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Here's a radical idea: Accessible housing that doesn't look institutional

By DENNIS RODKIN |



A handicapped-accessible house on Hermitage

Photo by Dennis Rodkin

The front of a contemporary-style house under construction on Hermitage Avenue in Ravenswood gives only one hint that there's something unusual about it: The front door opens flush with the sidewalk, a rarity in Chicago.

When the house is completed in January, it will be just as hard to spot the differences inside, but they'll be there: toilet paper holders and towel racks built to support an adult's weight, cabinets mostly installed lower than the norm and no bump-up threshold doorways.

The home is the work of Frances Kao, a developer whose focus is making homes that suit disabled people without looking institutional. To be priced at \$1.7 million, it's the first of four developments—including two condo projects with a combined 11 units and a building with two rental apartments—that she expects to complete in 2017.

"Grab bars around a toilet are ugly and confront you with your disability," said Kao, a retired attorney who's the principal in the neophyte Chicago development firm PH2 Square. "So the question I want to answer is: How do we make these things beautiful?"



Frances Kao

Photo by Dennis Rodkin

Her solution is to build bathrooms where the toilet paper holder and towel racks are rated by their manufacturers to hold a person's weight, installed on walls that are double-braced behind. Instead of grabbing hospital-style bars to lift and lower oneself to use the toilet, a resident can rely on the toilet paper holder and the towel racks for leverage. In the shower, soap dishes and other fixtures get the same treatment.

Elsewhere in the house will be features like countertops at multiple heights to accommodate a family where some people might need to do kitchen work while sitting in a wheelchair, an elevator and access from the

outdoors at ground level to eliminate the need for a ramp or other adaptation for a disabled resident. Kao says these features will also appear in the other three projects she has at various stages of development.

Marca Bristo, president and CEO of Access Living, a Chicago-based advocacy group for people with disabilities, said the time is right for Kao's projects, which she hasn't seen. "We've got to get over looking at things that are functionally helping us as if it's OK for them to be aesthetically problematic," Bristo said. "These things shouldn't have to jump out at you."

It also means that older buyers who may not need a disabled-access home now won't shy away from it because of its adapted looks.

Designed by Searl, Lamaster Howe Architects in Chicago, the house has a stucco and brick exterior punctuated by oversized single-pane windows. Hallways, bathrooms and showers are extra wide to accommodate a wheelchair, "but that width is something everyone likes to see in a modern home anyway," Kao said.

"It's beautifully designed is what you'll notice, not the adaptations," said Anne Laughlin, the @properties broker representing the house. "That's pioneering."

Bristo said she does not know of another homebuilder in Chicago with a similar program. Legislation and ordinances that dictate construction of accessible housing do not cover single-family homes, she said.

Putting exterior doors level with the sidewalk is a key part of making the home inviting, both Bristo and Kao said. Wheelchair ramps often look awkward and eat up space, Kao said. "You should be able to enter your house the way anyone else does," she said, "through the front door."

The 4,400-square-foot structure combines a 3,700-foot main house with an attached 700-square-foot studio apartment at the back, at ground level. The two are connected at the mudroom.

Kao envisions the pair being occupied by a family in the main house and an elderly relative in the back. The senior, she said, "can have a private space, but the family is close by." It can also flex to suit another family's arrangement, such as using the apartment as an office or guest house. It has its own entrance, kitchen and full bath.

Building from the ground up instead of retrofitting an existing home gives Kao leeway to do things like double-brace the insides of bathroom walls, said Mark Nobriga, a program director in the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. His program, Home Mod, helps residents modify their space to accommodate a disability.

"When we do a bathroom, we have to gut-rehab it to make sure it can be braced properly, and to verify there are studs where there are supposed to be studs," Nobriga said. "It's always going to be easier if you build it right the first time."

Kao estimated that her cost to build using the principles of **universal design** are roughly comparable to the cost to build conventionally, except for about \$20,000 for the elevator in the main house and another \$20,000 for an optional wheelchair lift in the apartment.

In the spring, Kao expects to start construction on a two-flat in Lincoln Square, with different-sized units priced at about \$600,000 and about \$900,000. In Edgewater, a mixed-use building will have nine condos priced between \$400,000 and \$600,000, she said, and the project at 51st and Lawndale in West Elsdon will contain two rental apartments.

The projects all will have the same sign that hangs outside the Hermitage home. It reads "Housing for all people. Regardless."