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## Thinking ergonomically in the home

Incorporating comfort features into a house has benefits for everyone

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Since I turned 50, entire days can be devoted to kvetching about how this aches, that's numb, and the other feels "funny." As much as I could, I designed our new kitchen to accommodate my creaky back, arms with all the strength of cooked spaghetti, and inflexible knees that make crouching down an Olympic event. I was therefore a tad disconcerted when I interviewed designer Garrett Hardy of <http://www.hemelgroup.ca> about a senior-friendly kitchen he'd designed for an elderly Toronto couple.

Mr. Hardy's clients are both in their mid-80s and the husband is a doctor who still works five days a week. That should have been the first clue that I wasn't on a par with these two. They sound like they could run circles around me. As a further boot to my confidence, some of the senior-friendly features in their kitchen are there, it seems to me, just in case they ever need them. I'm guessing they'll be 108 by then. But I digress.

The couple wanted their kitchen to be easy to clean and elegant, so Mr. Hardy installed a cork floor for underfoot comfort in a rich, dark truffle colour. This colour is repeated in the light valance on the underside of the upper cabinets and appears again as a horizontal stripe above the upper cabinets. The truffle colour is a beautiful contrast to the creamy white thermofoil cabinets, and repeating it as an accent creates a cohesive look. But it's the material used both above and underneath the upper cabinets that intrigued me.

Mr. Hardy created the light valance by using a section of laminate countertop in an unconventional way. With its bull-nose edge to the front as an aesthetic detail, he installed it upside down, underneath the upper cabinets, and recessed the task lighting into it. The transformers and wires for the light fixtures are concealed between the countertop material and the base of the upper cabinets.

The horizontal truffle stripe above the upper cabinets was created using the same bull-nosed laminate material. The light-valance material, coupled with a countertop and backsplash in a contrasting quartz, makes cleaning up a snap and looks fabulous. Quartz, by the way, is the most anti-bacterial type finish around.

Mr. Hardy included as many drawers as possible for maximum accessible storage space and to limit the need for crouching down to rummage through the dark recesses of cupboards. The top drawers in all the lower cabinets are, at eight inches, extra deep, and all drawers have full-extension glides and sleek stainless-steel pulls.

Extra shelves were installed in cabinets so that plates don't have to be stacked too high, and plate caddies with handles were included to make moving larger plates easy.

The dishwasher was raised by six inches to make loading and unloading easier. It stands 42 inches high while the rest of the countertop is the standard 36 inches high.

The homeowners' favourite feature is an instant hot-water tap for making tea. Running a close second is a "magic-corner system," a cabinet accessory that makes the most of blind corners by using less space than a lazy Susan. It attaches to a cabinet door that you pull straight out and pivot to the side. (To see what this mechanism looks like, Google "magic corner system.") It freed up enough space for Mr. Hardy to install the reservoir for that much-loved hot water tap and a garburator.

The eating area offers a wall-mounted table in the same quartz as the countertop and backsplash, complete with narrow trough to house condiments. The tabletop extends a few inches into a niche in the wall where a small TV and toaster are nestled, connected to an easily accessible electrical outlet. The table was installed at

counter height (36 inches) in order to accommodate a mobile file cabinet tucked away underneath. As the file cabinet is made from the same truffle-coloured laminate as the light valance, it practically disappears into the like-coloured flooring when rolled under the table.

Okay, I thought. I can see how these features would be great for seniors, but they're equally appealing to people like me, with or without an advanced state of decrepitude. I asked what else had been included to cater to age-related needs of these 85-year-olds. "Were there any vision or hearing problems that had to be addressed?" I asked. "No," said Mr. Hardy. "Their vision and hearing are fine." So, while the kitchen is well lit, standard task and ambient lights fit the bill with nary a need for a wall-mounted flashing light to warn of a ringing phone or doorbell. Fine.

"What about the faucet?" I asked, grasping at straws. "Were there arthritis problems that required a specific kind of faucet handle?" "No, not really," he said. "I gave them a Ladylux faucet by Grohe. It has a large handle so if they ever do have arthritis problems, it would be easy to use." Sigh. Looking around my own newly built kitchen, I did see one advantage I had over this "senior" couple. At least I have space for that iron lung. It should be arriving next week.

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