

## LIFE/TRAVEL

## Home/Gardening

# Couple's house is home for good

Universal design works from prime years to frailty

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By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News

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Bill and Judy Slease have built a house for the ages. All ages.

The sixtysomething couple own Tapestry Custom Homes in McKinney and have constructed for themselves a "universally designed" house that can accommodate every stage of life and every physical ability.

As the nation's older population doubles over the next 25 years, experts predict, the demand for homes such as the Sleases' will grow substantially.

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MIKE STONE/Special Contributor

Judy Slease, with husband Bill Slease, pulls out a mixer using a mount in her kitchen, which also includes a retractable bread board.

Empty-nesters looking to buy the home of their dreams will want a place where they can spend the rest of their lives.

The Sleases say their new house gives them peace of mind. Both now enjoy good health. But if either becomes disabled or frail in old age, they know they'll be able to remain in their home as long as they like.

"We intend for this to be our last house," Mr. Slease said as he relaxed in his living room, which would be an easy wheelchair ride to the rest of the house and even the outdoors, through wide hallways and doorways and no steps.

Universal design has been around since the 1970s, but it has only recently attracted attention as more Americans approach retirement.

The Sleases first heard about the concept at a homebuilders convention. Intrigued by it, they decided to try the idea on themselves.

Their two-story, 3,500-square-foot home looks like any other in their upscale McKinney neighborhood, but it includes 80 elements of universal design.

"The beauty of universal design is that it doesn't call attention to itself; it just makes life more convenient," Mr. Slease said.

The first hints that there's something different about the Sleases' house are the step-free entrance and wide front door.

Inside, there are wider hallways, hard-surface floors, lower light switches, higher electrical outlets and an elevator that resembles an entryway closet.

The master bedroom and a full bath are on the first floor, to the side of the spacious living room.

All make it easier for anyone to move around and use the home.

### Kitchens and bathrooms

In building their house, the couple paid particular attention to the kitchen and bathrooms, since those often present barriers to people with disabilities.

In the kitchen, cabinets and appliances such as the oven and microwave are mounted lower on the walls. On the other hand, the dishwasher is elevated, so that someone in a wheelchair doesn't have to bend down to load or unload it.

In the master bath, the shower floor has been sloped for drainage, so it doesn't need the little lip that most shower entrances have. The toilet is higher. And decorative grab bars have been installed throughout the room.

The Sleases have led dozens of tours through their home in recent months.

Prospective clients, other homebuilders, curious real estate agents and advocates for the disabled have visited the house to learn more about universal design.

"It's difficult to describe universal design, but when you see it, it instantly makes sense," Mr. Slease said.

The Sleases hope their house will persuade others in their industry to rethink how they build homes.

"Homebuilders may have heard about universal design, but very few have actually incorporated it into their construction," said Richard Duncan, senior project manager at North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design.

Though builders are jumping into the remodeling business to make existing residences more accessible for older people who want to "age in place," they've been slower to construct universally designed houses, Mr. Duncan said.

The Sleases' company, Tapestry Custom Homes, is one of only seven builders that belong to EasyLiving Home Texas, a recently formed public-private coalition that promotes the concept of accessibility in home construction.

Tajauna Arnold, the group's project director, said she visits homebuilder shows to introduce the coalition and recruit members.

"We're where energy-efficient homes once were," she said. "Builders don't understand us yet. Once they do, they'll climb aboard."

Universal design still labors under several misconceptions, Mr. Duncan said.

One is that homes built to accommodate all ages and abilities are ugly.

Charles Schwab, an Illinois architect who designed 10 age-friendly houses last year, including one in Texarkana, said many builders are under the mistaken impression that universal design gives a home an institutional look and

### Also Online

Get more information at these groups' Web sites:

[AARP](#)

[Easy Living Home Texas](#)

[National Association of Home Builders' 50+ Housing Council](#)

[North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design](#)

[Tapestry Custom Homes](#)

feel.

"When done well, a universally designed home resembles any another house," he said.

Dallas-based Centex Corp. recently built a univerrally designed house in one of its Virginia subdivisions to acquaint homebuyers with the concept.

An architect took one of Centex's existing designs – a two-story, 4,000-square-foot house – and adapted it.

"The public's response has been overwhelming. A couple of thousand people have walked through it since December and have raved about it," said Char Kurihara, vice president of sales for Centex Homes in the Virginia area.

Ms. Kurihara said the demonstration house will help Centex develop a corporate strategy on universal design.

### Cost myth

A second misconception about universally designed homes is that they're much more expensive, Mr. Duncan said.

"In many cases, universal design is no more expensive," Mr. Slease said. "It doesn't cost any more, for instance, to use door levers instead of knobs."

When all features are included, a universally designed house may cost up to 5 percent more, Mr. Schwab said.

That's because kitchens and baths must be roomier to accommodate wheelchairs, he said. Likewise, wider hallways add square footage.

On the other hand, incorporating universal design in a home under construction is far less expensive than modifying it later, Mr. Schwab said.

"Why not spend a few thousand more to build an age-friendly bath now and save yourself the \$20,000 to retrofit it later?" he said.

Experts say the main reason most builders haven't yet adopted universal design is that they think there's only a limited market for it.

"Builders aren't risk-takers. They respond to the market," said Leon Harper, a senior housing specialist who worked with Centex on its Virginia home.

"So far, homebuyers haven't banged on builders' doors asking for universal design," he said.

Most consumers still don't know about it, Mr. Harper said, or don't understand it.

### Boomer market

But he and other advocates of universal design are convinced that's about to change.

Mr. Schwab said many of his clients are boomers who have seen elderly parents reluctantly move out of their homes of 30 or 40 years because they can't climb the stairs or step into the shower anymore.

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MIKE STONE / Special Contributor  
The Slease's kitchen includes a retractable bread board.

"The average home doesn't work for an older adult, and boomers are beginning to demand something better for themselves when they grow old," he said.

A universally designed house may turn out to be the smartest investment someone makes, Mr. Duncan said.


"An assisted-living community costs \$40,000 a year and a nursing home, even more," he said. "If you can avoid or delay moving out of your home, just think of the savings, not to mention the satisfaction of staying put."

## COMMON FEATURES

Here are some common features of a universally designed home:

- No steps at the entrance
- All doorways at least 36 inches wide
- Lever door handles
- Pull-down shelves in upper cabinets and rollout shelves in lower cabinets (below)
- Elevator or shaft for future installation
- Stepless shower stall (right)
- Low-pile carpet or hard-surface floors
- One bedroom and full bath on main floor
- Front-loading washer and dryer

SOURCE: Center for Universal Design

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