

UNIVERSAL DESIGN: cheap, nearly invisible today, priceless when misfortune strikes

Is your home fit for the future?

Builders, buyers urged to plan for tomorrow's health challenges

By Todd Lewys

BUILD today for a mobility challenged future tomorrow.

That's the message behind a conference coming to Winnipeg next month that aims to encourage new home buyers, homebuilders and real estate agents to consider that today's health and agility may not outlast a person's desire to stay in their home.

And statistics suggest that's often the case: late last year, a Royal LePage study looked at how one-third of Canada's population is over 50 and how the vast majority of those pentagenarians have no desire to move into so-called "senior's housing."

While some of that market is looking to condominiums to ease lifestyle, as the human population's longevity increases and the desire to hold off moving into assisted-living homes for as long as possible, the odds that more homeowners will face mobility challenges before it's time to leave the home are high.

That is the force driving what's emerging as a new philosophy: universal design. And at the new-home stage, it's something that can be incorporated at little extra cost.

"We used to work in the spinal cord unit at Health Sciences Centre, and as occupational therapists, we are trained to look at the way people function," says occupational therapist Corinna Klassen, who is one of the organizers of the Human Factors in Design conference March 1-2 at the Victoria Inn.

"When our patients were sent home, we quickly realized that most homes are not accessible for patients convalescing from injuries that impaired their mobility. Standard homes have stairs, small doorways and other barriers that make it extremely difficult for mobility-impaired people to do the day-to-day tasks we take for granted."

Invisible

Many of the changes behind universal design are almost invisible to the average observer: a 36-inch main entrance door, 32-inch interior doors (instead of the standard 30-inch), a step-free entrance and wider hallways.

"The main issue here is that we're all getting older," Angie Maidment, Klassen's partner in Therapy First and co-organizer of the conference says. "For example, one of my clients just had a stroke. So he now has mobility problems, and his wife has memory problems. They didn't want to move, so they had to spend about \$25,000 for a lift to help him negotiate a set of stairs. It's just not cheap to retrofit a house."

But designed in at the beginning, a plan for the future is quite inexpensive, she said. And to the casual observer, it appears simply as good design precepts, not necessarily concessions to any physical impairment.

Klassen adds that another client, wanting to prepare for the physical challenges that come with aging, was looking to enlist a builder to build him a home with universal design features.

"It turned out to be incredibly difficult to find a builder that would build that kind of home from scratch," she says. "Out of five builders, one responded. That — by necessity — was the builder he went with."

Edmonton architect Ron Wickman, keynote speaker at the conference, says that's not surprising.

"The reality is that most of today's housing communities are built for able-bodied people. That's why I'm so keen to come and speak at the con-



PHOTO COURTESY RON WICKMAN

This home has a barrier-free entrance — wide door, no step up, wide sidewalk — yet it simply looks like the product of good design.

Keys to universal design

■ **Items that have minimal visual impact:** wider hallways, 32-inch interior doors, 36-inch main entrances with no steps, wider kitchen pathways, additional bracing inside bathroom walls to accommodate grab bars, either now or in the future.

■ **For greater planning:** lower light switches, higher electrical outlets, customizable kitchen cabinetry, curbless showers, at least one accessible bathroom and bedroom on the main floor.



Corinna Klassen, left, and Angie Maidment say universal design doesn't cost much but can make your future in your own home brighter.

'A huge tidal wave of seniors with mobility issues is coming, and it's going to hit hard'

—architect Ron Wickman, a leading proponent of universal design

ference — Corinna and Angie are looking to attract a large cross-section of society to it, which is a good thing," he says. "We have to educate the general public, various levels of government, and the private sector (builders) about the merits of universal design concept homes."

Wickman said like it or not, old age is coming.

"A huge tidal wave of seniors with mobility issues is coming, and it's going to hit hard," he warns. "So there's going to be a real need to accommodate seniors with a variety of mobility issues. Right now, I'm left wondering where people who can't take care of themselves are going to go. Of course, we'll figure out a way to house people, but I'm concerned that solution will lack grace and dignity."

While universal design is the ultimate goal when designing a home for persons with limited mobility, there are actually three levels of user-friendliness: 1) Visible; 2) Accessible; and

3) Universal.

Making a home visitable means that a mobility-impaired individual can get to and through the front door without incident, and then can negotiate their way around the main floor without encountering any major obstructions.

'Tough slog'

Judy Redmond, universal design coordinator for the City of Winnipeg, says it may be a while before everyone — the public, government and builders — fully realize how beneficial universal design can be.

"To be honest, it's been a tough slog to sell the concept to date," she says. "We are definitely looking at visitable, accessible and universal housing in Manitoba, but the city is a regulatory body, so we can't mandate something like universal housing to happen."

"We definitely encourage and promote it, but any type of legislation (to promote it) has to come from the provincial government."

Redmond says that builders throughout the province can't continue to claim there's no demand for houses incorporating universal design concepts.

"I've been told by people in the real estate industry that not a day goes by without them getting requests for bungalows, especially from seniors," she says.

"The builders then reply that no one asks them for bungalows with a universal design floor plan. How can people ask them if they don't understand, or know about the concept? Personally, I would love to have one showhome in the Parade of Homes designed specifically to show what universal design features are all about. Do that, and then see what the demand is like."

WinnipegREALTORS' market analyst Peter Squire says the universal design concept makes sense.

"It makes sense that universal design will be a growing trend — older people with knee, hip and back issues

would benefit tremendously from the user-friendly features.

"There's going to be a market for it, we just have to educate people about it."

Wickman says it is hard to convince builders.

"I can appreciate that it's tough for housing developers to go against the trend — they're out there to make a profit," he says. "But building a home with universal design features built-in isn't more expensive. In fact, such buildings, over time, will save money. You won't have to tear down obsolete buildings to start over, and because people can live for a longer time in their homes, they won't have to go into care homes."

For details on Therapy First's Human Factors in Design conference, go to www.TherapyFirst.ca or call 612-0399.

▷ lewis@mts.net