

# Aging in Place:

## *Building a home with your future in mind*

By Brian Kaufman

**E**veryone ages, but the changing needs of homeowners aren't always reflected in the design of their homes. Narrow halls and doorways, steep staircases and yard elevations may be beautiful, but they aren't always user-friendly. Homeowners are not always prepared for the very predictable needs of natural aging. What can homeowners do to design new homes or remodel old ones so that they can age gracefully in their own home?

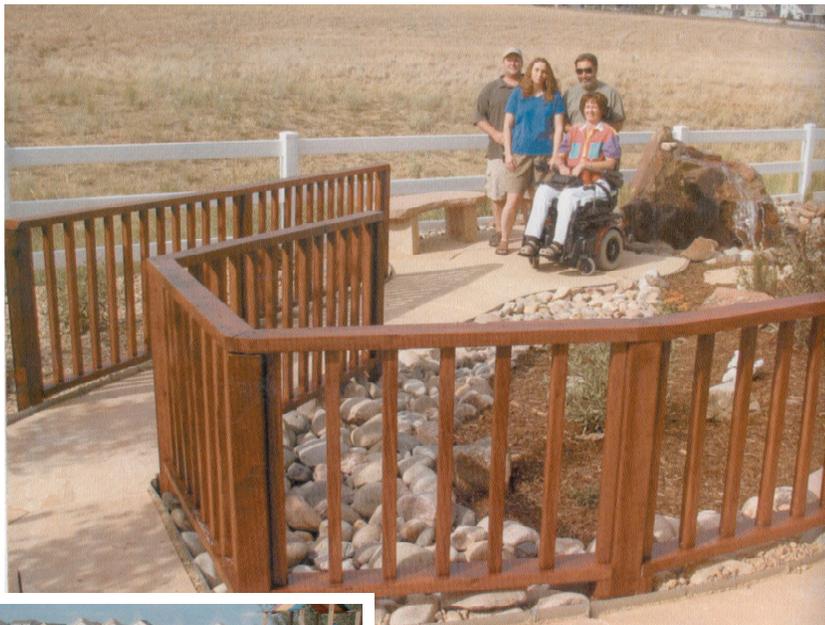
Jeff Schneider of Armstead Construction believes that more and more people are asking that question. "My opinion is, after 9-11 happened, a lot of people stepped back and decided that they needed to think long-term about their lives. It's a huge change in the marketplace. People are looking ahead and planning rather than moving to another home." Homeowners want to know what they should do to be able to stay in their homes comfortably, safely, regardless of their age or level of ability.

What are the building and remodel tips for people who want to live in their homes long-term? They include:

- **Levered door handles.** Those round doorknobs are tough to grip! Levered door handles allow residents to open the door with a soft push from a hand or elbow.
- **Touch pads for entryways.** Rather than fumble with the house keys, some residents use keypad locks that are both secure and aging-friendly.
- **Accessible appliances.** Whole new generations of appliances feature waist-high pull out drawers, including refrigerators and dishwashers. Built-in drawer pantries store food at countertop height. Front-loading washers and dryers help avoid bending and lifting.
- **One level houses.** Stairs are beautiful, but they're hard to climb! One level houses are wheelchair accessible.
- **Low doorway thresholds.** Instead of the standard front-door threshold of one and a half inches, CAPS builders put an angled, 3/4 inch threshold. The rounded threshold helps wheelchairs avoid the sharp angles of a traditional entryway.
- **Curb-less shower stalls with plenty of space.** Showers without a curb allow wheelchairs to roll into a shower unimpeded, turn around and roll back out.
- **Four-foot hallways and doors.** The ADA (American Disabilities Act) recommends 42-inch wide halls and doors to allow for wheelchairs. Schneider feels that four feet "gives you room for both a wheelchair and grab rails."
- **3/4 inch plywood wall surfaces.** Instead of plain drywall, plywood-backed drywall allows for the future installation of grab rails without major remodeling.
- **Extra clearance space** below sinks and counters-this will allow close "parking" for wheelchair-bound residents to use the workspaces in the home.

Schneider believes that these design ideas will "help the elderly adapt to their houses instead of pulling them out and moving them somewhere else." But what about outdoor space? For example, can landscape be made wheelchair friendly?

Alan Horne of Yard Elves, Inc. recently designed a landscape project for Peggy Graff and Jon Wright of Fort Collins. The project features a back yard deck with an elevator that drops down to a custom flagstone pathway. The sloped path curves through a small aspen grove and rock garden, and then continues down to a small patio and boulder fountain.



**ABOVE:** Accessibility equals freedom. Peggy Graff and Jon Wright's landscaping was designed to let Graff move around her yard without help using an elevator and an inclined path. Left to right: Alan and Nicki Horne, Peggy Graff and Jon Wright.



**LEFT:** A bench lies at the end of a custom pathway in Graff and Wright's yard. A boulder fountain and small rock garden set off the view, and the path and railing make it easy for Graff to move around and enjoy the open space.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN KAUFMAN

Horne designed the project to allow Peggy to enjoy her yard from all vantage points. He installed new beds, boulder accents and plants to enhance the view. A redwood rail offers protection for Peggy, while linking the path to a pre-existing deck.

The results were spectacular. Peggy said, "Yard Elves did three important things. They had great attention to detail. They cared about my safety. And since they completed the project, they've been by every few days to make sure everything is okay."

"This project meant a lot to me," Horne admits.

The work crew brought Horne's vision to life. "My crew really outdid themselves." Peggy and Jon's offered input as the job progressed. Horne said, "They're the reason this job was successful."

Indoors or out, experts advise planning for aging in the design phase of building a house, rather than waiting for problems to force a remodel. Schneider notes, "A lot of little things can be done in advance, like putting in that plywood instead of drywall. It will save money when the time comes to remodel. It will also save time. A person can install a handrail themselves if they've planned ahead. When we remodel, we come into your 'safe place,' tear it up and make a lot of dust and noise. A little planning avoids that."

