

Plan now to adapt

by Randy Ray

Now's the time for Canada's burgeoning population of baby boomers and young seniors to be thinking about the homes they'll live in when they're in their 70s and 80s, says Toronto architect Susan Ruptash.

Jim Zamprelli, senior researcher for housing needs at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in Ottawa, agrees.

While it may be more fashionable to plan trips to the sunny south and shop for new golf clubs, Ruptash and Zamprelli are urging boomers — especially those planning to build new homes or renovate their existing quarters — to also think about grab bars, non-slip flooring, doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and levered tap handles.

Why? Because they're among a multitude of practical conveniences that will enable today's 50- and 60-somethings to live happily and independently 20 years from now when aging limbs, dementia and any number of other physical and mental challenges steer them toward retirement or nursing homes.

"The idea is to get people thinking," says Ruptash, a principal in Quadrangle Architects Ltd. "Fifty-fear-olds may not need many of these features at this point but as they get older they will want to stay in their homes, so by doing it now, they have more chance of staying longer."

Ruptash's specialty is creating living and public spaces for those with present physical impediments or who will develop specific physical needs in the future.

Her designs include elements seniors might overlook such as countertops and appliances that reduce bending and reaching, doors that open outward so people who fall against the door aren't trapped in a room, and large windows with low sills, so those in wheelchairs can view the outdoors.

CMHC conducts extensive research and via its website (cmhc.ca) provides a variety of how-to documents, tools and information sheets that help older Canadians live in housing that will accommodate their changing needs. These include 12 publications that cover adaptations to various parts of the home, including kitchens, bathrooms and entranceways.

"We try to get the series of publications into the hands of seniors and occupational therapists who work with a range of people including older adults who need their homes modified either because they have a chronic condition or because they are just out of the hospital," says Zamprelli.

Says Ruptash, "Different people have different needs at different stages of life. Some of our ideas will help all people, not just the elderly, such as levered handles versus doorknobs, which can help children with a broken arm or younger seniors with arthritis.

Today's home renovations should incorporate features to enable tomorrow's adaptations to accommodate seniors needs

"Boomers should be thinking about and planning these changes now, when they are completely able, in control and financially stable," she adds. "Too many leave it until it is too late so their children have to make the decisions. By doing it now, they can be responsible for their own path."

Ruptash advises boomers and seniors to incorporate the potential for future design modifications while they are building, or renovating, to save later. By waiting until after a home is built or a renovation is complete, you'll pay more than three times the cost.

It costs virtually nothing to widen doorways and reinforce bathroom walls where grab bars will later be installed, says Ruptash.

Financial aid is available, says Zamprelli but only for Canadians of modest or lower income or people with disabilities. For starters, the federal government recently introduced its Home Renovation Tax Credit, designed to help kick-start the economy over the next year. And here are three CMHC programs that provide assistance:

- Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program-Homeowners (RRAP): offers financial assistance to low-income households and landlords that own and occupy substandard housing to enable them to repair their dwellings to a minimum level of health and safety in areas of structural, electrical, plumbing, heating and fire safety. Forgivable loans are available up to \$19,000, depending on where people live.

- Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program for Persons with Disabilities (RRAP — Disabilities): offers households that include a low-income person with a disability and landlords forgivable loans of up to \$24,000 for adaptations and renovations designed specifically for the disabled.

- Home Adaptations for Seniors Independence (HASI): forgivable loans of up to \$3,500 for low-income homeowners 65 years of age or over and having difficulty with daily living activities due to loss of ability brought on by aging, and for landlords to help cover the cost of smaller projects such as installation of handrails, easy-to-reach work and storage areas, lever handles on doors, walk-in showers with grab bars and bathtub grab bars and seats.



(Above) Front porch at a home at Woodside Mews in Oakville features level entranceway for easier access.

(Quadrangle Architects photo)

(Right) low window sills and ample lighting are other considerations when planning adaptations to homes for seniors.



Following the announcement of the new federal Home Renovation Tax Credit in January, federal minister Diane Finley (left) posed for a photo with homeowner Cathie Mulroy in Halifax to promote the program. Effective from January through Jan. 31, 2010, homeowners can claim a tax credit for 15 per cent of renovation expenses between \$1,000 and \$10,000. The maximum tax credit (on \$9,000 in renovations) is worth \$1,350. (CNW Group/Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation)

