

ROSEMARIE ROSSETTI, PhD

# around the HOUSE

## Finding an Architect

**Sometimes, life suddenly changes** direction. A spinal-cord injury (SCI) on June 13, 1998, caught me by surprise during a bicycle ride when a three-ton tree came crashing down on me.

My husband, Mark Leder, and I had built our dream home in 1995. We

trips to the library, Internet searches, speaking with other wheelchair users, and a visit with our independent living center (ILC) director. We visited homes built by wheelchair users and took extensive notes on what features limited accessibility and which worked well. After months of collecting information, Mark began to sketch out a floor plan for our new house.

the original house footprint. So we put a deposit on a lot.

## Getting Referrals

Mark and I quickly became overwhelmed with the design process, so began our search for an architect. We contacted the ILC and bureau of vocational rehabilitation for architect recommendations.

Our builder also recommended an architect who, when asked how he would approach the design of our home's kitchen, said the cabinet company would lay out the plan. He clearly had no experience with UD and simply wanted to delegate the whole task.

A second recommended architect sent me his résumé and completed-projects summary. I asked for his references and called three. One, a woman who had hired him to remodel her bathroom, said she could not reach any electrical outlets.

A third architect was out of state, making face-to-face conferences too difficult and costly. We interviewed a woman who had designed her home using UD features, but she was not an architect. Our project needed a registered architect to officially "stamp" his or her seal on any final plans.

A colleague recommended architect Patrick Manley (Columbus). Manley came to our home with his construction manager, Cathy Van Volkenburg. He brought us his reference list and described previous projects where he worked on Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant housing projects, as well as residential UD. I called his three references and got glowing reviews. We had our man!

## Envisioning the Layout

Over the next few months, we held meetings with Manley and realized we were spinning our wheels trying to "shoehorn"



Meeting to discuss plans (from left) are Cathy Van Volkenburg (architect's construction manager), Patrick Manley (architect), and client Rosemarie Rossetti.

expected to live there for an unlimited time, but since my injury, it became more of a nightmare—stairs that I couldn't climb, cabinets beyond reach, and bathtubs that I couldn't enter without assistance. We began planning a home that would better accommodate us both.

I had seen a magazine article on Universal Design (UD)—a framework for design benefiting the most people in the widest range of situations.

Encouraged by the concept, I devoted my time to research, including

The process began with choosing a location. We drove around the section of town where we wanted to live and found a new subdivision. Two builders had several lots available, but each had only one ranch-style floor plan to offer. We became discouraged; these homes did not meet our needs.

Based on referrals, we decided on C.V. Perry (Columbus, Ohio) as our builder. He said we could modify his existing floor plan by erasing all interior walls and redrawing a new plan within

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our space needs into the builder's existing footprint. The only logical solution would be to start from scratch.

The house was designed from the inside out. First, we positioned rooms in relation to each other. Then, we sized each room based on our furniture placement and travel pathways, allowing for my wheelchair, and keeping square-footage to a minimum. We considered "point of use" when locating appliances. Finally, the home's exterior shell was detailed. We avoided space wasters like an overly large foyer.

I needed help comprehending the architectural symbols on the blueprints. For example, I saw red circles and asked Manley what they represented. "Those are five-foot diameter turning dimensions for your wheelchair," he responded.

At times, I had trouble envisioning the layout of rooms. Symbols for the kitchen appliances had to be explained. When I needed more explanation, Manley drew a sketch of the elevation (a vertical depiction of a structure). We constantly reviewed my need for access to storage areas and work surfaces—especially in the critical kitchen and bathroom areas. To give these rooms expert consideration, we hired kitchen and bath UD specialist Mary Jo Peterson (Brookfield, Conn.).

The completed floor plans will soon be handed over to the builder for construction. Our home will serve as a national demonstration Universal Design Living Laboratory (UDLL) to bring about awareness of UD to the building industry and the public.

**Contact:** Rosemarie@UDLL.com.

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