



## 'It's Not You, It's the House'

Leon Harper, Relentless in His Pursuit of Universal Design

By Denise Hofstedt

When he started his career as a public servant in California in the 1970s, Leon Harper never envisioned himself as one of the country's leading experts on universally designed housing.

Yet today, the one time parole officer is the "go to" guy for bringing universal design housing into communities, states and beyond. His relentless activism over the years has given him an opportunity to see the positive impact that universal design has on peoples' lives and allowed him to build a vast network of colleagues interested in bringing universal design to residential settings.

### **His Start**

After a brief stint as a parole officer in the early 1970s, Harper jumped at the chance to work in the newly created Los Angeles County branch of the state Office on Aging. He loved it and was good at it. He went on to become the President of the California Association of Area Agencies on Aging and eventually President of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Because of his knowledge and network, Harper was hired to work as a Deputy Director for the 1981 White House Conference on Aging. In 1985, he went to work with AARP as a senior housing specialist. Despite many years of progress in promoting universal design, including the award winning model universal design houses in Atlantic City, NJ and Richmond, VA, in 2002 AARP changed direction and reduced its efforts in the area of universal design in housing. Harper didn't miss a beat and launched his own consulting business helping consumers, local governments, builders and companies understand and embrace livable communities, aging in place, universal design, home modification and visitability.

According to Paula Terry, Director of the Office for AccessAbility at the National Endowment for the Arts, Harper is "a most remarkable man, who, through his passion and work for universal design, has raised the awareness of designers and builders across the country concerning what UD encompasses, and its importance to the quality of everyday life."

She notes that he has the ability to get people to work together. In 1995 Harper organized an UD committee at AARP. It was composed of 12 key public and private groups, as well as staff within AARP, that met on a monthly basis to share information and plan coordinated events.

"This resulted in many wonderful efforts," says Terry. "Including work with [National Association of Home Builders] to develop UD criteria for remodelers, and award winning, model UD homes in Atlantic City and Richmond."

### **Adaptation**

Over the years, Harper has seen it all. He's experienced housing booms and busts and watched a blur of housing trends come and go. Through out it all, his message has been the same: "It's not you, it's the house."

"We have built houses in this country for so long that are defective," says Harper, referring to "Peter Pan" housing, built as if people never grow old and their needs never change. "People start to think they are getting shuttled off because of their personal and physical deficiencies, when actually it's the design of the house that's the problem.... It can be a disabling environment."

"We are fighting a system where people are marketing for profit," says Harper. Homebuilders want consumers to buy what they are selling, not necessarily what consumers need. He insists a fundamental shift is needed. "We have to change the way we build houses," says Harper, who founded the National Home Modification Action Coalition 10 years ago. Among the goals of the coalition is to encourage consumers to demand universal design features from builders.

According to Dick Duncan of the Housing Works/Universal Design Institute, who has worked with Harper through the Coalition, Harper is a force to be reckoned with in the field. "He has passion, dedication, and relentlessness. He has worked in the field for a long time and knows the issues and the life impact that living in inappropriate home environments has," says Duncan.

In one of his latest projects, Harper was able to gather a local coalition of government agencies, advocacy groups, an architect and representatives from a national homebuilder to build a universal design demonstration house. The house, located in Prince William County, VA, opened for visitors in December 2006 (see sidebar on page 4 and Universal Design Newsletter, January 2007). More than 3,000 people visited the house and saw its seamless universal features. One of the motivations behind the house was to educate consumers so that they start demanding universal design features from homebuilders. "Builders are not ignorant, they are business people... they will respond to the market demand," says Harper.

The coalition purposely sought the participation of a national homebuilder on the project and was successful in securing Centex. "Our hope was that [Centex] would learn locally and then take that information and use it on a national level... then the housing market crashed," says Harper.

He is confident Centex will weather the storm and come back strong with its demonstration house-inspired "Boomer Design" ready to go into production. In the meantime, he has already adopted another approach. "Now we are back to going state by state, county by county."

He is currently working with a group in Fairfax County, VA on including universal design features in new condominiums, apartments and affordable housing. The group then hopes to spur universal design in remodeling and home modification of the county's existing housing stock.

Learning from past victories and mistakes, Harper continues to refine his methods. He has found that it is more effective to bring disability and aging groups together and talk to them about the needs they have in common, i.e., comfort, safety, convenience, independence, than to speak to them separately about each group's specific concerns.

### **Vision**

Harper laments that universal design hasn't really caught on and that some of the housing trends have been misguided. "Change has been too slow. We haven't been able to make a major break through in the way people build housing. We have moved in the direction of separate and segregated... like the 55+ housing, assisted living, housing for the elderly." He notes that AARP studies have shown that people don't want to be separate from their communities; that they want to stay in their own homes.

To make the nation's housing stock accessible, it's going to take a group with national presence and credibility. The National Home Modification Action Coalition has had success locally, but needs funding. "Everywhere we've been able to plant this thing it grows," says Harper. "It takes hold because it makes sense. County planning groups involved in it like it. We need to figure out how to get the word out to the mainstream media. We need somebody -- who is unbiased and has national credibility -- out there pushing for consumers..."

"To make it happen we need to get out of the housing slump and we need some resources... There are pieces all over the place... pieces at the local level, pieces at the state level... they are just not currently working together. We need to cast a net that's large enough to enable everyone to realize how they each benefit when they work together. Universal design has the potential to do that," he says.

### **Proudest Accomplishment**

When pushed, Harper, who is more comfortable giving credit and accolades to others, will admit to being proud of some of the things he's been able to accomplish, such as realizing the importance and impact an informed consumer can have on the building industry. "We are able to see it locally and now we have to make it happen on a bigger/faster scale," he says.

## **Universal Design House Wins Two Awards**

An effort in Prince William County, VA to educate residents about the benefits of universal design has received two awards.

Centex Homes' universal design demonstration house in Bristow was awarded the 2007 Coalition for Housing Opportunities in the Community for Everyone (CHOICE) Accessible Design Award. It was recognized for its "integration of accessible features into the overall design of the house," as well as its no step entrance, wide doorways, fully accessible first floor bathroom with its grab bar-ready blocked walls, clear floor space and roll under sink. The award recipients were applauded for education of the community about the value and importance of universal design in residential construction and their success in making "influential builders, developers and architects aware of a market for universal design which may lead to the development and construction of more accessible single family homes."

In addition, the comprehensive Universal Design Education Program, which included the demonstration house and the public outreach effort, was honored with a 2007 Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award. The program, designed by the Prince William Area Agency on Aging and championed by Toni Clemons-Porter, included strategies to educate both consumers and design/construction professionals on the benefits of incorporating features into homes to increase usability by people of all ages, sizes and abilities. The agency is credited with helping form the public/private partnership, called the Greater Prince William Coalition on Housing and Universal Design, to coordinate the efforts of the program. Coalition volunteers led tours of the house for an estimated 3,000 people, and the project attracted much media attention.