuances of what goes in to making a home appropriate," she says.

### **Additional resources**

Here are sources for more on universal design principles and a way to locate CAPS experts.

- **American Association of Retired Persons,** [www.aarp.org/families/home\\_design](http://www.aarp.org/families/home_design)
- **American Society of Interior Designers,** [www.asid.org/designknowledge/aa/inplace/](http://www.asid.org/designknowledge/aa/inplace/)
- **National Association of Homebuilders Certified Aging In Place--Locate a CAPS professional at** <http://www.nahb.org/directory.aspx?sectionID=1391&directoryID=1415>

### **Seasonal Scams**

The tax season and the U.S. Census may bring out scam artists. Beware.

**Tax refund Scams--**Watch out for phony e-mail saying you're eligible for a refund. According the IRS, the scam asks consumers to open an attachment or click on a link to a claim form. The form requires personal and financial information. Taxpayers do not need to complete a special

form to obtain their federal tax refund, according to the IRS. Refunds are triggered by the tax return you submitted to the IRS.

**U.S. Census:** Scam artists may get in touch via phone, e-mail or in person in an effort to steal confidential information. A legitimate representative from the Census Bureau will never:

- Ask for your full social security number
- Ask for money or a donation
- Send requests on behalf of a political party
- Request PIN codes, passwords or similar access information for credit cards, banks or other financial accounts.

The Census Bureau also doesn't conduct the Census via the Internet or sends e-mails.

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