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The universal designer

by Katherine Luck

Architectural design styles come and go, from the New England Colonial style of early America to the Queen Anne style of the Victorian era to the McMansions of today. One thing they tend to have in common: They can be very tricky to live in as you grow old. Thanks to an aging baby boom population and a new appreciation for functionality, a design trend is growing in popularity: universal design.

Architect Emory Baldwin of Seattle was one of four recipients of the 2009 AARP Livable Communities Award for his family's Greenlake home. He is a member of the Northwest Universal Design Coalition, with an interest in universal design that goes back to his student days.

"About 20 years ago, I was in a study abroad program in Australia. I was given a project to design a vacation house for two families to share. One family member was a 9-year-old girl who needed to use a wheelchair. We had to design the whole house to be functional for the whole family," Baldwin recalled.

Unlike many of his classmates, he wasn't annoyed by the limitations the wheelchair-bound girl would impose on his design, but instead was inspired. This was in part because universal design isn't just functional, it's also very attractive. Elements are often unnoticeable until pointed out, allowing a universally designed house to blend in with the rest of the neighborhood.

Baldwin's award-winning three-story home, complete with daylight basement, was designed to accommodate the changes a family experiences over the course of many years, from young parents of stroller-bound babies to elderly adults with mobility restrictions.

"I designed it to be a demonstration house. ... People think of accessibility as institutional and with a stigma attached to it. But I wanted to design a house to be so appealing you'd never know it's accessible," he said.

The house was built from the ground up with an array of accessible features that appeal not just to those with a disability, but to anyone who has ever lugged a small child, groceries or luggage.

The house is reached by gently sloping paths that lead to front and rear entries. All the doors throughout the house are 3 feet wide with easy-open lever handles. The bathrooms are spacious, with curbless showers that allow a wheelchair to roll in and eliminate a common tripping hazard for young and old alike. All the light switches are rocker style, which are easier to operate for those with limited dexterity, including children.

Perhaps the most innovative element is found in the multifloor "stacking closets" that are designed and wired to be converted into an elevator. The house also features flexible



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMORY BALDWIN

Features like the daylight basement in Seattle architect Emory Baldwin's award-winning Green Lake home allow families to reconfigure spaces throughout the years.

living spaces, such as a mother-in-law apartment space downstairs that can serve as a home office, a rec room or caregiver's room. Such convertible rooms allow the homeowners to adapt to a physical change or disability without having to move — a crucial feature of the growing "age-in-place" movement for independent seniors.

Baldwin, his wife and young children have been residing in the house since it was completed.

"We live here and we love it. ... It's a lot easier. We're all able-bodied people, [but] it just feels more inviting. There are a lot of conveniences. ... It keeps in character with the other houses in the neighborhood. A universal design house doesn't need to appear any different than the homes around it," he said.

For those who want to add some instant universal design to their home, Baldwin is currently creating small, prefabricated cottages for the backyard called "accessible dwelling units."

"The primary purpose of such structures is for older adults who are downsizing and moving in with their children," he said. "It has a really modern, Zen feel to it. ... You can use it as a home office, a guest house, a rental unit or a caregiver's room. There are a number of uses for it."

Perhaps the best aspect of universal design is its ability to reduce the homeowners' environmental impact over the long haul.

"I think it's very sustainable. If you design a house correctly in the beginning, you reduce the cost and waste of remodeling in the future. ... Planning ahead saves a lot of money and hassle down the road," Baldwin said. "I try to use design to help people. Any designer can make a pretty building." ■

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