A Farmhouse in the City

Simple and Accessible

For people who are physically challenged, even the simple act of coming downstairs in the morning or gardening can be an effort. Working with architect Rosemary McMonigal, Hans and Barb designed a remarkably healthy and accessible home where simplicity and long-term accessibility overrule extravagance. Standing tall in a neighborhood of bungalows and postwar capes, this two-story house evokes a farmstead grouping of buildings. Every detail, from the ramped entry to the elevator and the wheelchair-accessible bathroom, is designed to accommodate Barb’s degenerative joint condition. The house is also designed to meet her chemical sensitivities to indoor air pollution from finishes and dyes.

Located in a city neighborhood and inspired by Barb’s small-town Main Street childhood, the house adopts a farmhouse vernacular. The simple gable roof of the main house is connected by a shed roof over the ramp to the gable of the garage.
You would think that someone with physical challenges would want a one-story house. Why not avoid the expense of an elevator altogether? But for Barb, who is a master gardener committed to working outside, a healthy and simple life means having choices: She wanted a house where she could look down from the second story to her gardens and the street. She is challenging herself in a way that could never be possible in a traditional “accessible” apartment. Her house and gardens are not so much “easy” as they are therapeutic, inviting interaction with the outside, with neighbors, and with the seasons.

**Healthy Choices**  A home to simplify your life is not just something that you buy in an architecture store, but the result of the hard work of making the right choices and resolving complex issues. Even in a house designed for someone with special needs, simple can mean spending (and consuming) less, as seen in the uncomplicated flat trim around all windows and doorways, low-maintenance tile and wood floors, handrails of steel water pipe, and off-the-shelf grab bars that double as towel racks.

The tools of accessibility can also be beautiful. Whereas access ramps are often seen as unattractive or as a tacked-on afterthought, this house’s entry ramp and breezeway serve to bind the farmstead together, unifying house, garage, and screened porch. Both attractive and functional, the breezeway and ramp foster protected access to the garage, which is detached to isolate exhaust and oil fumes from the house.

For the interior, Barb spent two years working with her doctor to test products used in the house—from paint and adhesives to wood—with the goal of eliminating products and processes that compromise indoor air quality. The mechanical subcontractor even took all of the house’s ductwork to a car wash to clean off the protective oils. They then had a final rinse with vinegar. Such tactics have vastly improved Barb’s daily comfort and the energy that she can devote to her ongoing garden projects.
The dining area in the one-room living area connects to the terrace with an accessible door and has windows with low sills for a better view of the garden. Fresh herbs for cooking are a few steps (or a short roll) out the door.

The side of the kitchen peninsula facing the dining area has a deep knee space for pulling up a chair and resting your feet on the pipe rail. The corrugated galvanized metal at the back of the knee space picks up the rural farm aesthetic repeated throughout the house.
Simple Joys of Small-Town City Life  Hans and Barb find simplicity through the old-fashioned idea of being part of a neighborhood where people don’t hide behind walls and security systems. Directly above the living room, the master bedroom is filled with light on three sides and the garden views that greet the couple every morning. Indeed, every room in the house has windows on two or three sides for cross-ventilation as a simple response to Barb’s chemical sensitivities. The rear-facing windows of their master bedroom and the living room don’t have curtains. By good design and siting, Barb and Hans “own their views.”

The master bathroom can also do without curtains because it is carefully screened by the garage roof. Besides creating “strategic privacy,” well-placed windows can be a simple alternative to elaborate art and decorating. Years after moving in, Barb and Hans still have a box full of framed art because their home’s abundant windows are landscape paintings in themselves.

This city farmhouse evokes the simple pleasures of Midwestern small-town life. The neighbors next door have three daughters who play in the shared backyard, where four galvanized-steel horse troughs glimmer in the lawn and sprout a rich collection of vegetables and herbs in summer. Beyond them, towering over the woods, soars a tall concrete grain elevator reminiscent of small towns on the plains. There is even an old galvanized-steel barn cupola sitting in the back garden.

Kitchen Solutions for Varying Heights  More than just borrowing the galvanized-metal details of a farmstead, Hans and Barb really are living as urban farmers, growing as much of their food as possible and canning produce and drying herbs for the long Minnesota winters. Not surprisingly, they are active

→ A covered walkway leads from the main house to the screened porch, which is attached to the garage and enjoys a clear view of the garden. Behind the garage, galvanized metal watering troughs hold raised vegetable beds, while in the background, a grain elevator, icon of the Midwestern skyline, is a reminder that this urban farm is not far from its roots.
Simply Green Strategies for Indoor Health

For people with compromised immune systems, many of the petroleum-based products used in building materials can cause health problems and vastly complicate life. Most of us live with these effects unaware of them and their potential impact. The following are some key strategies for reducing contaminants, odors, and particles floating in the air:

- Eliminate/encapsulate construction products that off-gas volatile organic compounds (VOCs), such as particleboard and manufactured framing lumber.
- Use paints without preservatives or toxic tints.
- Choose finishes that will not trap dust; for example, use wood or tile instead of carpet.
- Isolate the garage from the house.
- Install an air-to-air heat exchanger with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter that will clean the air and exhaust odors.
cooks, and, as in many simple homes, the kitchen lies at the center of the house, open to the living room and the front hall. One unusual complication is that Hans is 17 in. taller than Barb. To address this difference, McMonigal worked with the couple to design counters at two different heights so that each could work comfortably.

The stove and island are set into the lower counter level at 30 in., while the sink is located looking out the front window in the standard-height 36-in. counter. A cleverly designed pull-out step below the sink lets Barb easily reach the faucets. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen is wheelchair accessible with a 5-ft. turning radius. Light switches and cookbooks are set low at the end of the island, and cabinet sections are removable for future wheelchair access.

**Overcoming Barriers to Life’s Possibilities** Barb looks at her house not as a response to her disabilities but as “a place for life’s possibilities.” She has simplified her life but at the same time kept it challenging. Beyond mere “accessibility,” this richness of experience is the essence of Universal Design, a philosophy of design for public and private settings that stipulates that everyone, regardless of ability, should share experiences and choices of movement, entry, and views.

For this house, such choices mean that Barb can either walk up the stairs or take the elevator, depending on her condition on any given day. One of the experiences she savors is coming down the stairs in the morning to see what new flowers are blooming in the front-yard meadow. She has the choice, and for her, such options that many of us take for granted are the simplest essence of a life well lived.

> → Accommodating different needs is an opportunity for a good designer to turn potentially awkward into intriguing. Here, his-and-her sinks are set at different heights to accommodate individual preferences and wheelchair access.
The counter at the sink is the standard height, but a pull-out step in the toe-kick space means that Barb can use it, too. The grille on the front of the step is the air supply grille for the kitchen.