

## Health Section

### **An Age-Appropriate Update Can Add to Independence**

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Tuesday, August 12, 2008; HE01



It's a common refrain: Most people don't want to leave their houses as they get older; they'd like to stay put. Two weeks ago, a retirement community in McLean unveiled a suite that has been adapted and equipped to make that goal more possible.

Some elements in Vinson Hall's Suite 238 could be transferred more easily than others to an ordinary home. But the renovation project offers reminders of where potential problems lie as well as examples of simple innovations that could inspire anyone hoping to redo their own living space.

Previously a 520-square-foot, 1960s efficiency with boring beige walls, thresholds that could cause nasty falls and a narrow bathroom entryway that couldn't accommodate walkers or wheelchairs, the apartment was under reconstruction for a year. It now features many of the usual adaptations for the elderly and handicapped, such as grab bars and shower seating, as well as such less common ones as remote-control window shades and countertops with easily visible edges. Among the additions are recliners that angle forward to help someone move independently from a sitting to standing position.

The staff wanted to create a space that would allow residents to "age in place . . . [and] preserve their dignity," Vinson Hall administrator Judy Bowes said at the press preview.

The new design focuses heavily on preventing falls, which are the "leading cause of death from injury," according to AARP's senior vice president for livable communities, Elinor Ginzler. The apartment was reconfigured by Moira Leite of M. Quinn Designs in Annandale to remove

features that can cause falls, such as lamps with cords, and replace them with recessed lighting; she also avoided floor coverings, such as rugs, that could cause someone to trip.

Leite also added elements to prevent problems that might lead to falls. The kitchen's continuous Corian countertops, for example, have beveled edges in a contrasting color, which clearly denotes the end of the counter for anyone whose eyesight is impaired. Corian is heat-resistant, so some dishes can be slid from stovetop to dining counter rather than being picked up and carried. That can reduce the chances of spilling the contents on the floor, which could lead a person to slip and fall.

Some elements of the renovation are appealing regardless of one's physical ability or age. The suite aims to showcase universal design and possibilities for equipping your home so it ages with you, said Vinson Hall's director of development, Marcia Twomey.



Good lighting, for example, is crucial for safety, but it can also make tasks easier to perform.

"Shadows can be deathtraps" on stairwells and in bathrooms, Ginzler said. Well-lit spaces, on the other hand, can improve the quality of life, Leite said.

The new suite's bathroom includes incandescent and fluorescent lighting. A combination of both can help improve visibility for those with cataracts and macular degeneration, Leite said. Incandescent light mimics sunlight and produces less task-lighting glare. And fluorescent bulbs produce a broader spectrum of ambient light.

Erasing or easing the obstacles that sometimes send people to a hospital, assisted living facility or nursing home may prove popular. A 2006 AARP poll of people age 50 and older found "89 percent like where they're living and want to stay there as long as possible," Ginzler said.

Just as with baby-proofing a house for an infant, it's better not to wait for things to go wrong. Incorporating smart design elements can make life easier, not only for the elderly but also for other members of the family. Just as people with walkers will find a pedestal sink more accessible, children who have trouble turning small knobs will have an easier time with lever or D-shaped handles.

Ultimately, it is a good idea to consider redesigning earlier rather than later. "Far too often it is not planned ahead of time," Ginzler said, "but thought of after a crisis."