

around the HOUSE

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Who to Hire?

Are you considering a universal designed (UD) or fully accessible home or remodel?

If you have been a regular reader of *Around the House* in *PN*, you're aware this type of home is different from the standard homes typically built today.

The "typical" home is still based on family statistics and average anthropometrics created shortly after World War II. Of course, at that time we boomers were "still a glimmer in daddy's eye." Now we're older and may be alive possibly until 100 or more. If we want to live the rest of our lives in our own homes and "age in place," our homes need to be designed for all ages and abilities and not rely on home building standards of the past.

You can probably guess it takes a designer with this type of experience, sincere compassion and even a bit of empathy to correctly design a truly UD or fully accessible home. In these homes "God is in the details," as spoken by the famous 1950s architect Mees Van-der-Rohe. He was anything but a UD architect, but I believe he would embrace it now, nonetheless; his thoughts about attention to details clearly apply here.

The Right Expert

Depending on your current needs and scope of your project, you have several options. Consider a qualified architect, interior designer or even an occupational therapist (OT).

An occupational therapist may be a good choice if basic modifica-

tions are required and are nonstructural in nature. For example, OTs are qualified to specify a ceiling lift but certainly not qualified to certify if the roof structure can carry the load of the lift and user, and other construction-related details.



Architect and author Charles Schwab looks over Universal Design home plans with his parents. He advises people to hire the appropriate professional for the specific task at hand.

OTs can make recommendations for the individual, but it's necessary to employ a qualified architect or engineer when structural alterations are necessary.

Invisible UD

Always hire the appropriate professional for the specific task at hand that works only within his/her area of expertise. Enter the UD specialist architect.

An architect can design and structure a home, but he or she may not understand the nuances of universal design and home accessibility. Successful UD is actually invisible.

Although built to be accessible, the home should never scream out

as such. The UD home will increase in resale value, as it will appeal to multi-generations, whereas a home that "looks like" it was designed for a wheelchair user may not.

There are not a lot of UD or accessible home designers in every part of the country. The good news is that with technology, if properly equipped, the qualified UD architect or interior designer can and will work throughout the USA and even internationally.

I have worked on several remodels site unvisited, as the owners were able to make measurements of the home for me or had as-built drawings.

For a new home all that's really needed is the specific family home program, perhaps a topographic site plan (if changes in grade are involved) with specific setbacks, etc., and pictures of the views and a clear understanding of the geography, weather, and neighborhood architectural style.

The home or remodel should also be designed to be energy efficient and as "green" as your heart desires.

Not Just the Cost

Remember this is one of the biggest and hopefully the most satisfying investments you'll ever make. Don't make the mistake of basing your decision on cost alone.

A properly designed UD home provides safety, self-reliance, and independence. The spaces designed within should accommodate a caregiver, if you require assistance.

An interior designer can complete space planning and product selection

but is not qualified for whole house structural or exterior design. A good UD specialist has an arsenal of qualified interior designers, if the client requires.

However, as long as that person is able to get on board with UD, your local interior designer may be a good choice for this portion of the work.

The Actual Build

A Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS) or a National Association of The Remodeling Industry certified universal design contractor are good choices to build the project.

Don't be fooled by the contractor who says he has a draftsman who can do it at "no additional cost to you," or "The lumber yard will draw it for free."

Charles Schwab's book, *Universal Design Smart Homes for the 21st Century*, is available at a \$5 discount for PN readers by using coupon code "UDHomes" or "Vethomes." It is available at universaldesignonline.com.

The service is never actually free and built into the cost; so don't forget to ask if credit is available. Many lumberyards will give you a 1-2% credit on the lumber, if you have your own plans.

Remember, you always get what you pay for, and this most important investment deserves the best professional expertise. UD specialists architect probably can and will work with you and your budget.

They are experts in product specifications. They should also be able to

help you find a suitable contractor for the job no matter where you are located. He or she should also have funding ideas and resources for you.

The best team approach is to consult your OT for specific individual advice and search out and contract with a UD/accessible home specialist architect who can also help you find a qualified builder.

Contact: CharlesSchwab@UniversalDesignOnline.com. ■



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