

Living Universal: A Brief Tour

by Andrea Gabriel

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“My favorite part of the house is the archway. It separates, yet connects the rooms.” Mary Ann Baldwin comments on the open floor plan of her home designed and built five years ago in Raleigh’s historic Oakwood District. The house was the first she and husband Jim Baldwin looked at when they began house hunting; she describes entering the house and feeling like it was “home.” They bought it straight away.

I took a drive down to Oakwood on a sultry spring afternoon to interview Mary Ann about her house. The Center had some design input with builder Jay Beaman of Beaman Building, and we referred to it here as the “Beaman House.” Though it has universal elements, they are subtly integrated within the house structure and facilitate ease of use rather than denoting “accessibility.”

Nearly hidden by landscaping, a sloped walk and switchback at the front entrance allows an alternative to the front steps. The wide, wrap-around porch provides areas for sitting and family meals.

A ramp off of the back deck is used for easy transport of bicycles and other recreational equipment. Inside, high ceilings give a feeling of spaciousness to a small living area; leaded and stained-glass windows let in plenty of light. The wide archway leading to the dining area has a nice architectural touch—notched “windows” which double as shelves. The kitchen has a low counter section—33”—and is comfortable for Mary Ann and daughter Laura to work at; Jim who is taller manages at an adjacent counter of average height. The kitchen cabinets have custom-built doors that recess into “pockets” when kneespace is needed.

Both bathrooms are large; the master bath has a tub and a separate, curbless shower large enough to accommodate a wheelchair; the steel grab bars on three sides of the shower are a plus. “They make me feel safe, a little more secure. I see them as a safety feature,” says Mary Ann. Double pedestal sinks and a pocket door allow lots of room to maneuver. The second bath has a removable cabinet face under sink; the cabinet face is held on with magnets. Pipes are hidden by a front which angles back to the wall.

The house is decorated beautifully with bits of pottery, sculpture and “found” art, brightly patterned rugs and furniture with simple lines reinforcing the elegance of the house. No one in the household requires ramps or the roll-in shower or knee room at the kitchen cabinets, but Mary Ann is quick to note that her house is one they can live in for many, many years. “I personally think more houses should be built like this. It increases your options so that you don’t have to move later on. It shows you can have a house built with good features.”

