



This bathroom showcases numerous barrier-free, aging in place features, including a roll-under sink, a toilet with plenty of space surrounding it, a hand-held shower wand and a roll-in shower with grab bars.

# UNIVERSAL DESIGN

KOHLER

## Remodelers are coming up with new ways to accommodate all stages of life. By Carrie Alexander

**C**entral Florida remodeler Jack McGrath is about to tackle a whole-house remodel that will feature wide doorways, a shower with a no-step entry and extra space in the bathroom for grab bars. But the clients aren't elderly.

Like all of us, however, they someday will be—if they're lucky. And they're planning ahead by incorporating aging in place concepts into their remodeling project.

"It's a smart move," says McGrath of Longwood-based Jonathan McGrath Construction, a Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS). "This will probably be their last home, and they want to be comfortable in it as their needs change."

People over the age of 65 make up 13 percent of the population, says Carolyn Sithong, an occupational therapist who also earned CAPS certification.

"In the year 2030, that 13 percent will increase to 20 percent," Sithong adds. "That's almost one in four people. The demand for aging-in-place services will begin to reshape health care as the Baby Boomers age and choose to remain in their current homes."

Since people today are living longer and enjoying more active lifestyles, they should consider ways to maintain their independence by creating home environments that are accessible, safe and barrier-free, say experts.

Baby Boomers represent the largest portion of Orlando's population and the largest segment of home

buyers locally and nationally, says Lisa Dilts, vice president of Orlando's Real Estate Advisors. In Central Florida, the Boomer population—generally defined as those born between 1945 and 1965—is more than 530,000.

Remodelers increasingly are taking into account the needs of the 50-plus age group—one of the fastest-growing segments in the housing market—by embracing the concepts of aging in place and universal design.

Aging in place means that homes are being built and remodeled to be barrier-free and to provide ease of mobility and access to a person who is physically challenged and/or in a wheelchair.

Universal design also encompasses aging in place concepts while also accommodating the needs of children and other household occupants who may have specific needs. Thus the two disciplines sometimes overlap, says Karen Kassik of Winter Park-based Home Accessibilities by Karen Kassik.

You can't design one house to suit everyone's specific lifestyle needs and physical challenges as they age, Kassik says. Not everyone will need a walker or a wheelchair, for example, but they may have limits in vision, mobility and flexibility.

Kassik likes to work with a client's occupational therapist or health-care professional to find the best, most affordable solutions for each individual or family.

"Aging in place design is a home that actually works for all ages," Kassik says. "Many of the design features that we use for the elderly also work wonderfully for children and everyone in the house."

A zero-step entry, for example, works as well for a mother with a

baby stroller as it does for an 80-year-old with a walker. Likewise grab bars in a bathroom are great for the elderly but are equally handy for a pregnant woman or for someone recovering from surgery.

"Universal design involves creating a living environment that's comfortable and accessible for all people in all stages of life," adds Sithong, "This type of environment promotes capability and independence in the home, allowing you to remain there for the long term."

These homes include user-friendly details such as wide doorways, rocker light switches, single-lever faucets and kitchen cabinets with adjustable shelving.

Floorplans should be open, with wide hallways and wide entries that are covered and step-free, Sithong says, which allows easy access for wheelchairs and eliminates trip hazards for everyone else.

"Adequate lighting for safety and levered handles on the door are recommended for easy opening," Sithong notes. "The bathroom should have ample space for maneuvering. Roll-in showers are preferable for easy access and grab bars should be properly placed to allow safe transfers and to assist with balance."

Also, the kitchen can be designed for easier navigation with elements such as microwave and refrigerator drawers, pull-out shelves and lowered sink or prep counters with access underneath for wheelchairs.

"Many of these ideas can be easily implemented in the home," Sithong says. "A bedroom on the first floor can be converted from a den or office space. Changing faucets, handles and light switches

## Learn More About Aging in Place

The Central Florida Chapter of the National Aging in Place Council is presenting "A Step Ahead: Central Florida's Vision for Aging in Place," a seminar for consumers, the homebuilding industry and the medical community.

The event is slated for Thursday, October 15, at the Home Builders Association of Metro Orlando in Maitland. The following topics will be covered, according to organizers:

- How your housing needs change as you grow older.
- Challenges of living in a traditional home.
- How aging in place concepts are being incorporated into new homes.
- How builders and architects can be encouraged to plan with aging in place concepts in mind.

The program runs from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Cost is \$10 and breakfast and a box lunch are included. To register, contact the Home Builders Association at (407) 629-9242 or email Ali Gorgone at [ali@hbaofmetroorlando.com](mailto:ali@hbaofmetroorlando.com).



is as simple as using them. Lighting can be enhanced or decreased by understanding the wattages of light bulbs and/or adjusting window treatments."



**Roll-in showers with non-slip surfaces are safe for disabled or elderly homeowners using walkers or wheelchairs.**

Yet, homeowners sometimes hesitate to incorporate universal design features and products into their remodeling projects because “nobody wants to think of themselves as getting older and that we might need tools or equipment to assist us,” Kassik says. Plus, they fear ending up with an “institutional” look.

No need to worry. Bathroom grab bars, handrails and other products are now being designed so that it’s possible to incorporate them almost invisibly—or at least without sacrificing aesthetics.

“Universal design doesn’t necessarily make things ugly,” McGrath says.

Sithong agrees, adding: “There are many aspects of universal design that are beautiful and comfortable. Accessible areas appear open, welcoming and aesthetically pleasing.”

Also, she adds, there are varieties of safe and attractive nonslip floor finishes. Even medical equipment in the bathroom can have fold-down features for use only when needed and come in a variety of colors other than stainless steel.

In the bathroom, hand-held sprayers are perfect for those who need to sit while they bathe and they’re handy for cleaning the shower as well.

Think about small details such as tiltable mirrors and hinges that allow doors to open all the way.

Other relatively minor but important steps: lower thermostats, electrical switches, closet shelves and front-door peepholes to put them within reach of everyone. Also raise appliances off the floor and, for the hearing-impaired, consider strobe smoke detectors.

Privacy is also an important consideration, says Kassik, who incorporated universal design elements into the home she shares with her mother.

“We talk about the boomer couple growing old together, but many of us are bringing our parents home to live with us,” she says. “In a multigenerational house, there has to be a place for the caregiver to go.”

Kassik’s mother’s suite is on the front of the house, closer to the front door, in case she needs assistance. She has her own porch and a lake view.

“She’s got a place she can go and get away from things,” Kassik adds. “I’m on the other side of the house. My bedroom is very private. I put a main back porch on the house for when we want to be out there together.”

When Orlando-based remodelers Farina and Sons tackled a remodeling project for a multigen-

erational family, the team took into account both the physical and the emotional needs of the 94-year-old family member. Most importantly, he was asked to serve as part of the design-build team so he could feel included in the process.

But are universal design and aging in place projects expensive? Not necessarily, McGrath says. Some features, such as elevators, are pricy. “But incorporating many universal design concepts and features into a home are no cost or minimal cost,” he says. “It just takes planning.”

Sithong notes that professional consultants can make recommendations based on your medical needs and priorities. “Homeowners can then prioritize the remodel based on their individual financial ability and need,” she adds.

Homes built with universal design and aging in place elements, such as wide hallways and no-threshold entries, can be great for resale, too.

A universally designed house, Kassik says, is roomy, it feels good and it’s accessible. “There should be nothing negative about it,” she notes. “And it could increase its value. I think once buyers are educated about the features, it becomes a positive sales tool at that point.”

In fact, remodelers can take advantage of design elements such as wide hallways by adding art niches and decorative lighting to make the home more appealing than a home with standard-width hallways, McGrath says.

In short, universal design is usable design, Sithong notes. “It makes sense to instill concepts in the home that will accommodate any stage of life and allows you to maintain independent living.”