

BY SHARON BROWN

Universal Design and me

At first glance my apartment looks much like any other, but take a closer look and you'll see subtle differences that define Universal Design.

"Universal Design attempts to design tools and environments for everyone regardless of ability," explains John Hambene, senior vice president of McCormack Baron Salazar, the company that owns 6 North Apartments in St. Louis, Missouri. It represents the first example of Universal Design in a multi-family building in the United States, and Hambene is quite proud of it.

The purpose of Universal Design, or UD, is to accommodate the broadest range of abilities through the design of tools and environments and to do so in an unobtrusive way.

While there are thousands of building code rules under the Americans with Disabilities Act, UD is more of a design philosophy. All UD apartments are accessible—but not all accessible apartments are built within the design ideals of UD.



"We were thinking about it holistically," Hambene said, "It's just easier for all people."

For example, the floors in 6 North are made from hard wood and there is a distinct contrast between the counter top color and the floor color so that those with visual disabilities can easily see where the edges of counters stop and the floors begin. Some other obvious UD design

features include levers instead of round door knobs and light switches that can be activated easily and are low enough for children to reach.

Take a step into the kitchen and efficient design continues. From a stool in front of my sink I easily reach the stove top, sink and dishwasher. Doesn't everyone want that? The dishwasher and oven are both installed higher than convention decrees, eliminating the need to bend when cooking food or cleaning dishes.

Another cleverly disguised accommodation is a removable baseboard under the kitchen sink, allowing unimpeded wheelchair access if it's needed. The height of the dishwasher is repeated in the bathroom, with a washer and dryer up on pedestals.

The most obvious concession to the needs of people with mobility issues is in the bathroom. It is extra large and equipped with a roll-in shower. The key to fitting the bathroom into UD principles as opposed to ADA regulations meant that the walls were reinforced during construction, but grab bars weren't installed until I decided just the right spots for me.

The building is popular with everyone, Hambene said, not just residents. Architects and developers from around the country visit 6 North for ideas and information for future projects.

"While 6 North was a demonstration project, we now incorporate Universal Design in everything we do. Hopefully, other developers will do so as well," he said. Hambene hopes that **all** apartments will be built for everyone, regardless of ability, and so do I.

To learn more

Universal Design is indeed universal. Many now common innovations for people with disabilities are just as helpful for others. Consider curb cuts—and what they do for people with rolling luggage racing through a parking lot to catch that plane.

For information on the history, development, definition, and implementation of Universal Design check out the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University at www.ncsu.edu/www/ncsu/design/sod5/cud or by calling their toll-free number: 800-647-6777.

For help when home hunting try the local center for independent living or ILC. Check the database at CIL Management Center (716-836-0822) or go to www.wnyilp.org/database/directory.php. ILCs are often familiar with accessible dwellings. They may also have information on apartment complexes that are built using Universal Design principles.

The National Accessible Apartment Clearinghouse is another helpful resource for home hunters. While by no means exhaustive, this site indexes accessible housing units throughout the country: www.accessibleapartments.org or call 800-421-1221. Another useful site, www.makoa.org/accessible-design.htm, offers a large number of links having to do with accessibility and housing. ■

Sharon Brown is the author of "So You Have Progressive MS?"—a booklet published by the National MS Society sharing experiences from her first 11 years with MS. Call your chapter for a copy or go to www.nationalmssociety.org/SoYouHaveProgressive.