

Architecture



PHOTOS BY SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The living-dining-working space runs the length of Brian Patrolia's loft in the South End. The lowness of the furniture helps emphasize the height of the ceilings.

A design that is, indeed, lofty

Architect creates an airy dwelling for a wheelchair user that could work for anyone

By Robert Campbell

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After visiting Brian Patrolia's loft, which is located in a new building called Wilkes Passage in the South End, the clearest impression you come away with is that a living space that's exactly right for a guy in a wheelchair may be equally great for anyone else.

This isn't merely the best loft dwelling I've ever seen for a handicapped person. It's one of the best lofts, period. The architect is Brad Walker of the firm Ruhl Walker. He designed the loft for Patrolia, who was the victim, long ago at age 19, of a diving accident that left him without motion in his legs.

When Patrolia bought the space, it was an empty concrete shell in a new building. Often an architect will design such a loft space too conventionally, chopping it up into separate rooms and hallways like any standard apartment. When you do that, though, you've lost the magic of a true loft.

A loft should be as open as possible. You want to feel you're in a space that's long and wide and high and flooded with daylight. A loft should feel almost as expansive as an outdoor landscape.

The Patrolia loft is every inch a loft. And everything the architect does to solve the problems of the handicapped owner turns out, also, to increase the beauty — the loft-ness, you might say — of the loft.

SEE THE LOFT

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Everything is kept low because Patrolia can't reach very high. The lowness of the furniture works to emphasize the height of the ceilings, making the space feel larger. Walls, too, aren't placed too close together. The need to space things out becomes another virtue, increasing the dwelling's airiness.

The loft excels in another way: You can walk all through it without ever realizing it's the home of a handicapped person.

Too often, dwellings for people with mobility issues remind you of hospitals. There may be grab bars, for instance, to help the resident in and out of the shower. Walker provides all the necessary conveniences, but he does it in a way that's practically invisible. Instead of grab bars, he creates recessed openings in the shower wall. They're as easy to grab onto as bars, but they don't make you feel you're in a clinic.

There's no raised curb at the shower, either, or anywhere else in the loft. There are places where, because of the thickness of floor construction and finish, there's a change in floor level of a few inches. Walker never makes a step or a conventional saddle threshold. Instead, he solves the problem by



Architect Brad Walker (above) designed the loft with features such as a disappearing Murphy bed (left) for guests; low kitchen cabinets that can be rolled out, revealing cantilevered countertops that create room for the knees of someone in a wheelchair (below left); and a bathroom that features a shower with an edge-free entry (below right).



gently, invisibly sloping one floor up to meet the other.

"Be sure you mention that," says a man on the other end of my telephone line. "It's intensely painful for me whenever I have to go over a bump or threshold."

The speaker is Michael Graves, one of the world's best-known architects. I've called him to get his slant on what it's like, as an architect, to be mobility impaired. A virus infection in 2003 left Graves paralyzed from the mid-chest down. He soon decided that the world is a disaster for those who use wheelchairs.

"If you sit in your wheelchair at a restaurant," he says, "people look at you like a doorstop. Very few will open the door."

Since Graves's illness, his firm — which designs household objects in addition to buildings — has turned out improved designs for the mobility-impaired. Some are simple: a better heating pad, a shower seat, an attachable bathtub handle. Or a "reacher," which

is an arm-extender for gripping an object that otherwise can't be reached. Graves calls his line "Michael Graves Solutions," and expects it will eventually include everything up to, and including, wheelchairs.

I tell Graves about the nearly invisible strip of metal, at the base of Patrolia's walls and cabinets, that prevents his wheelchair from bumping into them. Says Graves, who doesn't have such a feature, "I have left scars on doorjamb all through my house. I was cursing at first, but it's gonna happen."

Hearing it described, he applauds the Patrolia loft's openness. "If you have a Mies plan, you can get around fairly easily," he says, referring to the work of Mies van der Rohe, the famed modernist architect who believed in minimal furnishings and maximum space. Graves is no Miesian, but modernism does offer more openness than, say, a cluttered Victorian interior.

Graves keeps bringing up other

issues that would never occur to an average architect. "It's painful for me to sit up straight or lean far over," he says. He talks about how his knees are always in the way when he approaches a low cabinet and how he's had to learn to "side saddle" his way up to them. (He's lucky enough to have a housekeeper who cooks.) He talks about the critical importance of what he calls "transference": moving yourself from a wheelchair to a sofa, a car to a wheelchair, a wheelchair to a shower chair. When handicapped visitors come to his house, he takes notes on exactly how they accomplish these things.

All these issues are addressed at the Patrolia loft. Sofas and chairs are firm, so the owner won't sink into them, which would make it difficult for him to move off again. Countertops are cantilevered out over open space, so there's a place for knees. Overhead cabinets are on springs and can be pulled down, and under-counter ones contain rolling serving carts,

but both look like any normal cabinets. There are not one but two under-counter dishwashers, so Patrolia can, if he chooses, use them alternately, one as washer and one as drainage rack — thus never having to deal with dishes stacked in the sink or on the counter. Lights are on dimmers so, as Patrolia grows older, they can be brightened.

What's great about the Patrolia loft, though, as noted, isn't just the admirable attention to special needs. It's the wonderful architecture. You enter past the kitchen, then turn a corner into a living-dining-working space that runs the length of the loft. You immediately feel a charge from the loft's bigness, its generosity, its light and air. This is an architect who understands what a loft is and isn't.

And there are surprising details. In several places, luminous LED panels are accents of bright color, as are the few but select paintings the owner has collected. One long section of wall is faced in

Homasote, a workaday material made from compressed recycled paper that's usually left hidden as insulation. Here it has been sanded to a pearly softness, a truly luscious surface. It's sound-absorptive, which is helpful for reducing noise in the open loft space, and it's located, needless to say, in a place where it won't be hit by a wheelchair.

The total cost? For 1,625 square feet of floor space, it came to about \$350,000.

For years, architects and advocates have talked about something called universal design. The concept is that if you shape every dwelling so that it can serve every kind of occupant, you'd not only help the handicapped, you'd make better architecture. The Patrolia loft is an argument for that belief.

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