

Looking to age in place, architect transforms an in-home studio into a rental



The sink faces an innovative faux window made of glass tiles on a mirror backdrop that catches sunlight and the eye.

It didn't take long for Ken and Pam Hurd to realize they didn't want to move.

The Lincoln couple considered downsizing in 2014 after their two children grew up and left, but Ken, an architect specializing in hotel interior architecture and design who likes to attend open houses on Sundays with Pam, said “nothing we saw met our standards.”

As appealing as downsizing was, the Hurds still loved the 3,600-square-foot house they built in 1995. That square footage does not include the roughly 1,750-square-foot ground-level studio Ken designed as a place for his firm, [Kenneth E. Hurd & Associates Inc.](#) The home rests on a beautiful sloped lot

that faces 40 acres of conservation land.

Ken and Pam, who works in philanthropy at the Boston Foundation, just weren't ready to leave their home or Lincoln, where they feel very much a part of the community. "We didn't want to give this house up and find ourselves disappointed later," Ken said.

But with the kids gone and Ken's firm now smaller, the space was too big for them and was becoming clogged with records dating all the way back to when Ken started his business in 1981. "When you become empty-nesters, it's suddenly a lot of house," Ken said. "When the kids were here, everything was used. It was active."

Calling on his architectural expertise, Ken came up with a solution that gave them several options for aging in place: with the help of builder [Renstrom Homes](#) in Shirley, he transformed 1,200 square feet of studio space into an apartment, otherwise known as an [accessory dwelling unit](#). (The other 550 square feet remain his design studio.)

They plan to stay put in the main house for now, but, "Creating this apartment gives us a lot of flexibility," Ken said. One option would be for Ken and Pam to move into the apartment if they found themselves unable to stay in the house or if they simply got tired of taking care of it. In that scenario, they would either rent out the house, sell it, or maybe have one of the kids move in. "The apartment is nice enough that we would enjoy living there without feeling compromised in either our standards or our lifestyle," Ken said.

The apartment could also be a suitable home for a caregiver, should one of them need one, or for an au pair if one of their kids moves back and decides to raise a family there. Most important, "It's accessible and it's move-in ready," Ken said, "so we can rent it out long before we might need it ourselves to age in place."

In Lincoln, an accessory dwelling unit up to 1,200 square feet can be allowed in a home or structure that has existed on a lot for at least 10 years, but the rules vary by community.

“There’s 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” said [Paul Yorkis](#), president of Patriot Real Estate of Medway, “and every one of them has their own zoning, ordinance, or bylaws. Because of that, in many communities the opportunity to create an accessory dwelling unit does not exist, since it depends on a zoning board of appeals, which might approve it or not approve it. It’s unpredictable and it makes it very difficult for individuals.”

Facing a shortage of homes on the market and record home prices, empty-nesters are searching for ways to age in place, particularly owners on fixed incomes. Accessory dwelling units are also viewed by proponents as a way to get first-time home buyers into the market. Opponents of accessory dwellings have raised concerns about them being used as short-term rentals.

“Accessory dwelling units help [alleviate] the housing crisis,” Yorkis said. “First-time home buyers, who have minimal resources but are trying to get that first home, are competing with the people who want to downsize.”

In hopes of creating more affordable housing, the City of Boston launched an 18-month [pilot program](#) last November that allows owner-occupants in East Boston, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain to carve out space within their homes to create smaller, independent units.

Alleviating some of the competition for smaller single-family homes is good for everybody, Yorkis said. “I strongly advocate for accessory dwelling units as a matter of right everywhere in the Commonwealth.”

It certainly has worked out for the Hurds. Since Ken’s firm worked out of that space for so many years, they were used to visitors coming and going, but the apartment is private, with its own entrance toward the back of the house.

Inside, there's a wall with nearly 45 feet of windows that face the woods. The windows, which were there when the space was a design studio, bring in natural light, as well as provide a spectacular view in all seasons.

“Working in the hotel industry has informed the other work I've done,” said Ken, who always considers flexibility when designing rooms. In front of the windows, Ken designed an open, multiuse living space that can accommodate many seating arrangements. At the far end, the kitchen is equipped with high-end appliances and materials that make it a great space to entertain. A fireplace in the corner adds coziness. The bedroom, dressing room, and wheelchair-accessible bathroom make for a luxurious suite. The toilet and sink can be closed off from the shower area with a pocket door, allowing the option of transforming it into a powder room when guests are over. The doorways throughout the space are wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair. The flooring is a high-end vinyl plank that mimics wood.

As soon as the apartment was finished this spring, the Hurds rented the space to Mary Beth Russo, who moved in May 1. “I sold my home in Northborough last summer but couldn't find a place to purchase in the area I was looking,” Russo said.

Russo, who works in marketing and wanted to live closer to Boston, said she's happy to rent because of the freedom it affords her. “There's nothing for me to upkeep,” she said, “nothing to worry about.”

She said Ken has a knack for details, noting the glass-tile detail behind the kitchen sink and on the island. They used a silicone adhesive to secure the tiles to a mirror, an effect that creates a mock window. It makes the tiles sparkle, she said, and she loves having so much natural light: “I wake up very close to the plants and wildlife. It's very serene and quiet.”

Ken said that when he first designed the house, it never occurred to him “that we would ultimately turn a portion of the studio into an apartment, [but] it turned out to be better than I thought.”

He and Pam take comfort in knowing the apartment is just downstairs. To them, it is all about having flexibility and “being able to plan for change,” Ken said. “It’s better to do that now while we are fully capable.”

They are happy in their home, and they aren’t moving — unless it’s just one level down.

Event

Ken Hurd will talk about designing for the future and aging in place on Monday, Dec. 17, at 12:30 p.m. at the Lincoln Council on Aging (Bemis Hall, 15 Bedford Road).

View additional photos of the home:



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Architect Ken Hurd designed his home, which was built in 1995.

Richard Mandelkorn Photography

Courtney Goodrich is a freelance writer, editor, and stylist who covers home, food, travel, fashion, art, and design. Send comments to

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