



This 36-year-old house on Honore Avenue in Sarasota, with architecture inspired by the antebellum mansions of Eufaula, Alabama, could become a demonstration home operated by Sarasota's Universal Design Coalition. Or, it could be torn down. Fund-raising is under way. [COURTESY PHOTO]

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Last week I covered our local Universal Design Coalition's hot-and-heavy summer campaign to raise funds by the end of July to support an effort to convert a Sarasota landmark into a demonstration residence, accessible to everyone at every age.

After listening to these enlightened champions of inclusive architecture, I went home and looked at my 1932 bungalow with a critical eye. We'd just had the whole thing picked up — by a friendly crew of miracle-working house movers from Myakka City — and set back down on a sturdier foundation. But there's still no way you can get into this house without climbing a few steps or installing a ramp. Sure, we did think about what the UD folks call "level entry" — for about two seconds — and rejected the idea. A slab house just wouldn't have that authentic bungalow charm.

There's nothing not to like about universal design, and it's really not any more expensive than what you might call exclusionary home design — especially if you're building from scratch. Yet it's hardly catching on like wildfire. Part of the reason is that whole hope-I-die-before-I-get-old kneejerk reaction that makes us want to contemplate nuclear melt-downs or rising seas before we dare to envision ourselves needing a grab bar to remain vertical in a shower stall.

But I do think that another element to this resistance is highly personal — the counterproductive urge to reject one-size-fits-all universality in favor of those little special somethings that make us feel uniquely present on the planet.

My father, in his middle 80s, refused to consider an adjustable bed that would allow him to sleep propped up because he loved the look of his sleek Danish modern headboard. So mostly he dozed, stylishly and stubbornly, in a Norwegian leather chair.

And my mother declared to the end that she'd rather trip and fall and break every bone than give up her collection of Navajo rugs. We compromised by affixing them to the floor with Velcro strips.

I'm looking forward to seeing the Universal Design Coalition's model home, and I hope they will offer wheelchair tours for all of us who can't imagine ever needing one.

But I perversely prefer to pick and choose the concessions I'm willing to make to the infirmities I expect to endure. Grab bars, a "comfort height" toilet and hand-held shower? Sure, why not? Kitchen drawers instead of cabinets? I like the look.

But let me cling as long as I can to my bumpy yellow pine floors and narrow Craftsman door frames. After all, in this era of technological customization, why should my little house change to accommodate a wheelchair? Why can't the wheelchair change to accommodate the house?

Well, it can! There's a 16-inch-wide chair used commonly in Europe, and I spotted one the other day in Sarasota, deftly maneuvering into a downtown cafe. And if you google "wheelchair prototype," you'll be amazed at the many possible futures for frail boomers: standing chairs that combine the advantages of a chair and a walker, so you can rise and sit with flexible supports; climbing treads on wheelchairs that can scale steps; even ones that go underwater.

Universal design makes great sense. But I'm hoping that designers will continue to innovate, if only for the sake of our sensibilities.

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