

# Dallas Business Journal

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## Easy-access living

Builder responds to growing demand for homes with better accessibility for senior citizens or the disabled

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### STORY IMAGES



Bill and Judy Slease had always wanted to build their own home, and as empty-nesters the time seemed right.

But as they began to plan the project, they realized it could more than just their dream home. The couple, owners of McKinney-based Tapestry Custom Homes LLC, realized their home could also be the showcase for a new product niche for their 10-year-old custom building and remodeling company.

It embraces a concept called universal design, which makes a property more accessible for those who are aging or have disabilities.

As waves of baby boomers reach their senior years, construction aimed at better accessibility is more in vogue. Almost everyone knows someone with bad knees, arthritic hands or failing eyesight, and products and designs targeting those consumers are gaining in popularity.

The Sleases' home, situated along a golf course in a hilly, gated community in McKinney, was the first certified in the state by the EasyLiving Home Texas program.

That program, funded in part by a grant from the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, is a voluntary certification program for member homebuilders who agree to build homes that are user-friendly for people of all ages and abilities. Upon completion, the home receives a certification that it meets program standards.

That certification is likely to become a criterion that makes it easier for real estate professionals to market a home to potential buyers, said Tajauna Arnold, director of EasyLiving Home Texas, which is based in Houston. Now there are two homes in the Dallas area, including the Sleases' home. By the end of March 2007 there will be three in El Paso that boast the certification.

"The homes are just so practical, whether people are 20 or 90," Arnold said. "The biggest problem I face is that builders think these are homes built for those with disabilities."

Instead, the program includes features that are useable for people of any age, much the way that a cut in a curb is helpful not just to someone who uses a wheelchair, but also by parents pushing strollers.

It's a niche market now, but one that will grow, she said, adding that the program allows homebuilders to capitalize on that.

One target market is individuals who want to stay in their homes as they age, a concept called aging in place.

"There are a lot of couples who have raised their families and want to downsize. They may be in their 50s and 60s now and not anticipating moving again any time soon. So if a house is visitable, it makes it easier for themselves and others," Arnold said.

Visitable refers to no-step access and other features that remove barriers to entry. Those with specific disabilities might still need to make additional modifications or changes to the home.

#### Practical planning

People are in denial if they think they will be totally functional, physically, all of their life, said Bill Slease, who came to home building following a successful career on Wall Street and with degrees in accounting and corporate finance.

When the Sleases decided to build their own home, they decided it was silly not to incorporate what they'd learned through extensive research about the aging in place concept.

They also think concentrating on that niche will help give Tapestry a stronger identity in the marketplace.

"We didn't find anyone else that was doing that," Judy Slease said.

If done right, the features that make a home more accessible aren't readily apparent. That's important because many people fear that with accessibility comes an institutional look or feel.

First and foremost, the Sleases wanted to build a beautiful home for themselves, their family and their friends.

Features include stepless entries into the home, a main-floor bedroom, at least one accessible bathroom with room to maneuver a wheelchair and wider doors and hallways.

The features make it easier for senior citizens to age in place, for visitors to gain access to their homes and for those who have a temporary disability that requires the use of crutches, for example.

But it has been a hard concept for people to grasp, the Sleases agree. They're hoping to communicate that the added functionality of their home takes nothing away from its beauty.

Many of the features aren't even noticeable. There is no step into the house from the front door nor the attached garage. The carpet is low pile, which aids movement for those in wheelchairs. The wide hallways give the house a spacious feel, but they would also be easily used by a person in a wheelchair. There is no step into the spacious shower, which gives it more of a spa feel. Grab bars look like high-end towel bars.

The gleaming kitchen has countertops at three different heights, so someone in a wheelchair could easily use one as a workspace. The dishwasher is installed higher from the floor than normal for the same reason.

The basic features don't significantly raise the cost of the house when they are added during construction, although special additions such as elevators can boost the price tag.

The Sleases added an elevator to their home, but other home owners might save that money, between \$15,000 and \$30,000, in the short-term by building a closet in the same place on the first and second floors so that an elevator can be added later without structural changes.

The Sleases, both real estate agents as well, have become Certified Aging in Place Specialists, a designation for remodeling professionals that indicates specialized knowledge in ways to make a home meet the needs of aging homeowners.

The program was developed in part by the Remodelers Council, a part of the National Association of Home Builders. It is in recognition of the demographic trends that indicate home owners want to stay in their homes as they grow older, and that remodeling homes so that they are able to do

that is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the home remodeling market.

About 3.2 million baby boomers just hit the age 55 mark, the beginning of a 15-year trend. Research shows that 80% of U.S. residents age 55 or older own their homes.

For those who want to make their home easier to live in, small fixes can work wonders.

Easy fixes

The American Federation for the Blind in late 2006 opened a model home in Dallas that highlights ways that those who are losing their vision, including senior citizens, can make their home life easier. The AFB Center on Vision Loss is the first of its type, a national center to address issues related to living with vision loss.

The model home is full of gadgets, such as talking microwaves and a device that reads product bar codes on common grocery items, that make life more manageable for those with vision loss.

There are also tools to help individuals communicate with others and more easily handle shopping and other chores.

About 10 million people in the U.S. are blind or visually impaired and the number is growing as the large number of baby boomers age.

Some strategies are simple and don't even require a home remodel. One is the use of contrasting colors, which would make a light colored switch stand out on a dark wall, for example. Special task lighting in the kitchen also helps those whose vision is worsening.

"Cooking is one thing people worry about most," said Kelly M. Parisi, vice president-communications for the American Federation for the Blind. "But there are simple solutions to help them adapt to age related vision loss and allow them to live independently in their own homes."

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