

Ten ways to design a forever house

Bob Thacker had a crazy idea for a house. He just wasn't sure his fiancée would go along.

Like most couples who marry or remarry later in life, Thacker and Karen Chere-watuk, who today are 72 and 62, respectively, had pasts and opinions.

The year was 2014. Thacker, a lifelong marketing executive, and Chere-watuk, a college English professor, were living in Minnesota, engaged and facing the question: Whose house will we live in? Yours, mine or ours?

Chere-watuk had lost her first husband to cancer and downsized from her former family home to a townhome. After his divorce, Bob also moved from a larger house to a smaller one.

"Neither of us really liked each other's homes," said Thacker, who also had a Chicago apartment and a North-shore lake house getaway at the time, but none was "what we needed for our life together."

During this mulling period, Thacker attended a tribute for Princeton architect and designer Michael Graves. Thacker and Graves met 20 years ago, when Thacker headed marketing for Target and spearheaded the debut of Graves' housewares products in Target stores nationwide. They remained friends.

At the tribute, which featured a retrospective of the esteemed architect's work, Thacker noted the Wounded Warrior project, homes in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, which Graves designed in 2011 using universal design so injured soldiers could live as independently as possible.

Graves could relate. In 2003, a spinal infection left him paralyzed from the chest down and in a wheelchair.

"When are you going to build homes like this for the rest of us?" asked Thacker, who, like most aging Boomers, could see a need down the road.

"I don't have a client," Graves answered.

"You do now."

There was just one catch ... "Karen and I had been looking at houses to buy, but we'd never talked about building one. I wasn't sure she'd sign up for that."

When Thacker called his fi-



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ancée, she was in India traveling with students and standing in a cow field.

"Don't tell me no until you've heard the whole story," Thacker started as he wound up for his pitch. But before he'd gotten 10 words out, she was saying, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

So Graves set to work. Plans for the couple's Forever House were in place in 2014. After Graves died in 2015, at age 80, his firm's Senior Partner Tom Rowe saw the project through its completion in late 2016.

And that is how Thacker and Chere-watuk, who married in July of 2015, became the first residents of a Michael Graves Forever House, a home for people to live in as they age that doesn't look like a house for the handicapped. "Nowhere does it have that 'eeyew' feel," Thacker said. "It's a vibrant, open, healthy, accessible home."

According to AARP, 87% of adults over 65 want to stay in their homes as they age. Designing and building a home with ageless spaces is a lot easier and cheaper than retrofitting later.

"It makes so much sense we call it 'design-duh,'" Thacker said. "Accessible homes are good for everyone. What if you need to accommodate a stroller or a visitor with a walker?"

Or, heck, I just enrolled in a high-intensity interval workout program at my gym; after three sessions, I'm pretty well paralyzed and could use a few grab bars. I don't mention this.

"The moves that make the biggest difference are so obvious, like, why wouldn't you make a doorway 36 inches wide instead of the standard



Bob Thacker and Karen Chere-watuk outside their Forever House in Northfield, Minnesota. Courtesy photo

32 inches?" he adds.

Good point. Today's homes are built for able-bodied, right-handed young men of average height. That's not most of us.

"Ours is not a high-end house," Thacker said. "It's a middle-class home in a modest neighborhood in the heart of Northfield, Minnesota. We're more Better Homes & Gardens than Architectural Digest."

But it's perfect for them now — and 20 years from now.

"We both came from loss, but today we have a great life, and many blessings," he said; a blended family of four adult children and seven grandchildren are among them.

For Thacker's part, however, the biggest blessing is that she said yes — twice.

Here are 10 Forever-House inspired ways to design an ageless space:

1. Remove entry hurdles. Make transitions from house to outside or garage smooth and at grade level.

2. Widen doors. Make

doorways wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair. The front door should be at least 42 inches wide, and interior doors 36 inches. Use sliding or pocket doors instead of swinging ones, or consider no doors where practical.

3. Consider an open floor plan. It's easier to move furniture than walls.

4. Add lever handles. On doors and faucets, use levers instead of knobs. Grabbing a doorknob can be difficult for arthritic hands.

5. Eliminate steps. For anyone on wheels, steps block access. Choose smooth, hard flooring. Avoid carpet.

6. Fortify the bathroom. Besides making sure the walk-in shower is curbless and wide enough for someone to roll into, the couple installed ¾-inch-thick plywood behind the sheetrock-and-tile walls, so grab bars could be installed anywhere, not just where there happens to be a stud. Lower sink counters so someone seated can access them.

7. Raise plugs. Standard height for outlets is 12 inches from the floor. Raise them to

18 inches so someone in a wheelchair or who has difficulty bending can reach them.

8. Choose drawers over cabinets. Just as swinging doors are challenging to get around in a wheelchair, so are cabinets. Opt for pull-out, undercounter kitchen drawers instead of cupboards.

9. Make it moveable. Rather than a permanent kitchen island, consider one that moves like a piece of furniture, and that raises and lowers.

10. Drop windowsills. In living areas, the Forever House places windows 12 inches off the floor, instead of at waist level, so those sitting get a better view of nature.

Syndicated columnist Marni Jameson is the author of five home and lifestyle books, including "Downsizing the Family Home — What to Save, What to Let Go" and "Downsizing the Blended Home — When Two Households Become One" (Sterling Publishing, Dec. 2019). Reach her at www.marnijameson.com.