



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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When Nancy Schlossberg moved into her high-rise condo in downtown Sarasota some years back, the first thing she wanted to change was the grab bars in the master bathroom.

"Not only did I have them taken out, I had them thrown away," said the Sarasota professor and author of numerous books on retirement and aging. "What kind of attitude did I have?"

As she confessed to guests at a breakfast Friday to discuss the Universal Design Coalition's latest project, it wasn't long before Schlossberg learned for herself why grab bars are so useful — when she had to have new ones installed.

Universal design is both a concept and a movement, aimed at making homes livable for people of all ages and abilities. Wheelchair access is just one element in a host of options that include door handles easier for arthritic hands to turn, roll-out shelves or drawers in the kitchen that are easier to dip into — and, yes, those grab bars that help prevent falls on hard, slick surfaces.

These are simple notions to grasp. They're also easy to dismiss from your mind, unless you need these design features yourself — or you've had a chance to try them out and see how they can make life better for somebody you love. That's why the coalition, from its earliest days, has been hankering for a demonstration house where people from Sarasota — and from around the world — can come for guidance and inspiration.

Sarasota's Universal Design Coalition was born in the swirl of community conversations on aging that also led to the Institute for the Ages, an ambitious effort that ended in 2015. Other conversation circles sponsored by SCOPE — Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence — drifted into silence as well.

But these universal design folks are passionate! They just don't seem able to stop talking until all of us get what they're saying.

One frustration, coalition co-founder Tracy Lux said at the breakfast, was that after hearing them out politely, local builders would explain that they would be happy to add universal design to their plans — if customers ever asked for it.

"You can't ask for something if you don't know what it is," Lux said. "Our overall goal has always been: If we could only show people what this is about, they would like it."

As Herald-Tribune correspondent Harold Bubil wrote in June, the pretty-in-pink Albritton house — once a Proctor Road curiosity for folks visiting the orange grove store — could become an eye-catching advertisement for universal design. If the coalition's board can raise enough funds by the end of this month, this 1981 example of New Traditional architecture will be theirs for the remodeling. Dreams include an outside elevator, roll-in kitchen ... well, you get the idea. And if you don't, you will.

"We are today where we think green building was 15 years ago," Lux said. "We think this will become the next destination attraction and legacy learning center."

Schlossberg added that she sees the coalition's new venture as "a bridge between the past and the future." While the Institute for the Ages failed to deliver on its promise, she said, "many of its ideas, and much of its energy, have remained with us."

To learn more about universal design, or the model home project — or to make a timely donation before the end of July — call 941-376-2167 or visit easyuniversaldesign.com. And for more on home modification, read our Aging feature in this issue.

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"All the carpets are coming up, so they won't be a trip hazard," said Ernie MacNeill, walking through the split-level house in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, that he is remodeling for a client who struggles to walk.

The home's owner, Elliot Goldberg, 71, a Vietnam veteran with multiple health problems, has lived on this quiet suburban street for 30 years. He could move to a single-floor apartment or an assisted living facility, but like most older people, he wants to stay put.

"I have a lot of good memories here," he said.

So he turned to MacNeill, a longtime contractor who took a three-day course through the National Association of Home Builders to become a Certified Aging in Place Specialist, or CAPS.

Older people have the highest rate of homeownership in the country — about 80 percent, according to a 2016 report by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard. The great majority live in single-family homes, most poorly suited for the disabilities common in later life.

The center has looked at three of the most important features that allow people to move safely around their living spaces: entrances without steps, single-floor living, and wide hallways and doorways that accommodate wheelchairs.

"Less than 4 percent of the U.S. housing stock has all three of those," said Jennifer Molinsky, a senior research associate at the center. Add two more important elements — doors with lever handles, and light switches and electrical outlets that can be reached from a wheelchair — and the proportion drops to 1 percent.

You will often hear older people vow that they won't leave their homes except "feet first." Without modifications, however, the design of most older Americans' homes could eventually thwart their owners' desire to stay.

About 3,500 CAPS graduates across the country — builders and remodelers, occupational therapists, interior designers — retrofit homes to help people remain in them safely, said Dan Bawden, a Houston contractor who helped develop the program in 2001.

Many of the nation's more than 200,000 occupational therapists also assess homes, said Scott Trudeau, who manages productive aging programs for the American Occupational Therapy Association.

Other groups are also tackling home accessibility, including nurses, academic researchers, and the Certified Living in Place Professional program. Local agencies on aging or senior centers may provide referrals, too.

Most CAPS remodelers can install two grab bars for a modest \$200 to \$300. Figure \$60 to \$90 to replace a doorknob with an easier-to-manuever lever, Bawden said, and \$175 to \$250 for every relocated light switch or outlet.

But replacing a tub with a roll-in shower will run \$8,000 to \$10,000, he said. A new bathroom incorporating universal design elements could top \$25,000.

Home modification remains essentially a privately financed undertaking, even though it could help prevent far more expensive hospitalizations and nursing home admissions. A bill to offer seniors \$30,000 in federal tax credits for modifications was introduced in Congress last year, but it has made little headway.

"How do we structure these programs so they're available not just to the few, but to the many?" Trudeau asked. "CMS" — the federal Medicare and Medicaid agency — "needs to start thinking about this."