

By Jackie Gast, Director

Universal Design. We are hearing the term more and more in our community. Universal Design is very much like "one size fits all." According to Wikipedia.org, the free online encyclopedia (try it, you'll love it!), universal design is "' inclusive design' and ' design for all.' (It) is an approach to the design of products, services and environments to be usable by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or situation."

Most often known in construction, the concept of universal design has been implemented by commercial builders for decades and is building steam for residential builders as well. A few examples are widening hallways, widening interior and exterior entrances, installing levered door handles instead of knobs, and designing open floor plans.

Why is the practice of universal design becoming more popular, especially on the Delmarva Peninsula? Number one, it expands the builder's marketing base. Our population is aging and this area is a draw for retirees. If dear, rich, retired Aunt Sally cannot get through the hallways with her walker, she is not going to buy your house. If "able-bodied" Mom wants to retire near her favorite sister, Sally, and wants to invite her over for Dominos every other week, she may not buy either if Sally cannot get in the door. Not only do we have retirees, but veterans as well. Many young men and women who have been permanently injured have enough to deal with besides trying to maneuver within their and their friend's and family's homes. Builders, be sure to get your home improvement license. With the decline of housing new starts, you will be aligned to handle the demand for home modification for retirees and veterans. Many, who live here want to "age in place" and do not want to move out of their existing homes.

Number two, the sales appeal is greater. Wider hallways and open floor plans are nice for everyone because it feels spacious and looks appealing. It also helps everyone when it comes to moving around furniture!

Universal design is expanding to employment. Policies and procedures are designed for all. For example, McDonald's Restaurants use pictures in some of their kitchens that show the steps in food preparation. Some hospitals use large print on labels or pictures on the shelves in their storage rooms. Employers have found that what may have started as an accommodation for someone with a disability has turned out to be a great improvement for all employees.

Universal design of products is also gaining steam. According to Wikipedia.org, examples would be built up handles on food utensils for easy gripping and dishware with steep sides for, well, everyone! Manufacturing has been using global ISO quality standards for years. You may have seen many of our eastern shore companies with large ISO certification banners displayed on their buildings.

The Bottom line of universal design is that it improves quality of life and your bottom line.