

# Aligning Your Home with Your Life

*Second of a four-part series written by designer Donna Domenicali, Allied ASID*

Last week, a friend of mine was telling me about a woman who visited her a few months ago. Although the woman was in her fifties, she had developed terrible arthritis in her hands. While she was staying at my friend's house, she had real issues closing the bathroom door; turning the knob was just too painful for her. When I mentioned that the principles of universal design would suggest using lever handles, my friend's reaction was, **"Wow, I never thought of that!"**

**N**o matter how old we are, many of us don't want to think we will ever face age-related issues ourselves. But even so, we may have aging parents, visitors with arthritis, or even a wayward son who has a snowboarding accident and is stuck in a wheelchair for a few weeks.

Now you may not want to go all over your house changing your door knobs to lever handles, but it makes sense to incorporate elements of universal design whenever you undertake a home renovation, particularly if it involves your kitchen, baths, halls and doorways. Introducing such elements into your home as part of a well-designed plan also increases your home's value because it attracts a greater number of home buyers.

In this second article of the series, I offer a few suggestions that will make your home more user-friendly for people with mobility, flexibility, strength or balance issues.

**MOBILITY** Ramps are common mobility solutions to entering and exiting a home, but how about moving from room to room?

- Wheelchairs typically need 32" of clearance to get through a door, but 32" doors only have a 30" clearance. When renovating, specify 36" doors at room entrances; they'll also accommodate moving large pieces of furniture.
- Getting into a shower area, transferring onto a toilet and pulling up to a sink will also require certain clearances. Specifying such clear spaces while planning a renovation could make all the difference down the road.

**FLEXIBILITY** As we age, we may have problems with reaching, lifting, bending or stooping. If you've ever had a rotator cuff injury, you know how difficult it is to lift your arms and how swiftly your shoulder muscles weaken.



*Meet . . .*

**Donna Domenicali**, Allied, ASID  
a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) and owner of Blue Heron Designs Inc.

Her firm specializes in providing design services for "baby-boomer" homeowners who want to update their residences, convert a space to suit lifestyle changes, or accommodate visiting grandchildren or aging parents.

Her work has been published in the books, "Designed in New Jersey, An Exquisite Collection of New Jersey's Finest Designers" and "Asian Influenced Architecture & Design." She has also been a guest speaker for several nonprofit groups, including the Muscular Dystrophy Association. She serves primarily the New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia areas. You can contact Donna at: 732-263-1300 or email: [info@blueheron-designs.com](mailto:info@blueheron-designs.com). Her work can be viewed at: [www.blueheron-designs.com](http://www.blueheron-designs.com)

- Wall ovens with side-hinged doors, open like a microwave oven and mean you don't need to stoop down, lean over a hot oven door, or reach way inside.
- Induction cooktops that heat just the cooking vessel itself and leave the rest of the surface cool greatly reduce the chance of injury to someone who may have difficulty moving heavy pans around.

**STRENGTH** Many new products help us circumvent loss of strength.

- Motion-sensor water faucets and soap dispensers have moved from the public rest room to our home master bath suite, and along the way they've taken on great style.
- In the kitchen, shelves for heavy appliances—like mixers—that pull up to counter height and fold down into a lower cabinet for storage are very helpful for people with diminished upper arm strength.



**BALANCE** Today grab bars are no longer industrial looking. They mimic towel bars and come in a variety of colors including clear acrylic.

- If you're renovating and don't wish to put in grab bars now, you should at least reinforce the walls around the bathing area and toilets by attaching wood blocking to studs, so that grab bars installed later are safely secured and will hold a person's weight.



- Another good idea is to add hand rails along the walls of long halls so that people with limited strength and poor balance can travel down the hall safely. This means, of course, specifying a wider hall so that the hand rails don't impede travel.



Of course, as we age we may encounter additional issues that involve memory, eyesight and hearing, but there are many accommodations that can be made to deal with these. It just takes a bit of planning, creativity and common sense.

Next issue I'll focus on finding spaces for new hobbies, home management and storage. ■



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