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Universal design means accessibility

Home doesn't compromise style for wheelchair

Model benefits both able-bodied and disabled

HILARY WALDON
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Nestled near the end of a driveway, the two-storey clapboard-and-stone colonial in Glastonbury, Conn., makes a subtle but firm first impression: gracious living practiced here.

Outside the home where Greg Hughes lives with his yellow lab, Lincoln, retaining walls and terraced ramps tame the property's slopes and invite visitors to stroll the landscaped grounds.

Inside, polished red-oak floors, oriental rugs, elegantly upholstered walls and doorways artfully encased by carved mouldings reflect the owner's style and success long before he greets visitors in his motorized wheelchair.

Hughes, 39, lost the use of his arms and legs in a car crash when he was 17. But while his disability obviously has affected the course of his life, it does not define him.

Like Hughes, the house design accepts the realities of life with a wheelchair, but without compromising on comfort or style.

Experts say this is a new model for home design that everyone should embrace, even if they are young and active.

An increasingly popular concept known as universal design is based on the notion that any building should be attractive and usable by all people, regardless of age or physical ability. The idea has caught on as the population ages and people seek to remain in their homes instead of moving to retirement communities.

"It's difficult to swallow that we're all going to need these things," said Mary Jo Peterson, an interior designer from Brookfield, Conn., who specializes in creating accessible kitchens and bathrooms.

But whether from old age, a skiing accident or a hip replacement, it's a fair bet that most people will have to live with a mobility problem during at least some portion of their lives.

So some designers say any home renovation or new construction should include accessibility features such as no-step entrances, extra-wide doorways, lever door

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handles, no-lip showers and at least some lower counters and under-sink legroom in the kitchens and baths.

And nobody should be able to notice.

"We don't want it to look institutional," said Carol Peredo Lopez, national architecture director for the Paralyzed Veterans of America. Lopez is completing a book on accessible design.

"Most of the images in our book do not look like a wheelchair user lives there," she said.

When he bought his rear lot off Chestnut Hill Rd. four years ago, Hughes wanted a home where he could live independently and where his two brothers, two sisters and 12 nieces and nephews could congregate on weekends to play pool or watch the Red Sox or the Giants on the big-screen TV.

He modified the builder's house plan to add a caretaker's apartment above the garage, move the master bedroom to the first floor and add space for an elevator.

Then Hughes hired Lisa Davenport of Lisa Davenport's Home Gallery in Glastonbury to design the interior of his 7,000 square-foot-house.

He chose Davenport because she had decorated his sister's home. When they met, and she saw that her new client used a wheelchair, Davenport said she panicked.

"I had one class on (the Americans with Disabilities Act)," Davenport recalled, clutching her head in her hands. "I said, 'What am I going to do?'"

Davenport checked her old textbooks and the many Internet sites devoted to accessible design. It was then that she realized her challenge was only slightly different from what it might be for any other residential client.

She set out to create a warm, spacious interior that would be comfortable for Hughes and his many visitors.

While hardwood and tile floors throughout the first floor make for easy rolling in Hughes' wheelchair, Davenport persuaded him to try a few low-pile area rugs to absorb noise and warm up rooms that might otherwise feel cavernous.

With every door, window and window treatment motorized so Hughes could operate them from his wheelchair lap tray, the constant whirring of fans and motors threatened to detract from the home's peaceful feel. Davenport added full-length drapes to soften many spaces and upholstered the walls of the dining room with fabric and the master bedroom with suede to absorb more sound.

Hughes' den is a good example of how the design reflects his personality more than his disability. A Civil War buff, Hughes told Davenport how he admired President Lincoln (even naming his dog after him). Davenport incorporated a Lincoln theme into Hughes' den, using gold window treatments similar to those in the presidential box at Ford's Theater.

The kitchen table is higher than standard, so Hughes can roll up and eat with friends, and there is plenty of space for him to move around the centre island.

"It's very comfortable," said Hughes, who said he felt like a bull in a china shop while

visiting his parents' less-accessible home during the holidays. "I forget until I come back here how nice it is to get around so easily."

While Hughes' kitchen is all custom-made, there are many simple and inexpensive ways to improve access in the kitchen, said Peterson. Easy-to-reach drawers can replace under-counter cabinets, and countertops can be placed at various levels to accommodate people of many heights, including those in wheelchairs.

Peterson suggests using stock cabinetry and installing one bathroom vanity in a matching finish and style to create a lower island or work station in the kitchen. Standard bathroom cabinets are generally lower than kitchen cabinets.

Peterson likes to see raised dishwashers, side-by-side refrigerators, counter-height ovens and single-lever faucets to make it easier for everyone from a wheelchair user to a mother balancing a grocery bag and a toddler on her hip.

In the bedroom suite, Davenport disguised the institutional look of Hughes' hospital-style bed by pairing it with a standard twin bed and covering them with a floor-length bedspread, to make it look like a standard king-size bed.

A gigantic white-tiled master bathroom with roll-in shower, a tub with jets and special-access sinks is the only space that might give away the occupant's disability.

But while it might be difficult to disguise adapted bathroom furnishings, there are ways to make the space attractive. As more people live into old age, more companies are manufacturing products such as lever door handles, more accessible tubs and sinks, and attractive grab bars, all of which used to have to be custom-made.

The son of a Glastonbury entrepreneur who made a fortune when he sold a family business years ago, Hughes did not have to worry about money when he designed his home.

But while some adaptations can be expensive (an elevator, for example, can cost \$15,000 to \$20,000), accessible design sometimes can save money, said Enrico Melchiorri, an assistive technology consultant and owner of EM Enterprises in Guilford, Conn.

When designing a home for a wheelchair user, it might make sense — and reduce cost — to eliminate some interior doors. Also, expensive moulding can be dispensed with because dings and dents are inevitable during wheelchair passage. Eliminating bottom cabinets to allow leg space for the wheelchair user also might save money.

Peterson used the principles of universal design when she and her architect-husband designed their new home in Brookfield.

"If we want to stay in our homes (as we age), why don't we make them homes (we) can stay in?" Peterson asked.

Accessibility begins at the front door — new homes easily can be built with at least one entrance level with the ground, critical for the disabled but also helpful to active parents wrestling with a stroller.

One of the biggest no-nos, designers say, is the hulking wooden ramp out front that might as well scream "a disabled person lives here."

For almost the same price, homeowners can add a gradual sloping sidewalk surrounded by plantings and leading to a front door at ground level.

Bolingbrook, Ill., passed a law in 2003 requiring any new home in the city to have ground-level access.

A year later, 3,000 homes have been built with flat entrances, and there have been no reports of problems with moisture at the entries — one worry in a snowy climate.

But more than money, designing for accessibility requires careful planning.

"The inspiration comes from things that do cost a lot, but there are ways that don't cost a lot of money," Peterson said. "My rule for the work I do is: If it doesn't look good, don't do it."

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