

Model Home

In Ohio, the Universal Design Living Laboratory aims to educate

In May 2009, Jefferson Township in Columbus, OH, will be home to the Universal Design Living Laboratory (UDLL), a 3,500-sq.-ft. ranch-style house that will function as a national model and educational facility for Universal Design. When completed, it will offer tours to building and design professionals and include a library of resources for in-depth learning. In addition, the home will incorporate state-of-the-art technology, as well as green design practices and products.

Designed by architect Patrick Manley, the house is being built by its owners, Rosemarie Rossetti, PHD, and Mark Leder, who originally intended it for their private use. The couple conceived of the house after Rossetti had a spinal cord injury and now uses a wheelchair. "I read an article about a woman in a wheelchair who had built a house and saw pictures of someone rolling under a sink and countertop," she said. "I had no idea that Universal Design existed." However, finding an existing house that offered greater accessibility, as well as two home offices (both work out of the home—she is a speaker, writer and trainer and he runs a software business), was pretty much impossible. Consequently, the couple, with Manley's help, decided to build their own from scratch, and, with much encouragement from her business peers, to open it to the public.

Multiple setbacks, including opposition from a homeowners association and a search for a new site, have delayed construction, which will finally begin this May. Until the UDLL is finished, however, Rossetti and Leder will continue to live in the same house, which, though somewhat modified, is less than ideal. In the kitchen, for example, certain elements like wall cabinets are out of reach, and loading the oven is unsafe, as the door is hinged at the bottom, requiring Rossetti to access it from the side. In the bathroom, several doors were removed, leaving her no privacy, and a bench and handheld shower were added for Rossetti's use. The tub is completely inaccessible, "so forget taking a soak," and a vanity cabinet requires that she position herself sideways to brush her teeth.

The UDLL addresses these and other lifestyle concerns with a thoughtful kitchen, bath and dressing room designed by Mary Jo Peterson. According to Peterson, an interesting component of the project is the height difference between Rossetti and Leder, who is 6 ft., 4 in., "so they really have a personal, everyday need for the flexibility of Universal Design." In the kitchen, for example, a multi-tiered island with rolling carts ensures not only comfortable work surfaces for both Rossetti and Leder, but also ample (and mobile) storage and knee space when necessary. "They have a fairly large extended family, so when everyone's around, they tend to sit around the island," said Peterson. The cooktop is located in a corner to maximize the knee space underneath. "When you give up a corner to knee space, what would normally be the width of a cooktop is now wider," said Peterson. This allows Rossetti more flexibility.

For the Universal Design Living Laboratory, designer Mary Jo Peterson created a kitchen that responds to Rossetti's accessibility requirements as well as the height difference between her and her husband, Mark Leder. When built, the kitchen will feature varying counter heights, a multi-tiered island with mobile storage and plenty of knee space.



As with most kitchens, the UDLL kitchen will also have a fair amount of accessories, but all "with an eye toward putting things within Rosemarie's reach," said Peterson. In the pantry, for example, a pull-down shelf mechanism gives Rossetti access to storage in higher places. Entry into the pantry from the garage will include a place for her to park her wheelchair so it can dry, a handy feature when it's raining outside.

The same level of consideration and flexibility also informed the design for the master bathroom. Unlike more conventional arrangements, the room is loosely divided into three zones: separate his and her vanity and toilet areas, with Rossetti's doubling as a powder room, and a shared tub and shower. "For most clients, regardless of their abilities, disabilities or interest in planning for aging in place, traditional bath design is so formally symmetrical that it can't support different heights," said Peterson. "However, separating the vanity and toilet areas is a wonderful way to accommodate differences."

The master bath adjoins a dressing/laundry room that was also designed by Peterson and is essential to Rossetti's career as a speaker and trainer. In addition to a washer and dryer, the space contains an ironing area and island with pullout features, abundant storage and sufficient room to enable her to pack and unpack a suitcase, retrieve clothing and move about with ease.

The UDLL promises to be an exciting and informative resource for those wanting to learn about Universal Design. For more information and visuals, visit www.udll.com. ■

—Alice Liao