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Avoiding the Peter Pan Mindset

by James R. Ziglinski, C.R.



I recently attended the 51st annual National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) national convention. One of the many seminars I attended addressed some of the issues facing the nation now that the ADA has gone into effect. One speaker's statement particularly struck a nerve with me.

A friend of hers, she said, stated that the majority of people today design, build, and live in "Peter Pan" houses; homes constructed under the theory that the homeowners won't ever grow old or become handicapped. It is this frame of mind which brought us such designs as the bi-level home, the tri-level home, the sunken living room, the sunken bathtub, ad infinitum.

This really set me to thinking. I soon came to the realization that the remodeling industry in general may very well be just as guilty as the new housing industry when it comes to this "Peter Pan" mindset.

When interviewing a client, it rarely occurs to me to address any future needs which may be brought about with the current project, such as the effects of aging or the possibility of handicap, unless such possibilities are blatantly obvious or the client happens to mention it.

I discussed this with other remodeling firms and found that I was not alone. Out of the twenty-odd contractors that I spoke to, not one normally makes an effort to address future needs such as those listed above with their clients, simply because it has never occurred to them to do so.

Planning Ahead

What makes this so surprising - especially in my firm's case - is that we have been strong ADA legislation advocates for years. We've been assisting the elderly and disabled ever since we've been in business.

I came back from the NARI convention with a whole new outlook. I examined our projects, from kitchens and baths to porches and decks, and discovered that many items needed to adapt for a disability would be a convenience rather than a hindrance for a person who isn't physically challenged.

For example, my wife is rather short. When I remodeled our kitchen, she was happy to have clear shelves in her upper kitchen cabinets. She was able to see what was hidden at the back end of the shelves.

The same effect can be created with roll out shelves in the base cabinets, although I must admit that

these were for my convenience. (I'm over forty now, and can't exactly bend as easily as I used to.) And since my wife is also a baker, she likes the wing handles on the faucet fixtures. She's able to turn them on with her forearm when her hands are full with flour and what have you.

The placement of our microwave was a help to our son when he was younger. Being a latch-key child, I always had a fear of him reaching over the stove to get at the microwave when we weren't home. I had it built into a lower cabinet at the end of the counter, which proved helpful for him at the time. My wife still likes it that way, though now my son has to bend down to use it.

Expect The Unexpected

This summer, I intend to build a deck off the rear of my home. None of us are in wheelchairs at this point, but I know that it only takes a blink of an eye to happen; that's exactly how it went for my brother.

Since he is a frequent visitor to our home, my design will include a ramp. The deck will also be level with the interior floor's height. Even without my brother being in a chair, the ramp would still be an excellent idea.

For young kids' bikes, tricycles, and skateboards, it is also much safer to have a ramp as opposed to steps. Not to mention, moving large appliances and furniture is much easier with this type of construction, as opposed to manually lifting it up steps.

And if the deck is being built, the addition of a ramp is a minimal monetary investment if done at the same time. It would be somewhat more costly to do so later on.

I also looked at other things I have planned for my home, as well as how I would approach clients with this new insight. I know that installing safety grab bars into an existing bath can be difficult at times, due to wall thickness and finish. It is often hard to locate wall studs, even with electronic devices.

However, if a bath is already being remodeled, it would be no great feat to prepare the wall cavities with mounting blocks, placed in the appropriate locations for future installation of grab bars.

Think Of Others

With today's grab bar designs and finishes, one can install them without fear of detracting from the attractiveness of your bath. You may not need them today, but maybe your visiting mother or perhaps another relative would be thankful for your foresight in having these devices installed now.

In remodel projects or additions, wider doors can be designed at a lower cost than adapting an opening at a later date. Plus, I've always found offset hinges make more sense - why design an opening when you know that two inches or more will be lost to the open door? With the offset hinge, one is allowed to take full advantage of the open space right away.

The same can be said for push bars or lever style door handles, as opposed to the standard knob. When your hands are full of groceries, clothes baskets, or even if they're just plain wet, it's much easier to push the lever down with your arm than to reach for a knob, grab it, and twist it. Again, if this is installed as original equipment, it is much less expensive than retrofitting the door at a later date.

Windows are a big factor to the remodeling industry today. Why install double hung windows? Are

they right just because the rest of the house has them, or because you have always had them? With today's casement window designs, you can get a casement that simulates the double hung's appearance with the advantages of a better window with higher efficiency.

That aside, if someone uses a wheelchair or has arthritis, crank handles are much easier to operate than trying to raise the double hung type with brute force. Casement designs are easier to exit from in the event of a fire than trying to bend down and crawl through the miniature space offered by a double hung window.

Listening Skills Are Important

I've always prided myself on the fact that I listen to my clients when discussing remodeling and improvement projects. I can see now that I must have listened very closely to know what their future plans are - if they intend to stay in this home or move on. Are they employed in high-risk jobs, and do they have plans for their parents to visit or move in?

The old saying "live for today" should no longer apply to the home. As with all things in live, remodeling and improvement projects must be done with an eye toward the future.

As an influence in clients' decision making process, I would be doing them a great disservice by not helping them look to the future. After all, none of us are Peter Pan, and even he got old after a while.

We hope this information has been helpful to you! If you have any further questions, please visit our website at www.aroundyourhouse.net, or contact Jim at Around Your House.

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