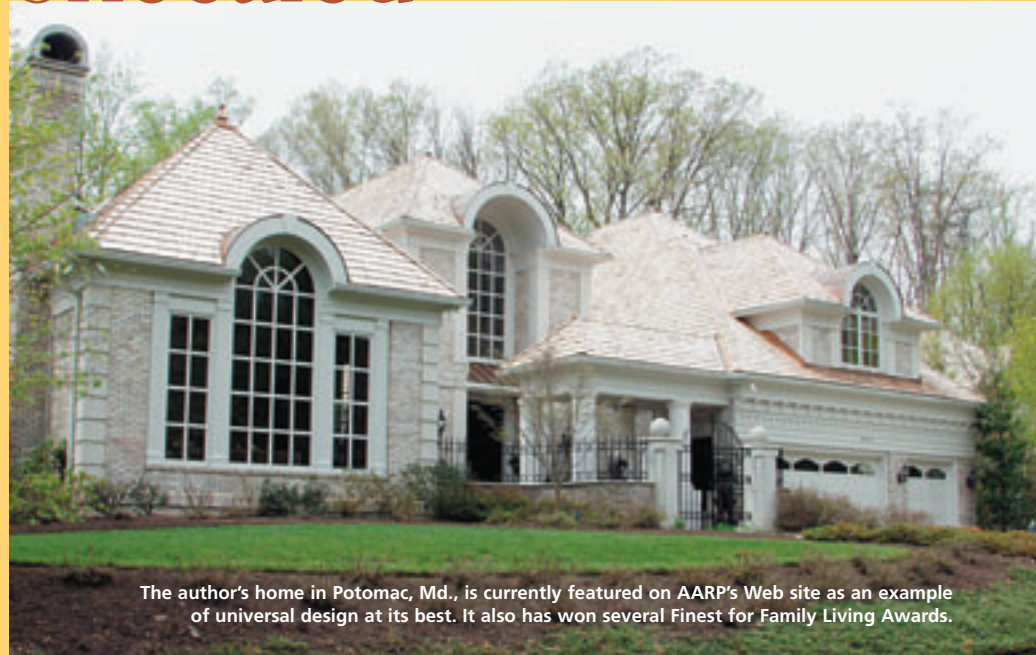


Universal Design Features: Perfectly Concealed

BY MICHAEL T. ROSE



The author's home in Potomac, Md., is currently featured on AARP's Web site as an example of universal design at its best. It also has won several Finest for Family Living Awards.

Buyer awareness: That just may be the last major hurdle universal design has to overcome before it has truly “arrived” and is a force — a “must have” — in the booming boomer market.

Many housing professionals, especially those who already market to the active seniors and boomers, know all about universal design. We understand its value and virtues, the flexibility it adds to our marketing, and the peace of mind it can bring to potential homeowners. Some of us have discovered that a majority of our prospective homebuyers, even those who would benefit the most, don't know much about universal design.

Quite simply, most prospective homebuyers aren't at that point in their lives where they look for universal design to fill their housing needs — unless, of course, they are caring for aging parents. Why would they think about universal design if it doesn't apply to them?

What's that slogan coined by AARP?: “60 is the new 30?” Friends in their 40s, 50s, even their 60s have told me more than once, and I quote them here, “Middle age is 10 years older than I am.” I have even used the phrase myself. With so many older

adults living active lifestyles and unwilling to slow down, it's no wonder they aren't more aware of universal design.

But universal design is not about now. It's about the future, possibly well into the future. So what's a builder or architect to do? How do you reach this market?

Add Pizzazz to Universal Design

You “wow” them, of course. In universal design, form and function can be accomplished with style and pizzazz. In fact, many of the features buyers want have universal design components.

AARP considers my home as a model for universal design and currently features it in the universal design section of AARP's Web site, www.aarp.org. Built in the 1990s, my home existed before universal design was the formal architectural concept it is today. When I built my home, the only future needs I addressed were to design it where I could live comfortably and conveniently for as long as I wanted to live there. Of course, my home is accessible and incorporates many universal design features because I am in a wheelchair.



A large foyer proves that universal design can successfully combine form and function. It creates a dramatic entry into the home while making it accessible for everyone — regardless of their ability.

My home has earned a Finest for Family Living Award in Maryland and Florida in the homes-over-\$3 million category. Among the many amenities are outdoor and indoor swimming pools, a movie theater, and a heated driveway. Neither award submission mentioned that the home has universal design features or is wheelchair accessible.

The key to its success in a universal design sense is that all the accessibility features are so well incorporated, or as the AARP Web site points out, so perfectly concealed, that guests may not even be aware of the specialized areas. It's comfortable for me, it's comfortable for my guests, and it's designed and built for the entire family, from the youngest to the oldest.

What kinds of features are we talking about? Are they transferable to production-style or semi-custom homes? Lastly, are these features that homeowners truly want?

An Accessible Entry Can Have Curb Appeal

A ramp and curb appeal don't have to be mutually exclusive. When properly designed, a ramp can be practically invisible from the streetscape. My home incorporates a three-part entry ramp designed into the landscape. A step leads to my front door, but the ramp deftly bypasses it. Many guests don't notice the ramp when they first visit my home.

If you don't want to incorporate a ramp, you easily can design and offer a stepless entry. I offer my customers both ramps and stepless entries. Just be sure that the front entry is accessible. Nothing turns off a homeowner more than to always have to enter his or her home through a back door.

The front door should be wide enough to easily accommodate a wheelchair. That also applies to the hallways. I prefer to make my hallways four, five, even six feet wide. Not all hallways have to be six feet wide, but they shouldn't be three feet wide either. Your homebuyers will appreciate more elbowroom. It makes the home more attractive, and most buyers will trade a little space from other rooms for wider hallways.

Make the Volume Dance

Volume is just as important as width. Like many active adult homebuyers, I'm a big fan of volume. My home has a variety of



Universal design in the bathroom doesn't mean grab bars and rails. Features such as a "drive-through" shower, equipped with multiple shower heads and body sprays, can make the bathroom a beautiful place to relax.

ceiling heights and styles in several rooms. There's a domed ceiling in the foyer, a tray ceiling with hidden lights in the bedroom, a pyramid ceiling in the library, and a 20-foot ceiling in the family room. Just about every room in the main-floor living area has a different height or ceiling style.

Designers once used sunken living rooms or step-down dens or family rooms to create volume and movement, but that trend has become obsolete. Today's buyers desire level floors, but not at the expense of movement. That's where volume comes into play. Offering a range in room heights promotes the illusion of movement while maintaining a level floor. You don't have to

incorporate as much variety in your homes as I did in mine, but add some variety; that's what the market demands.

I have found that many active adult homebuyers no longer want grand U-shaped stairways. Instead, they prefer stairs concealed, which also is compatible with universal design.

In my home, the stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms are off to the side, while the stairs to the game/billiard area and movie theater are off another hallway. I also have a hidden elevator large enough for my wheelchair.

All the flooring in my home is hard-surface flooring with area rugs scattered throughout to add warmth. It is easier for a wheelchair user to maneuver hard surfaces than on cut-pile carpeting. It's a universal design "must have," but it's also a feature that many buyers request.

Be Award of Bathroom Dimensions

You don't have to put grab bars or rails in the bathrooms: Just plan for them. As for bathtubs, the general market slowly is moving away from spa tubs. From my perspective, a normal-depth tub is easier to get in and out of and much more convenient than a deeper one. My tub also has a wheelchair-height ledge that is wide enough for me to transfer from my wheelchair to the tub — a must when incorporating universal design as well as an attractive convenience.

I splurged a bit by installing what I call a "drive-through" shower. Equipped with multiple shower heads and body sprays, it was shower openings on both ends. I can wheel through — much like a car wash — whenever I want to shower.

Elaborate showers may not be practical for most universal

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design homes. Upscale homebuyers generally are trending away from two-person tubs and toward two-person showers. More affluent buyers want showers equipped with shower seats, multiple shower heads and body sprays, and no-threshold openings. All of those features fit in nicely with universal design.

I also have installed a custom vanity in my bathroom with enough legroom beneath it so I can comfortably use my wheelchair.



A small home theater can be equipped with a mini-version of stadium seating and space for multiple wheelchair users.

A Kitchen Fit for the Owner

Believe it or not, I did nothing special to the kitchen cabinets. The reason is simple. Before my injury, I was very tall, 6-foot-4. Even though I'm in a wheelchair, I'm still tall; I have a long reach and have no trouble getting items from the upper cabinets.

There's a small lesson here. The disabled community is as diverse as the community in general. Some are tall and some are short. Some are heavy and some are thin. The rules of design are basically the same, whether they are in wheelchairs or require other mobility assistance. When incorporating universal design features, make sure the features can comfortably accommodate the family buying the home. In other words, one size does not fit all.

A few other "must haves" for universal design can just be part of the luxury package for upscale homes. Instead of doorknobs, use lever door handles. They are easier to operate and much more practical. Besides, there are enough choices out there to satisfy most buyers.



The kitchen should be designed for people of varying heights. A "one-size-fits-all" approach simply won't do, especially if one of the residents is disabled.

Do away with 30-inch doors and 24-inch closet doors. You don't have to go overboard. In general, 2-foot, 10-inch doors are wide enough, add a touch of luxury and, at that size, enable the bedrooms and bathrooms to be fully accessible.

The features in my home can be incorporated in homes selling for \$500,000 to \$5 million. They are universal design features that make living easier, but also are optional design features many buyers want. I incorporate many of them in the custom homes I build: luxury features that are compatible with universal design. I'd call that a breakthrough in buyer awareness.

A Touch of Rose

Some features in my home were designed just for me. It's amazing how technology has made accessible living more comfortable. My swimming pools incorporate hydraulic chair lifts — lifts powered by water pressure and not electricity — that allow me to get in and out of the water.

A movie buff, I have built a small home theater with a mini-version of stadium seating and, of course, ample space for multiple wheelchairs. In the lower-level family/activity room, I added a wet bar that can be lowered from its normal height to wheelchair height.

As a technology geek, I fully automated my home with strategically placed touch screens that allow me to operate the lights, drapes and curtains, air temperature, water temperature, door locks, etc.

I added a special refrigerator outside the movie theater to store my Diet Cokes and Diet Dr. Peppers. To satisfy my sweet tooth, I put a candy counter at wheelchair height; now I can sneak a candy bar when my wife isn't looking.

Finally, I have what can affectionately be called a universal design poker table. I gladly take winnings from disabled as well as able-bodied players.

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