

In many residential neighbourhoods, homes are designed primarily for a particular phase of life and type of resident – those who are mobile, have no significant physical challenges and are not in their elderly years when their use of special equipment may increase.

Unfortunately, this means people may face painful choices when their circumstances change, through age or injury. Homeowners are often forced to leave their neighbourhood and social networks because the cost of special renovations is too high.

A growing awareness of such needs has led to the rise of Universal Design – the idea that products and environments can be designed to meet a broad spectrum of needs, rather than designing specialty products for each niche need.

“It’s really incredibly simple, as long as you start at the beginning of a project,” says Roger Bayley, Design Manager for Millennium Water. “Everyone involved needs to realize they have some slightly increased space allocations to make, but as long as you’re aware of those in the planning process, most are really fairly simple to execute.”

Suites in Millennium Water include a variety of features that improve their accessibility and their support for aging in place. Power plugs in every unit are slightly higher than is customary, while light switches are lower. To improve access for those in a wheelchair or with mobility issues, corridors, doorways and spaces between countertops are a little wider. “There are fewer pinch points in terms of how you move through a unit,” says Bayley.

Bedrooms have a double set of duplex plugs, says Bayley, “because older people typically use more power around their bed.” In washrooms, the taps for showers and bathtubs are offset rather than centred, so that people don’t have to lean in so far and don’t risk getting sprayed with hot water.

Other features are impossible to see but could prove extremely helpful should a resident’s circumstances change. Behind every shower enclosure, an additional plywood backing is already installed, allowing future installation of handrails without rebuilding the wall. Kitchen installers were all instructed to install the sink unit last, so that it can be easily replaced with a low-level unit. “It’s future-proofing,” says Bayley. “These features mean you can come in later and modify the unit in a way that’s reasonably easy to do, and will

accommodate the kinds of dimensional criteria that handicapped access dictates.”

Bayley says a challenging aspect of accessibility was providing level entries to showers and from suites onto balconies, because of issues relating to controlling water.

“Building developers are nervous about developing showers without thresholds because of the possibility of leaking into the units below,” he says. “You have a plumbing code, then you have people striving to deal with assisted access issues, and their views can be somewhat at odds with each other.”

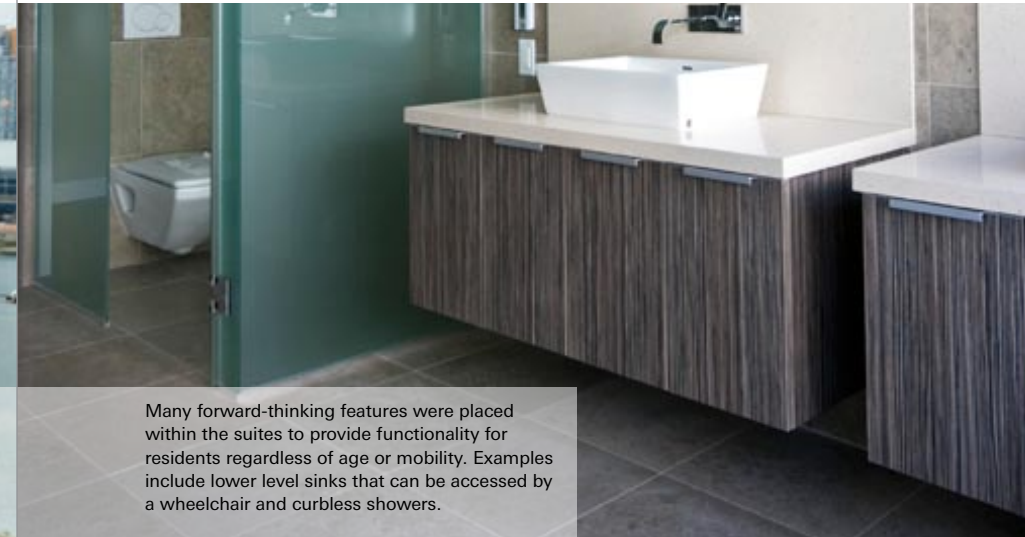
Parcels 9 and 10 will be used to house competitors in the 2010 Paralympics. Robin Petri, Manager of Development at the SEFC Project Office, says an indication of their universal design is that the suites will be used with almost no changes. “There were minor changes needed, mostly around putting in

benches so people could slide into tubs and showers, and installing hand-held showerheads, but there wasn’t a lot needed to make the suites ready for the Paralympics,” she says.

Beyond the suites, the design of the community overall helps support aging in place. “The goal was to create beautiful spaces that encourage people to get out and use those spaces and engage with the street,” says Petri. “The streets are designed to cause cars to slow down. There are many benches so that anyone who needs to stop and rest can do so. You have many services that you need all around you – grocery store, drug store, restaurants, community centre, day care, coffee shops – so you get in your car less often, and you’re engaging with the people in your neighbourhood. If you’re raising your kids there, or you’re an older person, you’ll feel more secure because you’ll feel more connected to the people around you.”



Accessibility for all within the homes and to the amenities of the community was a part of the Millennium Water design process from the beginning.



Many forward-thinking features were placed within the suites to provide functionality for residents regardless of age or mobility. Examples include lower level sinks that can be accessed by a wheelchair and curbless showers.

