

Senior-proof your house now so you don't have to move later

10:23 AM CDT on Thursday, August 13, 2009

By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News
bmoos@dallasnews.com

Bruce and Carolyn Exley have been fixing to stay put.

The Dallas couple, who are in their early 60s, have remodeled their 1980s-vintage master bathroom and kitchen so that they can use both more easily as they grow older. They replaced their tub with a step-in shower, and they enlarged the kitchen and installed pullout shelves.

"We're creating a home where we can enjoy retirement," Carolyn Exley said. "If either of us ever needed a wheelchair, we could continue to live here. The only problem I see is that both of us now want to use our new kitchen, and two cooks may be one too many."

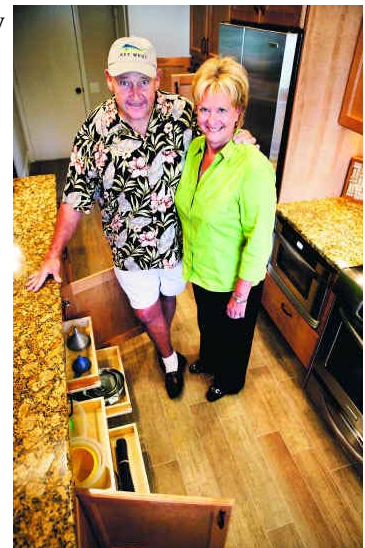
Like the Exleys, nine of 10 people older than 50 plan to remain in their homes for as long as their health allows, an AARP survey has found. But most older homes weren't built to accommodate the frailties of old age.

The typical American home is still a "Peter Pan house," constructed for the young couple whom contractors think will never grow old, said Marty Bell, director of communications and marketing for the National Aging in Place Council, an advocacy organization.

With 78 million baby boomers beginning to feel the aches and pains of their years, the "aging in place" market offers a huge potential for remodelers. Half of those boomers expect to make changes to their homes to stay there, the AARP survey said.

"They've seen their parents struggle, and they don't want the same fate," Bell said. "They're interested in adapting their homes to their changing circumstances."

Rob Jackson, president of Servant Remodeling in Dallas, estimates two-thirds of his clients are boomers who have lived in their homes for 20 to 30 years and don't intend to move. When they update, they also make their homes more age-friendly, he said.



EVANS

CAGLAGE/DMN

Bruce and Carolyn Exley of Dallas enlarged their kitchen and added pull-out shelves, no-slip flooring and brighter lighting to make it easier to use as they grow older. The couple, now in their early 60s, also installed a step-in shower in the master bathroom.

"As nice as some retirement communities are, many people don't want to have anything to do with them," Jackson said. "Their homes are treasure troves of family memories."

Even so, the remodeler has found that many older homes are inconvenient and possibly unsafe for anyone not surefooted. They have doorways too narrow for wheelchairs, carpeting too thick for walkers and staircases without continuous handrails.

Jackson, president of the Dallas chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, worked with the Exleys to turn their kitchen into a place where they can age gracefully. The pullout shelves eliminate any stretching or kneeling. The no-slip textured floor discourages falling. The brighter lighting makes recipes more legible.

Recession's influence

The recession has also prompted older couples to look more seriously at staying put, said Leon Harper, executive director of the National Home Modification Action Coalition, a trade group of remodelers, home nurses and therapists.

"People can't sell their home and can't afford a senior community, so they're calling on remodelers to put in barrier-free showers, higher toilets, more grab bars, wider doorways or anything else to help them maneuver around the house," he said.

Ed and JoAnn Sward, Plano residents in their 70s, considered moving into a retirement community after JoAnn began using a wheelchair and walker, but the high entrance deposits persuaded them to stay in their home.

The couple hired a builder experienced in aging-in-place projects who interviewed them about their needs, evaluated their house and recommended a bigger shower, wood floors and 36-inch-wide doors.

"The economics of staying here worked better for us," Ed Sward said. "If we had moved, we would have tied up a lot of our retirement savings."

'Easy-living' trend

William Slease, president of Tapestry Custom Homes in McKinney and the Swards' remodeler, said he expects the "easy-living" features added to the Swards' home will increase its market price if they decide to sell.

"Just as energy efficiency has become something that buyers look for in homes, so will accessibility, or easy living, become a big plus as the public learns more about it," he said.

Remodelers report a 74 percent increase over the last year in inquiries from prospective clients interested in making their homes more accessible, said Therese Crahan, executive director of the National Association of Home Builders' remodelers group.

Homeowners have begun to include age-related modifications in remodeling projects because they don't have to compromise on style to do it, Crahan said.

"People have started to understand that an age-friendly house doesn't have to look like a nursing home," she said. "Grab bars, for instance, now come in a variety of styles and finishes that match the faucets and other bathroom hardware."

Some changes are so subtle that most people don't notice. Door levers have replaced knobs and given more independence to homeowners with arthritis, Slease said.

Consumers can choose from many more age-friendly home products than in the past, he said. Coming onto the market are keyless door locks that read fingerprints and home versions of sensor-triggered faucets now found in public restrooms.

Getting advice

If homeowners aren't sure what they'll need to remain in their house, they may want to call in an occupational therapist or geriatric care professional to evaluate the home, Harper said. That could help guard against unscrupulous or inexperienced remodelers' grandiose suggestions.

The National Association of Home Builders has also worked with AARP to establish a program that has trained almost 3,000 contractors, architects and others to understand aging in place, Crahan said.

Harper said too many people are still told they need to sell their house and move into a retirement community when they get old.

"But it's not always the older person who's broken. It's often the house that needs fixing," he said.

"This country won't be able to build enough retirement communities for 78 million boomers. Our only option is to help as many as possible hang onto their houses."

SENIORS' HOME NEEDS

What a house should contain if its owners plan to age in place:

- Master bedroom and bath on first floor
- Low or no threshold to house
- Lever-style door handles
- Wide doorways
- Bright lighting, especially in stairways
- Low-maintenance exterior
- Nonslip flooring
- Open floor plan, especially in kitchen and dining area
- Handrails at all steps

SOURCE: National Association of Home Builders' remodelers group