

SPECIAL INSIDE: SENIOR CLASS SUPPLEMENT

# NORTHSHORE

CHICAGO'S GUIDE TO FINE LIVING

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## SEXY SAM

Opera's local  
heartthrob

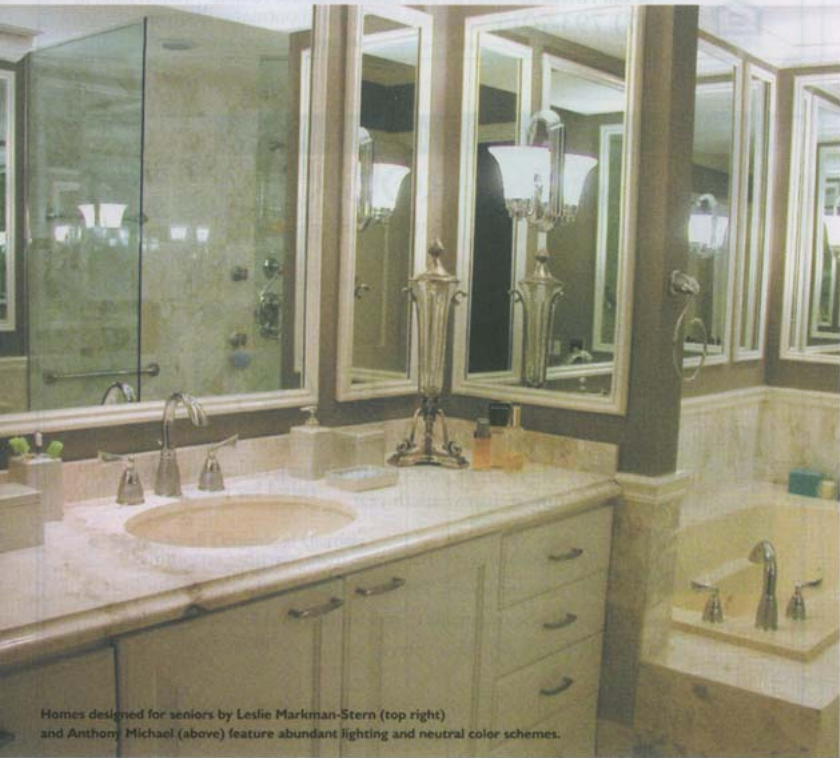
Book excerpt—  
*The Marshall Fields*



# Design for Living

BY CAROLYN BARTH

A few simple changes can make a house safer for homeowners as they age



Homes designed for seniors by Leslie Markman-Stern (top right) and Anthony Michael (above) feature abundant lighting and neutral color schemes.

CHICAGO INTERIOR DESIGNER Anthony Michael is used to working for demanding clients. But one recent project challenged him as no other had. The client was his own mother, who suffered a stroke that transformed her from an active woman to a person suddenly confined to a wheelchair and in need of full-time, in-home care. After the initial shock wore off, Michael put his design sense to work to transform the family house into a place where his mom could still live comfortably despite her new limitations. Little details such as wider hallways, blinds that open with one touch and smart appliances help — including a refrigerator with a sensor that sounds if the door is left ajar, a stove that shuts off if a meal is left in the oven for too long and lights that automatically turn on when someone enters a room. New design options like these permit Michael's mom to stay in her home and to enjoy an independent lifestyle.

"I've put in all the elegant touches, but yet the home is very functional," says the designer. "The neutral palette and sleek design are what catches one's eye when they enter. Yet, the reality is that this home's dishwasher and countertops have been lowered so that they're easy for my mom to reach. The Turkish limestone floors throughout the home provide better traction and are level so that my

mom can easily maneuver around her home. Semi-gloss walls and vinyl wallpapers wipe clean and are easy to maintain. The end result is that her home always looks fresh."

As Baby Boomer homeowners approach their golden years, more and more interior designers will find themselves asked to create functional yet elegant homes for aging Americans. For those who want to remain in their own homes even as their health or mobility declines, making a few small adjustments to a home's design can literally save lives. Chicago-based interior designer Leslie Markman-Stern is emerging as a specialist in this field; many of her commissions come from seniors (including plenty on the North Shore). The good news, she says, is that a house can be senior-friendly without taking on the sterile look of a hospital.

"Safer designs should be both beautiful and functional," she says. "The thing to keep in mind is that every room should still have a focal point. If you've got beautiful bay windows, let's feature them as a focal point."

Markman-Stern says that the key to a safer and more elegant home often begins with great lighting. "Every room should have a general, overhead light as well as plenty of task lighting so that we can see what we're doing," she explains. "Even if you love to cook, it's a task. Take a look around your sink at your existing lighting to make sure that you've got a few under-cabinet lights or counter lights positioned near where you chop vegetables each night. Are your cabinets and closets well lit so that you can see what's inside of them?"

Markman-Stern strongly urges installing an actual light fixture in closets; the dangling bulbs so common in older houses can accidentally touch a cardboard box, stored suitcase or clothes piled in the closet and start a fire. "In your bathroom, do you have an overhead light fixture, two lights on either side of the mirror to help you shave or put on makeup, and are there lights in the shower or over the bathtub?" she asks. "If not, these are easy fixes. From the garage to the walkway, and throughout the inside of one's home,

good lighting creates a cheerful, pleasurable, and safer space...even as one's eyesight fades."

Markman-Stern and Michael both advocate using a light or neutral color palette throughout the home. Whites, off-whites and neutrals help to reflect light in rooms, thus creating a brighter room in general.

Another easy fix is to look at your floors. Are they level throughout the home or are there uneven surfaces that could cause someone to slip and fall? Ideally, one consistent floor surface should be used throughout the house, but make sure that it's not slippery marble or thick, shag carpet that's easy to trip over. Instead, opt for tile with a honed (rough) surface and install wider grout lines in between tiles for the entire home; those wider grout lines increase traction. Next, look at your bathrooms and kitchens, as these floors get wet daily. Is the flooring slick after you get out of the bath or shower and are dripping wet? If so, consider opting for a floor with more traction and wider grout lines. Throughout the house, be sure to level out any spots where one floor surface meets with a different surface to prevent a nasty fall.

Do you have steps to your bathtub? Markman-Stern suggests getting rid of them immediately. "No one wants to trip while entering or exiting a bath," she says. "Steps are quite slippery when we're wet. Also, because many people want the spa functions in their bathrooms today, the heights of the tub ledges are much taller now. In the past, the height of the ledge on a bathtub used to be 14 inches on average. Today, they're often 20 inches tall or higher so that people can soak in a deep tub. Most people can step over 20-inch tub ledges while climbing out of a bath, but I always suggest that people



A Highland Park bathroom designed by Markman-Stern.



The entry to Anthony Michael's mother's home.

try out the bathtub in the store before you buy it. In the showroom, slip off your shoes and climb into the bathtub when you're dry. Then, imagine how tough it will be to step over a tall ledge when you're wet and relaxed after a nice bath. It's a good idea to see if the tub itself is roomy and comfortable enough for taking a long bath, too."

Also in the bathroom, Markman-Stern says grab bars are essential for getting in and out of the tub. "Unfortunately, using towel bars as grab bars won't work when you'll need it most," she warns. "The towel bar will rip off the wall if you try to grab it during a fall. Grab bars support hundreds of pounds, so they're one of the most important features to

make one's bathroom safer and to prevent a broken hip."

Using tempered glass, also known as safety glass, for shower doors is also important. Should an accident occur, the tempered glass would not shatter into a million sharp pieces like regular glass. Michael suggests installing a First Alert security system in every room, including the bathroom, for

the ultimate in safety. Markman-Stern has found that a telephone in every room, including the bathroom, works well for most of her retired clients.

Want to save your back? If so, Markman-Stern recommends measuring your bathroom vanity and kitchen cabinets. Thirty-six inches is the ideal height for most people to avoid back strain; however, many of today's

vanities measure only 30 inches tall. A contractor can easily raise the vanity's height by putting in a little ledge to make it comfortable for everyday use.

Homeowners with arthritis should consider installing levers rather than knobs on drawers and doors, since they are easier to open. "Shower levers are great and help you control the temperature easily," Markman-

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Stern says. "It's also very important to install anti-scald faucets in the shower, bath and sink." She suggests choosing an anti-scald faucet that's also pressure-balanced and thermostatic, which will avoid dramatic temperature swings from hot to cold when someone else in the house uses the sink or flushes the toilet while you're taking a shower.

Another easy tip is to check to see if your

home has GFI outlets (if so, you'll see that the outlet has a reset button on it). GFI outlets guard against accidental electrocution and are particularly important for bathrooms, kitchens, laundry rooms, or any room where water and dampness can be a problem. Markman-Stern also recommends installing an exhaust fan in the bathroom to prevent mildew and mold from building up. "Choose a quiet fan so that

you can still hear the phone should it ring."

Whether it's basic tips that can be quickly implemented at a minimal cost, or remodeling an entire home for a loved one who's recovering from a stroke, interior designers have found many easy and affordable ways to transform one's home into the perfect place to retire. Most importantly, the place will still feel like home for years to come. ■