

around the HOUSE

A Universal Design Retirement Home

Dona and John made the retirement move from northern New York to sunny Southbeach, a community south of downtown Myrtle Beach, S.C., to get away from the long cold winters and to be near their three children, who are north and south of the new retreat. John had also had a work-related injury resulting in the use of a wheelchair. The new location gives them quick access to the beach and their pontoon boat (complete with access ramp) on the Intracoastal Waterway.

They chose a gated community with a quiet back-to-nature feel for the location of their home. Their “perfect” lot is nestled under tall pine trees and adjacent to a community lake. Then it was time to find an accessible home plan.

Dona and John read a house plan book review in *PN* in 2003—*Universal Design Smart Homes for the 21st Century*. They purchased the current third edition



The centrally located kitchen’s dual-height serving counter allows use by people who are seated as well as standing. All cabinet doors have lever-style handles.



that was freshly edited and included 102 new and revised home plans. They wanted a fully accessible home designed with energy efficient construction, abundant natural light, and a hurricane-safe room, among other features.

They chose plan UD 3390—a three-bedroom, 3,390-square-foot, slab on grade home with a central common living area and a hurricane-safe room that is also the bathroom for bedrooms # 2 and 3.

The larger bathroom doubles nicely as a safe room, as it is bigger (because it is wheelchair accessible) than a typical bathroom; in case of a hurricane, it has the necessary amenities within. It is built with concrete insulated walls and is actually a separate but “invisible” structure

At the front of the home, a covered portico provides shade, and the no-step entry assures accessibility.

within the home. The ceiling is not attached to the house roof trusses, and the safe room has a blast-resistant window and emergency lighting. It also has a separate distinct phone line direct to the phone company, not bundled with the cable and Internet, so if the cable goes out (it happens more often) they will still have a phone line.

The kitchen is centrally located and has visual access to the Great Room, the breakfast area, and the living room. From all of these views there are vignettes to the beautiful backyard landscape and lake.

The “rooms” are not separated by walls but rather defined by colors, various ceiling treatments, and flush non-slip floor finishes. The “room” ceilings have low-voltage, energy-wise uplighting that also uniquely defines each space.

Making Changes

I had the pleasure of meeting the couple at an accessibility conference in Philadelphia. Several revisions to the plan were required, including adding a saltwater aquarium between the kitchen and a high-low bar, opposite the baby grand piano in the living area. The bar was also to be fully accessible for the bartender and guests, with open knee space under the sink and with a lever faucet. Easy access, full-extension storage and refrigeration with dual-height countertops at the bar were included. (Unfortunately, the aquarium is still being tested as of this article’s writing.)

I often say, “The plans in the plan book are a good *starting* place.” Revisions are often required and encouraged to make a stock home plan fit a lot and conform to local codes or neighborhood and personal home styles. A custom home



A curbless shower and adjustable hand-held controls allow John to use the spacious master bathroom. INSET: The master bath’s sink area has open knee space at both stations.

has an easy-access ramp down to a fishing platform, complete with a curb to bumper wheel-chair wheels while fishing. The house was set farther back from the street to be closer to the

pond. This thoughtful setback invites approaching visitors to a sort of majestic all-encompassing view of the home.

design is the preferred approach—but not always feasible.

The garage doors had to be changed from a front- to a side-load per neighborhood covenants. A window at the front of the garage was added, flanked with columns that imitate the style of those at the covered main entry porch. Similar-style columns were added at a covered rear portico with direct access from the master bedroom overlooking the lake and fire alcove in back. These all are welcome revisions and in line with the overall design concept of “the inside being an extension of the outside, and the outside being an extension of the inside.”

Upon entering the front foyer, with elegant fixture and barrel vault ceiling, you see through the sunny home to the pineapple trees, flowering landscape, and lake beyond. The backyard even



UD Features Included

Dona and John invited me to briefly stay in their home this past spring; what a wonderful treat! It was such a pleasure to see how well the home functioned for everyone.

Other Universal Design (UD) features of the home include:

- All entries are no-step with maximum ½" threshold. The passage doors are 3'-0" wide; high-quality pocket doors are often implemented.

- The kitchen has open knee space under the sink adjacent to the dishwasher, full-extension storage, and an open-under computer station. All doors have lever handles, and the electrical outlets are 18" above the floor.

- Light switches are no higher than 42". The electrical panel, which is not higher than 48" to the top, is accessible. Structured wiring is used

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throughout the house's communication and security system.

- The master bathroom has open knee space under the sinks and a curbless shower with adjustable hand-held controls and temperature sensor.

- Bright colors are uplifting and enhance the abundant natural light. Even the curbless shower has an opaque glass-block window.

- All exterior-finish materials are maintenance free.

- A fully accessible 13x26' workshop with 32"-high countertops and knee space below has a full 9x8' garage door for easy access tool and project transport.



Homeowner John spends quality time in the garage's fully accessible workshop area.

There are many other details, but the open-space design is what seems to make the house function so well for *everyone*.

In John's words, "It's so nice to

have the extra space and not be banging up the finish trim with the wheelchair."

Contact: charlesschwab@UniversalDesignOnline.com. ■

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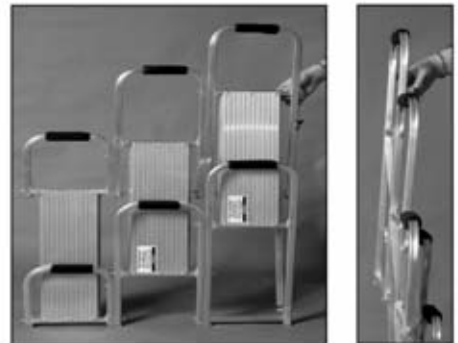
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