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Real Estate

‘Aging-in-place’ features for the home gain higher profile as baby boomers get older

By Wendy A. Jordan

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At 72 and 65, Tom and Susie McSweeney love to ballroom dance. “Tom does a mean samba,” Susie says.

Still, Tom has arthritis. So, despite their active lifestyle, when the McSweenys built their Edgewater, Md., house in 2013, they asked their architect to incorporate “aging-in-place” features — including an elevator, wide doorways to accommodate a wheelchair and a flat, no-step entryway — into the design.

“You have to be realistic,” says Susie, who has a background in nursing. You don’t know what health issues you may develop as you get older, but “you try to plan for it so that you can enjoy your later years.”

The McSweenys said they wanted to prepare their home now so that those accessibility features would be ready and waiting.

Aging-in-place design choices are gaining a higher profile as baby boomers become a larger and larger segment of the population. According to AARP, the majority of older Americans want to stay in their homes permanently and live independently. This demographic change translates into demand for residential designs that anticipate changes in health, vision or mobility, and ensures that homes stay safe, comfortable and aesthetically pleasing.

Related to aging in place is “universal design,” which emphasizes accessibility for all, with no sacrifice in style. Components may be as simple as abundant lighting, lever-style door handles, well-located storage, chair-height toilets, slip-resistant flooring and open plans with plenty of circulation space. The most visible result of aging-in-place design is living space that simply “feels roomier and more open,” says Russ Glickman, whose North Potomac company, Glickman Design/Build, specializes in accessible multi-generational and universal design homes.

The McSweenys asked Annapolis architect Cathy Purple Cherry to design a safe, satisfying and stylish new home on a small, waterfront lot. The three-story 4,750-square-foot house, constructed by Apter Remodeling/Craftsman of Annapolis, captures expansive Chesapeake Bay views from every level.

An elevator alongside the staircase makes the entire house accessible. The elevator cost \$30,000 to buy and install. But “if you are going to invest in a custom home for aging in place,” says Cherry, “limiting access by wheelchair

into and around the house doesn't make any sense." Either an elevator or a first floor that can be adapted for one-story living is a must, she says.

The McSweenys' ground-floor elevator door is just inside the no-step entry to a two-car garage. The McSweenys appreciate the garage, which shields them from the elements when they come and go. The garage and elevator combo already is a real convenience for toting in groceries and for bringing in their arthritic dog after walks.

The ground floor features a family room/guest quarters. It also has a full bathroom and a large storage room that is drywalled, painted and ready to be repurposed as a room for a caregiver if the need arises.

On the first floor, Cherry included not only the main living spaces — living room, dining room, kitchen and deck — but also the laundry and study. Thus, fewer steps are required to carry out daily living activities. The kitchen is inviting and stylish, while loaded with accessibility features.

Cherry incorporated four feet of circulation space around the central island for easy access to food prep areas, the eating bar between the kitchen and living room, and all appliances. The appliances include two ovens — one under the range and the other stacked in easy reach between a lower pot drawer and an upper, wall-mounted microwave. In the adjacent laundry room, the washer and dryer also perch atop storage pedestals to alleviate the need for bending and reaching.

Kitchen storage is plentiful; the McSweenys worked with their cabinetmaker, NVS Kitchen & Bath in Manassas, to plan cabinet placement and pull-out inserts for ease of use. D-shaped door and drawer handles offer a comfortable grip. Kitchen trash bins occupy cabinets in two locations, to cut down on walking. Electrical outlets are conveniently located. Sealed wood flooring and complimentary wood countertops contrast with the white cabinets for aesthetics and offer visual cues to edges and surfaces.