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Universal Design

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Design for All: Universal Design at the 2012 Kitchen & Bath Industry Show

By Nina Patel

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Designer Sandra Gaylord hopes this bath project will help her clients see that universal design can be both comfortable and beautiful.

In a panel discussion and through conversations with remodeling professionals at the 2012 Kitchen & Bath Industry Show in Chicago, it became clear that universal design is currently a popular topic in the industry.

Designer John Yun, a KBIS panelist and sales consultant at [Mr. Floor Kitchen & Bath](#), in Chicago, said that he does not use the phrase “universal design” when discussing aging-in-place features with his clients because it brings to mind institutional design. Instead, he talks to clients about “ease of lifestyle.” Fellow panelist Chris Wright, president of [WrightWorks](#), in Indianapolis, said that he defines universal design as design that is useful to people of various ages and abilities, adding that it requires a long-term view to allow homeowners to remain in their homes as they age.

Designer Sandra Gaylord of Gaylord Design, in Charleston, S.C., winner in the universal design category of the 2011 National Kitchen & Bath Association Design Competition, said that many of her clients still think universal design has to look institutional, so she often doesn’t mention the terms associated with universal design when suggesting features for clients. Instead she might recommend to clients that they add bars in the shower, without using the phrase “grab bar.” For some older clients she will suggest countertops and flooring in contrasting colors, without stressing the fact that this will make it easier, as they age, to differentiate between the two.

Chris Wright said that he tries to stimulate this type of conversation by asking clients questions about how they will use the space. But, he added, “be sensitive — no one wants to think about their lives being less than they are today.”

Yun uses an extensive questionnaire and gathers clues from his clients’ answers to determine which needs-based product recommendations he should make. He pointed out that kitchens require many elements, which need to fit in a small space, and sometimes designers forget about providing sufficient space for walking and maneuvering — something that is especially helpful in the kitchen, which is often the center of activity for families. He says it’s also important to provide switches that are easy to use, lighted so they are easy to find, and placed in easy-to-reach locations.

Making Use of Technology in Universal Design

Michael Creeden, owner/founder of [M+R Digital Innovations](#), in Spring Grove, Ill., made some interesting points on the technology angle. One example he gave was how designers could install a bathroom light switch with a motion detector that is programmed to turn the light on at 20% strength between 10:30 p.m. and 6 a.m. for night trips to the bathroom, and then automatically turn off after five or 10 minutes — a feature that’s useful for all users.

However, Creeden cautioned against focusing on individual features and elements, noting that true universal design means integrating technology, such as lighting control, a security system, and audio/video, “making them work seamlessly together.”

And Diana Schrage, senior interior designer for [Kohler Design Center](#), stressed in her presentation that designers should look at the bigger picture, evaluating features and products that are economically viable, socially responsible, and environmentally sound. She was not alone in pointing out the importance of collaborating with experts in different fields — from occupational therapy to automation — as the best way

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