

Universal design accommodates homeowners as they age or lose mobility

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Fred and Julie Neihaus recently moved into what they hope will be the last home they ever have to build, a place where they can grow old with ease.

The custom-built home in the Arthur Ranch area of Douglas County is nestled into a hillside and features an airy floor plan and high-quality finishes and appliances.

But the home has secrets.

They are small design touches and layout features that will support the couple -- now in their 40s -- as they age, yet take nothing away from their home's appearance.

There are wide doorways and stacked closets that could be converted to an elevator, should the need arise. The kitchen has many easy-to-reach amenities, like a dishwasher and a freezer with drawers. Probably the feature the Neihauses like best is the layout, which features a main-floor master suite.

"We really looked at it as basically having all of the living amenities on the first floor, so as we age we don't have to move," said Fred Neihaus, a public affairs executive.

In the Denver area, remodelers can take a new training course in "universal design," design that accommodates people as they age or lose mobility, and some area builders are planning more homes with main-floor master bedrooms and universal design features.

Such design features might not immediately show their true worth to active people such as the Neihauses. But as time passes, those design aspects may allow them to stay in their home as long as possible.

It's a goal some call "aging in place," and it's something 72 percent of the population 45 and older wants to do, according to a 2000 study by the AARP.

Loosely defined, universal design is design for all people, said Cynthia Leibrock, a Livermore resident who has written three books and taught extensively on using design to improve the lives of older people and members of the disability community.

The term traces back to the early 1990s and was coined by Ron Mace, a North Carolina architect who was a paraplegic.

"It's just really good design," Leibrock said. By incorporating it, "we can extend people's lives for years in their homes."

Universal design isn't only for senior citizens and people in wheelchairs, said Leibrock, who teaches summer courses at Harvard. It's an ideal, a goal of accommodating people of as many different strengths, sizes and abilities as possible.

The cost of making such changes to an existing house are going to be higher than putting them into a new home, Leibrock said, but many people will choose to remodel rather than move.

But universal design is not a panacea, especially when it comes to small children. Stove-front knobs, for example, might be easier to reach for an elderly adult who uses a wheelchair, but they're a major hazard for a toddler.

The Americans with Disabilities Act estimates it costs less than 1 percent of a building's value to make more accessible. The National Association of Homebuilders, however, puts the cost of retrofitting a home at 14 percent or more of its value.

While universal design has been slow to take hold in the single-family home industry, a burgeoning baby boomer population is spurring it on.

"I think it's in the interest of the market to provide those features for people, because we certainly don't want the government telling us to do it," said Tom Hall, president of Renaissance Homes, which built the Neihaus residence and incorporates many universal design features as a practice.

"We do recognize as a company that it's in our interest to design houses that don't limit themselves to the occupant," he said. "The primary design focus, though, is to make them exciting."

Smart building techniques, such as using shelf molding instead of an institutional-looking grab bar, can make a big difference. Many appliance and hardware makers now offer stylish products that also are functional in a universal home.

"If you label a product as for the disabled or for the elderly, it's the kiss of death," Leibrock said.

Baby boomers are willing to make changes to their home so they can stay in them longer, according to RP.

They've also been smart with their money, said David Mathews, owner of Churchill Construction, a full-service remodeling company in Aurora.

"They've saved it and invested it wisely," he said. "They don't want assisted living. They don't want to go to a senior center. They want to stay in their homes."

Mathews, who serves as chairman of the Council of Professional Remodelers in Denver, is organizing a training effort in July or August on universal design. It will be offered to remodelers, but may also be of interest to builders, architects and designers, Mathews said.

Called CAPS (Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists), the two-day program takes participants through the characteristics of aging, demographics, why people choose to remodel, scenarios of good and bad design and nuts-and-bolts construction methods, among other things.

The course spurs participants to rethink everything they do in design and construction, Mathews said. One of the key components is empathy training.

Participants, for example, are asked to put a sock over their hand and hold onto a tennis ball while trying to open a standard round doorknob.

As for new homebuilders incorporating universal design, "I think it's beginning to appear on the horizon," Mathews said.

Montgomery Homes LLC, a small semi-custom/custom builder in Westminster, hopes to start construction on homes with universal design features and main-floor master suites before the end of June.

The company will possibly build in Westminster or Longmont, depending on land deals, said vice president Jim Janco.

The homes will include many of the accessibility features of universal design, including level entrance points and wider doorways. Lower rocker-style light switches and other more accessible hardware and appliances also will be offered.

Usually, such features are found only in age-targeted communities, not residential housing, Janco said.

"I know my grandma and my mom," he said. "They don't want to live in an age-targeted community. They want to live where families live. They want to be able to see kids playing."

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