

Building San Antonio: Home design changes for the 'back' side of life.

Published: 12:00 am, Sunday, January 9, 2011 – San Antonio Express – News

Everyone who gets the privilege of living a long life has to acknowledge the odds are good that they will become disabled at some point. Most of us want to live in our homes as long as we safely can function, but many homes are not designed for someone who is disabled.

I for one, want to stay active and healthy as long as possible, but, having recently lost my father and moved my mother into an assisted-living facility, they need for proper home planning has never been more apparent.

Back in 1990, my parents decided to sell their house and build a new home. My sister, who was in architectural school at MIT at that time, became their "designer."

At the time, my mother and father were in their mid-60s and in great to good shape. They had never designed a house before, but had traveled the world and knew they wanted a home that reflected their lifestyle and would also act as a great showcase for the numerous artifacts and memorabilia that they had collected in dad's 30-plus years as a naval officer and submariner.

I was not yet an "accessibility professional", when they were planning their new home. But, knowing what I do now, I would have made some strong design recommendations to provide for more safety and accessibility for the next 20 years of their life, when their mobility situation began to change.

During that time frame, dad had both hips replaced and mom just wasn't as stable as she once was and rarely went upstairs. Accessing the house from the garage involved a step "in" and two steps down to the living area, and their bedroom required another two steps.

The bathrooms were small and the kitchen couldn't accommodate more than three people, which was always a problem, even before mobility became a concern; outside the home were numerous level changes and trip hazards. For people with mobility issues, the well-intentioned design for their house had become a disaster waiting to happen – assuming you were even able to get inside.

So, knowing what I know now, what questions would I ask anyone that is considering building or rehabilitating a home for the golden years? I would ask some simple, but telling questions, to assist in approaching a universal design:

How long do you plan to live in this house? If the answer is "a long time," then I would strongly suggest making design changes.

Even if you aren't planning to live in a house forever, would you want to be able to accommodate a visitor or relative who has mobility issues and/or uses a wheelchair? If so, how are they going to get into the home?

Is the bathroom accessible? Are the doorways wide enough and is there sufficient maneuvering space to get around?

If there is a second level, how about planning for a "future" elevator or lift?

There are a whole host of questions and situations to evaluate that will help in designing a home that will accommodate your future, aging needs. Just Google "universal home design" to begin the process.

Peter Grojean, P.E., LEED AP, is a Registered Accessibility Specialist. He reviews plans and inspects private and public projects for compliance with the Texas Accessibility Standards.