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Creating an all-access space makes home last a lifetime

This article is the third of a four-part series that looks at the concept of creating a livable community for all ages in the Wichita and surrounding areas. The Central Plains Area Agency on Aging and the Older Adult Alliance are spearheading efforts to raise awareness of these issues. The first two articles covered the concept of livable communities and some of Wichita's efforts toward creating such a place. This article looks at the concept of universal design.

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

For Julie and Terry Connett, a rotting deck turned into an opportunity to bring some age-friendly functionality to their College Hill home in Wichita.

With the help of an occupational therapist who specializes in aging-in-place and adaptability issues, the Connetts added an accessible bathroom and bedroom on the first floor of the two-story home they've owned for the past four years.

While the couple initially planned the space to accommodate Terry's elderly father during visits or if he eventually moves in, the area will also be a bonus for Julie, 52,

and Terry, 53.

"We were thinking of ourselves, too, as we get older and it's no longer feasible for us to use our second-story bedroom or even if one of us broke a leg," said Julie Connett.

That kind of thinking—the structuring of an environment so that it can be usable by all people—is one of the hallmarks of universal design. It's a concept that's gaining hold among communities and aging-in-place experts concerned about America's growing aging population. Since a summit last year, the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging and the Older Adult Alliance of Visioneering Wichita have been working to educate the Wichita community about issues related to aging in place.

One concern includes how one's home can be a place that can literally last a lifetime and not become an obstacle.

The universal design concept, experts say, needs to be considered for those wanting to create livable communities where facilities, including public and personal spaces, are accommodating to people of all ages and abilities.

A place for all ages

When people think of making spaces accessible, they often think of designing a space for someone with current special needs or disabilities. They don't consider making their homes livable through their stages of life or across generations, say local experts.

"We are all moving to the point where we need this" concept, said Greg Black, a Wichita architect who has championed universal design for the past three decades. He particularly remembers meeting with a client who told him every individual is just one day away from living in a space with adaptability.

By using universal design concepts, one is also making a home more intergenerational-friendly and able to accommodate visitors of various ages, says Shana Gatschet, a Wichita occupational therapist who has the rare combination of being an aging-in-place specialist.

"The whole concept of livable communities is for anybody of any age to be able to visit and use a space," said Gatschet, a member of the Older Adult Alliance.

Gatschet's work as an occupational

therapist often meant visiting clients in their homes. She saw how for many people, their home had become an obstacle after their illness or disability. So in 2008, she partnered with her husband's home remodeling business, Heartland Home Improvements, to offer Home for Life, a consulting business featuring her expertise as an adaptability specialist. Gatschet works with customers to make "life at home possible, now and in the future" by evaluating their homes and customizing plans.

According to Gatschet, the duo is Wichita's only health care professional and home remodeling team.

Creating universal appeal

As the home-building industry becomes more aware of the importance of universal design and accessibility to consumers, homeowners can avoid the "institutional" look of creating an adaptable space.

"Bars (for bathrooms) are becoming more decorative now to avoid the stigma or stereotype of looking like a hospital bathroom," said Gatschet.

Connett, one of Gatschet's clients, said she was impressed with how updated her bathroom looks.

Accessible doesn't mean institutional with new product designs

"It's about how can we make this adaptable, without sticking it in your face," noted Black, the architect.

Lowe's, a major national home improvement retailer, recently included an article on its Web site, LoweCreativeIdeas.com, with design ideas and tips for remodeling a home using universal design and aging-in-place concepts.

Black said he hopes more people—from product manufacturers to developers to builders to homeowners—realize how important these design elements can be.

In the past, the building industry was slow to embrace the concept because of added costs, said Black, part of Clockwork

Architecture and Design. Also, with a lack of demand from consumers, manufacturers and builders have been slow to respond to creating universal design products, he noted.

Homeowners need to look at the whole value of their home and space during their lifetime, he advises. If a person is able to live in one's home for a longer time because the house was adaptable, the extra costs can be worth it.

While adding an extra bedroom and bathroom is generally a sure way to add resale value to a home, Connett believes their new remodel has even more added value because of its functionality.

For anyone building or remodeling a home, Gatschet and Black recommend considering ways to either prepare for or accommodate adaptability.

For example, adding extra blocking behind the wall next to a toilet prepares the wall for the addition of an assistive bar later on, Gatschet pointed out.

Installing lever-type handles on doors and sink fixtures will make them easier to use for both small and aging hands. Pullout racks and pull-down clothes rods will make a closet more user-friendly. Increase the functionality of cupboards with pullout trays. The Lowe's Web site included the tip for inseting carpet tiles to be flush with

the surrounding floor, rather than having an area rug that could cause someone to trip. Consider the widths of hallways and doorways or avoid them with an open-floor plan.

One of the most important issues is access, Black pointed out. Homeowners can install low- or no-grade access to their home. That helps prevent the stigma of having a handicapped ramp.

For some homeowners, medically necessary remodels may be tax deductible. Check with a tax preparer or accountant for more details about such deductions.