

# house beautiful

## What's pretty now

*plus*  
French porcelain,  
garden furniture,  
artful tablesettings



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# AT LIBERTY

*Thanks to a masterful renovation, a homeowner in a wheelchair can go indoors and out with ease and has full use of every room in her house*

BY ALEXANDRA P. BURNS



**Barrier free, from top, left to right: Teak ledge allows owner to shift from wheelchair to Kohler whirlpool. Brick walkway is flush with the house and lawn. Island counter and sink are at wheelchair-friendly height. Shower in master bath has built-in bench.**

When my husband and I were looking for a house outside Philadelphia a couple of years ago, we fell in love with several stately stone Colonials built at a time when one could lavish attention on details. Then we came across a nondescript 1950s ranch with a small kitchen, ugly baths, and a narrow, dark corridor leading to the bedrooms. We bought it.

I have used a wheelchair for years, and we knew the house could be made wheelchair-accessible. The main living area and master bedroom were on the first floor, and there was a place in the house where we could put an elevator shaft. We enlisted architect Spence Kass of Kass & Associates in Philadelphia, and developed a remodeling plan, to be implemented in two stages.

In the first phase, the kitchen and back part of the house were gutted to install the elevator and to make the bathrooms and kitchen accessible. In the master bath, our architect designed a wheel-in shower with a built-in bench and specified plastic-coated grab bars that do not get slippery when wet. Shower controls were placed at two locations for the convenience of my able-bodied husband and me. A pair of sinks were set in a granite counter that I can fit my wheelchair underneath. (Built-in

cabinet and towel cubby compensate for the lack of storage space under the counter.) The second bath contains a whirlpool with a ledge on which I can pivot to get in and out.

We consolidated the old kitchen, breakfast nook, and laundry to make a 255-square-foot room that incorporates all three functions. Ample space was left between counters and island—47 inches instead of the standard 42. On one wall, side-by-side front-loading washer and dryer are positioned four inches off the floor so I can do the laundry. Kitchen counters are normal height, but the island in the middle of the room is a wheelchair-friendly 33 inches. Finally, big windows were fitted lower to the ground so that I, too, can enjoy the view.

In the second phase of our renovation, we replaced the antiquated breezeway between house and garage with a spacious family room, installed a ramp in the garage to the door to the family room, added a brick walkway at the rear of the house, and regraded the lawn. Three out of the four entrances to the house are now accessible to me, as is the lawn on which my two-year-old son loves to cavort. When he excitedly calls to show me his latest discovery, I can go to him with ease. ■