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Function a driving concept



LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

The house at 14539 Bud Lane in Hanover County has a drive-through garage and is designed for universal access.



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The kitchen of the home in Mountain Run has a drawer-style microwave, front stove controls and pullout cabinets at a level comfortable for a person in a wheelchair.



Builder Stephen Thomas stands in the kitchen of his Parade of Homes house. The kitchen has counters at three levels.

Universal access is main idea behind builder's design of Parade of Homes entry

BY JOAN TUPPONCE
Special Correspondent

Builder Stephen Thomas can't help but smile when he shows off the drive-through garage in his 2008 Parade of Homes entry in the Mountain Run development.

The unusual concept allows a driver to pull into the garage, which borders the home's circular driveway, and pull out onto the driveway without ever backing up.

"I decided the way the garage sits out in front of the house that it was the perfect opportunity to create a drive-through," he said.

The feature is just one of many universal accessible design concepts that Thomas incorporated into the house at 14539 Bud Lane in Hanover County. The house is one of 130 homes that are part of the annual Parade of Homes, which kicks off today.

The home's other characteristics include stepless entrances, wider halls and doorways, lever door handles and lowered light switches.

"One of the goals with universal design is to make all these features invisible so you don't notice them," Thomas said. "The house in Mountain Run doesn't look any different from any home but it's fully functional and accessible."

The idea behind universal design is to make a home accessible to all people, regardless of disabilities or age, he said.

"If builders would start to look at new ideas instead of continuous patterns, they could be doing a better job of making buildings more user-friendly for everyone," said Michael Chenail, senior consultant at Compliance Alliance, an Americans with Disabilities consulting company that has worked with

2008 Parade of Homes

The Parade of Home kicks off today, marking its 57th consecutive year in the area:

What: 130 homes built by 59 builders featuring the latest in home designs and construction techniques and materials.

When: Starts today and continues Oct. 11-12 and Oct. 18-19 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Cost: Admission is free.

Where are the homes: located throughout the Richmond and Tri-City areas including the localities of Goochland, Louisa, Henrico, Hanover, King William, New Kent, Hopewell, Chesterfield, Richmond and Powhatan.

Price of homes: range from the high \$100,000's to more than \$1.7 million.

Details: Parade of Homes magazine appeared in yesterday's Times-Dispatch. It contained detailed information, including a map and directions to each home. The magazine is available at Ukrop's stores and at the Home Building Association office at 400 N. Ridge Road.

Contact: The association at (804) 282-0400 or online at www.hbar.org/info

SOURCE: The Home Building Association of Richmond

Thomas.

As a baby boomer, Thomas realizes the growing need to build homes that will accommodate people as they age.

Having wider doorways and stepless entryways, for instance, enables anyone, regardless of age or impairment, to visit or maneuver through a house, said Thomas, who also has a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist designation from the National Association of Home Builders.

His Mountain Run house also has lower electrical

panel boxes that are easy to reach and easy to read, an open floor plan with wider halls and doorways, casement windows that crank open, levered door and cabinet handles, lower light switches and raised electrical outlets.

The kitchen in the five-bedroom, three-and-a-half bath home has three counter levels — low, medium and high.

"The lower counter can be used by a child or someone in a wheelchair," Thomas said. "We also have a raised dishwasher so you don't have to bend to reach the dishes and a base cabinet under the sink that you can remove to accommodate a wheelchair."

A Jenn-Air range is available with front controls and a Dacor touch-screen microwave drawer, located in lower cabinetry for easy use.

Light switches are 46 inches above the floor, 8 inches lower than normal height.

The main floor has three bedrooms, including the master bedroom equipped with motion sensor lights in the closet as well as a Lutron programmable lighting system.

"The system can be controlled by a master control and a remote that you can put in your car," Thomas said. "As you drive in, you can hit the button on the remote and the lights that are programmed on the system will come on."

The house has an elevator with a land-line telephone inside as well as a conventional staircase.

The master bathroom has a curbless shower with a grab bar. He put reinforced wood between the studs in the bathroom so additional grab bars can be added.

"The home is made to be adaptable," Thomas said.

Building a home with a universal design does have its challenges and can cost a little more, he said.

A stepless entry, for instance, can be difficult if

the home requires a crawl space.

"You have to be attentive to elevations," Thomas said. "You have to be careful about planning the excavation and the foundation so that you can get the home situated for the stepless entry. It's really easier to build this type of home on slab construction but a lot of subdivisions don't allow that."

The 4,202-square-foot home in Mountain Run is priced at \$899,000 — within the range of prices of other homes in the subdivision.

The extra features of a universal design home can add to construction costs, Thomas said.

The increase depends on the number of features included, he said. The minimal ones could cost less than \$1,000.

To help pay for the extra features, homeowners can apply for a Virginia Livable Home tax credit of \$500 for buying a new residential unit or retrofitting existing ones with accessibility or universal features.

"This is not to be confused with the first-time home-buyer tax credit," Thomas said.

Homes must meet certain requirements to qualify for the tax credit, including having at least three accessible features such as a zero-step entrance and a first-floor bathroom with wider doorways.



The home that Thomas built in the Mountain Run development recently received the EasyLiving designation as well as one from Earthcraft Home.

The Earthcraft Home is a regional program designed to encourage the construction of new homes that are environmentally friendly, energy efficient and healthier to live in.

Thomas received the EasyLiving designation this year at a home in Henrico County's Spring Lake subdivision. That home was the first in Virginia to earn such a designation from Virginia Assistive Technology Solutions.

"I started doing research on universal design about three years ago," he said. "I made some contacts in the field and felt knowledgeable enough to start a new universal-designed home in Henrico."

Chenail, the consultant at Compliance Alliance, worked with Thomas on the Henrico home.

"We met at the house part of the way through construction," Chenail said. "I made a few suggestions and he used those in the home. It was really well done."

Homes with a universal design are as much about the future as they are about the present, he said.

Those types of homes have seven design principles as outlined by The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, a national research center that promotes accessible and universal design in building.

The principles include designs that offer simple and flexible use and the minimization of hazards.

Because these types of homes carry specific features related to aging-in-place, homes with universal design are often thought to be institutional in looks and ambience.

"That's a common misconception," Thomas said.

Jennifer Whitaker, occupational therapist and owner of Independence by Design, has worked with Thomas on remodeling several homes for her clients.

"You have to have a builder that is knowledgeable," Whitaker said. "Stephen is one of the few builders in town that uses universal design. It's nice to know he has that type of education."