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Building With Universal Appeal

Touring 534 Chinoe Without Noticing Anything

By Susan Bachner

Since the universal design remodeling project at 534 Chinoe Road started last summer, there have been two open houses and numerous private tours. The visitors included neighbors, friends, readers of the *Chevy Chaser*, students, architects, bankers, political types and a whole lot of people who simply stopped by because they were intrigued. All ages, all sizes, all abilities, all curious.

John Considine, owner and contractor, Tom Wilmes, architect, and Susan Bachner, occupational therapist and home adaptations consultant have been working to create an environment that would meet the needs of a very diverse, multi-generational group of people with varying abilities. It was our hope that the open-houses would not only teach the public about the advantages of accessible products and environments but would also arouse our visitor's curiosity about what would be possible in their own homes. The goal is to be "feeling right at home."

The questions posed during the walk or wheelchair ride-throughs were all thoughtful, but the best, I think, was from a man who after his *unaccompanied* tour during an open house simply said, "So what's the big deal? Other than wide doorways and a gradual walk into the front door, what's so special?"

Was he simply more outspoken than others who looked things over without the benefit of a show-and-tell by one of the members of the professional team? Unknowingly, he was actually affirming the beauty of a basic universal design [UD] standard -- the standard of invisibility. When universal design is successful, the features are quiet solutions and are noticed only because the environment and products are easier to use. And so, the *guided* tour began for this skeptic.

Our first stop was at the electric panel box. No, the starting point was not in the darkest part of the basement because at 534 Chinoe Road the panel box is in an accessible location on the first floor. It is there because it simply makes good sense! After some brief discussion, the tour moved into the den with its entrance to the screened-in porch. This protected back area is an additional source of natural light for the den and living

room and provides a sense of being outdoors. (Very often I consult with folks who feel trapped and handicapped by their home environment. High on their wish list, always, is a screened-in porch with easy access.) This porch has the potential to accommodate a wheelchair platform lift should the home owner ever desire it for occupants or guests – the power source and the dimensions of a lift have been factored into the design plan so that the actual lift can be set in place at some time in the future without any major disruptions to the raised back porch area.

Onward towards the bathroom and dressing areas. I asked this middle-aged gentleman if he ever lost his balance while putting socks on in the morning and he grinned and nodded. Getting dressed *before* his morning dose of coffee put him at risk for stumbling, he said. But then, many of us can relate to the perils that accompany grogginess. Admitting that he has been lucky so far in avoiding falls, he really liked the idea of sitting while dressing.

Then, we began discussing the bathroom. It was here, somewhere between his learning that the shower controls were within 12” of the entrance to the curbless shower (rather than centered on the wall and thereby requiring the user to get wet before the temperature reached warm) and the discussion about the second adjustable-height shower head within easy grasp of the fold-down shower bench, that I could see that he was catching onto the ease, safety and comfort associated with universal design. His attention was captured and he seemed to be having an “ah-ha” UD experience. When I got to the part about the pocket door (door that slides into the wall rather than swinging in or out) he was really attentive. With pocket doors, I explained, you would not have to worry about someone who has fallen on the floor and is lying against an in-swinging door. Easy access, safety and comfort are at work again.

Another person who had picked up the tour, shared that she had an aunt who needed assistance in the bathroom and how difficult it was when she came for a visit. In particular, she spoke about the difficulty of helping her aunt to transfer on and off the commode. I pointed out that the toilet placement was planned to be a bit further off the wall than usual so that someone could assist from either side. Another invisible but important feature!

The plans for the kitchen area were really fun for me to describe. The provision for multi-level counters (either through well placed pull-out cutting boards or through planned variations in counter heights) enable good ergonomics while seated or standing during cooking preparations. One of the things I spoke about was the accessibility advantages of a side-hinged oven door (rather than a pull-down door) for all people, standing or sitting, tall or short. In my opinion, it is much safer. Additionally, we talked about the new casement windows that were recently installed – the crank handles enable seated users or people who have difficulty lifting and/or reaching to open/close windows comfortably. Until pointed out as a UD feature, the usability benefits of these casement windows went unnoticed.

The front-loading clothes washer was another item deliberately selected for this kitchen. Someone else who had just joined this tour commented that if she had this type of clothes

washer, her 9-year old granddaughter would be able to help with laundry when she visited! Her own top-loading clothes washer was always too high for the young visitor, who really enjoyed helping grandma, and she frequently 'lost' all sorts of things in the cavernous wash tub. After considerable discussion about other useful but invisible kitchen features including such things as pull-out drawers and a lower cabinet on castors for move-ability and access, our attention turned to the door leading to the lower level.

This lower-level apartment-like space with two large rooms, a full bathroom and kitchenette has a separate doorway leading to the outside. How perfect for extended visitors, a caretaker, or a home office, they acknowledged. The plans even included two separate doors going into the full bathroom --- if someone was sleeping or working in one of the rooms, the bathroom could be accessed through the doorway in the 'other' room. Maximizing usability is just another universal design principle.

As these folks were saying their good-byes, I did take one last opportunity to point something else out. Did they realize, I said, that 534 Chinoe Road was located approximately 2 ½ blocks from Romany Road shops and services? And, I added, because the neighborhood had already shown foresight by having sidewalk curb-cuts in place, a baby being pushed in a stroller, a teenager running an errand on a bike, and a person navigating independently in a motorized wheelchair would *all* have easy and safe access to whatever they wanted to get to on Romany Road!

Now *this* was a successful tour, I thought to myself.

For more information about the 534 Chinoe property, contact John Considine at (859) 294-7600. Susan Bachner is an occupational therapist and environmental access consultant. Using universal design solutions, she performs evaluations and consultation services for people considering home adaptations or attractive products that promote safety, comfort and accessibility.

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