

Aging in place

Interior design takes a universal approach

story & photos by James Martinez

According to the Census Bureau Web site, www.census.gov, Michigan's 65 and older population is projected to increase from 12.4 percent in 1995 to 18.1 percent in 2025. Due to these shifting demographics, planning for aging is emerging as focal points for many communities and homeowners.

As an offshoot of this trend, many baby boomers are finding the houses they bought 30 years ago aren't necessarily meeting their needs now.

Many health care and building professionals believe part of the solution to help keep older adults in their homes will undoubt-

edly be the employment of universal design.

Simply put: Universal design aims to create products that are easier to use and environments that can be lived in comfortably with as little as adaptation as possible.

"It's a philosophy that supports the idea of 'aging in place' by making homes easier to live in," said Architect Brad Butcher, AIA, a member of the Otsego County Elder Friendly Community Leadership Team (see related story on next page).

"(Universal design) is important because it'll assist us on 'aging in place,' which is typically

our preference — to stay in our house as long as possible as long as it's safe," said Dona Wishart, assistant director of the Otsego County Commission on Aging (OCCOA).

The principles of universal design can be applied throughout the home to make spaces adaptable as the owners' needs change. Such designs can ease transitions to changes like deteriorating vision, decreased mobility or wheelchair use. Examples of such design plans or modifications include one-story houses with no-step entry, wide doorways and hallways with extra floor space.

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“It’s like a take-off and upgrade from the barrier-free housing that started when the veterans came home from World War II,” said Alice Yeoman, who chairs the Otsego County Affordable Housing Alliance and works as education manager for Northern Homes Community Development Corporation out of Boyne City.

Yeoman said universal design differs from previous architecture movements, however, because it adds stylish designs compared to unappealing features used by its predecessors like barrier-free homes.

Universal design incor-

porates its wide range of principles, making it a very customer-friendly process, which has led to an increase in customer demand.

“We can design specifically to the client and their unique needs,” said Certified Kitchen and Bath Designer Theresa Olson of Preston Feather.

Advocates are quick to point out the design philosophy can benefit younger home owners as well.

“(We’re) seeing more customers planning ahead now,” said Olson, who explained products incorporating universal design are all over the market as customers and designers

are working to ensure homeowners age comfortably in their homes.

“What impresses me is it’s about planning,” said Butcher. “A lot of times people solve problems they are facing today. This is looking ahead 20 or 30 years so the homeowner can age in place.”

Incorporating such planning into housing designs early on is much easier and often less expensive than “retro-fitting” or remodeling current homes to add elements of universal design, said Butcher.

Butcher suggested looking at www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/ for more information on universal design.