Universal design is gaining traction

By Harold Bubil, Herald-Tribune / Friday, June 12, 2015

As someone who counsels business people on how to succeed, Karen Bush understands the importance of cooperation and planning.

These are concepts she applies to her personal life as the co-owner of a condominium unit in Le Chateau, the bright pink building on Sunset Point near the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota.

She shares the unit with her friend, Louise Machinist. “She owns one end and I own the other,” said Bush. “In between is common space.”

When the two women bought the unit, they decided to renovate, and they also decided to incorporate principles of universal design.

UD, which is gaining in relevance as the population ages, is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design,” writes architect Ron Mace of the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University.

The concept is related to “aging-in-place,” which includes the retrofitting of homes so that older people can adapt to physical limitations and needs.

“UD contributes to convenience and function of the products by making the products safer, easier to use and often more comfortable,” the National Association of Home Builders says. “The key component is the market appeal of the home and the integration of universal features into the overall home scheme. UD becomes a virtually invisible element of a home well-done.”

“When we speak with clients, we talk in terms of UD because it is easier to market ‘safety, convenience and ease of use’ vs. accessibility, such as ‘balance bars’ in the bathroom,” said Wanda Gozdz, president of Golden Age Living and an allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers.

Gozdz will be a panelist at a public forum presented by the local Universal Design Coalition from noon to 2:30 p.m.
Monday at the Realtors Association of Manatee and Sarasota, 2320 Cattlemen Road in Sarasota. Admission is free.

The panel includes John King, president of Rampart Homes; Greg Hall of Hall Architects; Kathleen Houseweart, geriatrics manager for SMH Healthcare System; and Tracy Lux, president of Trace Marketing. The Herald-Tribune’s real estate editor, Harold Bubil, is the moderator.

“You need it before you need it,” said Larry Hale, chairman of the Universal Design Coalition. “We age, and our mobility changes.”

“When design is done well, it doesn’t impede anyone from being able to function,” Gozdz adds.

**Keeping you in your home longer**

Aesthetics is another facet of UD. The goal is to create a safe, useful and appealing environment that does not look “institutional.”

UD proponents also emphasize that inexpensive home improvements, such as grab bars for balance, step-free showers and lever door knobs, can allow seniors to remain in their homes longer rather than moving to expensive care facilities. Assisted living costs $35,000 to $65,000 per year, while UD upgrades can cost $1,000 to $5,000, Hale said.

“It is unethical not to consider universal design,” he said. “It is economics. It keeps you in your home longer.”

For Machinist and Bush, planning for their elder years led them to make UD part of their renovations.

They had a past similar living arrangement — shared ownership and residency — with a third woman in Pittsburgh. But even though they were, and still are, able-bodied, they looked ahead to when they might not be.

“We realized that the house we lived in in Pittsburgh was not a house the three of us could have lived in forever. It was a four-story Colonial with winding stairs and no way to even install a chair lift,” Bush said. “We knew we couldn’t stay there. And we all knew we wanted to be able to live in our own residences as long as possible.”

When the two women, both in their mid-60s, bought their bayfront condo and decided to renovate, they said, “Let’s make sure we plan on what might be happening to us in 20 or 30 years.”
Their remodeled apartment includes open spaces throughout, especially in the bathrooms. “The whole place is quite accessible,” Bush said. “I don’t have a need right now for a walker or a wheelchair, but in 20 or 25 years, I might.

“We have installed some things that our guests might need right now — grab bars, a tile non-slip floor, lever door handles. And then there are the things you don’t see. In the bathrooms, where there aren’t grab bars, there is infrastructure behind the tile so that grab bars can be easily installed and supported,” Bush said. “Some of it is easily renovated. In my bathroom, I have a great big bureau on one wall. It would be very easy, if I needed handicap-access, to pull that bureau out. There is plumbing behind the wall, so a handicap-access sink could easily be put in.”

She said such planning comes from being a “forward-thinker, and a little bit smart. It is much less expensive to put in the infrastructure ahead of time for the point when you might need it in the future.”

**Impact in the market?**

If green building benefits people and the planet by conserving resources, then universal design benefits individuals by making their homes more comfortable and functional.

The house that allows its occupants to thrive regardless of their age or mobility is one that is truly sustainable, Hale said.

By including universal design concepts when a house is built or remodeled, homes can be useful for a longer time, delaying the occupants’ need to move, he said.

Like green building, which saves homeowners money by lowering their utility bills and creating healthful indoor air, universal design also comes down to economics, said Hale. “It keeps you in your home longer.”

Home builders are somewhat divided on the impact that UD is making in the market.

“Aging in place has a lot more traction in a stagnant or receding market,” said T.J. Nutter, owner of Nutter Custom Construction, which builds most of its houses in Lakewood Ranch. “My opinion is, when we are experiencing a growing market, many people take that as the opportunity to realign their living situation consistent with their current lifestyle.” In other words, sell the old house and buy a new one.

“A small percentage of our clients build their homes with the intent that they will be in the family for generations, so they include the accessibility that Universal Design affords,” said luxury home builder Ricky Perrone of Perrone Construction. “Occasionally we build a home that makes concessions to future accessibility modifications; in the design and construction, there may be an elevator pit and structural reinforcement to accommodate an elevator
should they decide they need one in the future. You would never know it was there unless you looked at the plans.”

Builder Josh Wynne of Josh Wynne Construction, known for building high-performance homes, said UD is one more facet of building a sustainable house.

“The majority of my clients intend on staying for a good while,” Wynne said. “As such, we use many, but not all, of the Universal Design concepts in just about all of our homes.”

These include, Wynne said, elevators, flush door and floor transitions, wider hallways (42 inches or more), 36-inch interior doors, roll-in showers, grab rails in the showers and at least one wheelchair-accessible bathroom.

“I try to reduce curbs to the entry door, but this is not always palatable from a design standpoint. Each client is different. Some are more willing to make a design compromise, in the sake of function, than others. It is discussed with every client.”

Realtor John Van Zandt, of Island Real Estate in Anna Maria, and his wife made UD a priority for his own home.

“Christine and I asked our architect, Linda Stephenson, to consider it for our house, and we aimed for 36-inch door openings, an opportunity for a lift in the future (you wouldn’t know it unless you see the plans) and a roll-in shower,” he said. “All the doors have lever handles, and many others are pockets. Outside access doors, although all are wind-damage resistant, are manageable with one hand — not like the current sliding doors.

“Then we went and ruined it all with taller than normal cabinets in the master bath and kitchen. But the kick plates could easily be cut down to size for later wheelchair access, thus reusing the quartz tops.”

Veteran real estate agent Lynn Robbins of Coldwell Banker Previews said most of her clients are more likely to move rather than improve their homes.

“I have not seen too much evidence” of UD or aging-in-place, Robbins said. “The majority of my elderly sellers are choosing to go into facilities like Sarasota Bay Club and Plymouth Harbor, where they have all the safety features and medical facilities.

“Some homeowners are putting in wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, or handles in the tub or shower, but they are in the vast minority.”

The members of the Universal Design Coalition would like to change that.

Universal Design Coalition forum
**When:** Noon to 2:30 p.m. Monday, June 15.

**Where:** Realtors Association of Manatee and Sarasota, 2320 Cattlemen Road, Sarasota.

**Cost:** Admission is free. A light lunch will be served.

**Panelists:** John King, Rampart Homes; Greg Hall, Hall Architects; Kathleen Houseweart, geriatrics manager, SMH Healthcare System; Tracy Lux, Trace Marketing. Moderator: Harold Bubil.

**Guest speaker:** Wanda Gozdz, president of Golden Age Living and an allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers.

**Principles of Universal Design**

Also known as inclusive design, UD promotes safe, accessible, convenient, healthful, useful and stylish spaces that accommodate all people, regardless of age, status or physical ability. Features in the home should be simple and intuitive, flexible and require little effort — and they should not be especially noticeable.

UD and “aging-in-place” examples include homes without stairs; level surfaces that are smooth but non-slip; wide interior doors and hallways, and wheelchair-turning spaces; lever door handles and other hardware that does not require grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist; good lighting; clear lines of sight; large-print labels with good contrast; appliances that can be used by people with disabilities; and furnishings and fixtures that can be moved or removed as needs change.
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