AIADESIGN

THE FUTURE OF RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN AN EVOLVING ECONOMY



PHOTO: BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

Rolling On

A centenary storefront is transformed into an accessible live/work space

BY BRENNEN JENSEN

TYLER ENGLE, AIA, VIEWS THE 1,600-SQUARE-FOOT SEATTLE storefront he renovated in 2007 as live/work space for real estate developer John Kucher and his wife, Tina Jacobsen, as a "little jewel box"—reimagined in a "scrappy and concise way."

At first blush, the erstwhile drugstore would seem to have offered little for an architect to engage. It's essentially a box. But there were some challenges to coming up with a design. For one, Kucher is in a wheelchair, so the space needed to be accessible. He also had a large collection of modern art to accommodate.

"Perhaps the biggest challenge was privacy," Engle adds. "You have a storefront facing the street that's only 8 feet from the curb."

For the owners, flexibility was an important factor. "We really wanted a space that was good for the two of us but could also accommodate a dinner party for eight or a big party of 40," Jacobsen says.

Seattle's Tyler Engle Architects PS met these challenges head on, and the so-called scrappy redesign won the 2010 AIA/HUD Housing Accessibility–Alan J. Rothman Award.

The circa 1916 storefront, erected in the leafy Madrona neighborhood, had been awkwardly subdivided into offices sometime during the 1960s. Kucher bought it in 1985 and renovated it to serve as his company's home base. In 1990, he decided to work and live there, unceremoniously turning one of the offices into a bedroom and preparing meals on a kitchenette tucked in the rear. But when Kucher, a widower, proposed to Jacobsen in 2006, the bride-to-be found the impromptu bachelor pad a clumsy fit for the sociable lifestyle they would pursue together. The kitchen, for starters, was barely functional and lacked counter space. This wasn't a home so much as an office suite with a bed in one corner.

Engle's redesign was driven by three concepts. First, the main 18-foot-by-25-foot living space was centered beneath a sizable 8-foot-by-12-foot skylight to give it the feel and function of a traditional courtyard house.

"The skylight was already in place but had a 1980s-cute ziggurat opening," Engle says. "We cleaned it up and splayed the opening to reflect light downward, and used the opening as the center of the courtyard space." He then worked with Kucher and Jacobsen to design the wall space around some of the large modern paintings in his collection. The bedroom and full bath at the building's rear sport clerestory windows to tap into the "courtyard's" daylight. A flush-mounted pivoting door can completely seal off this domestic area when entertaining.

Several ideas were exchanged for the new kitchen (including keeping it at the building's rear) before Engle developed the concept of combining the kitchen and a powder room into a "service core," the dimensions of which suggest a shipping container. This "container" was then positioned between the storefront windows and the courtyard space to act as a privacy-enhancing buffer. It is clad on both sides with horizontal ipe boards, selected both for their warm color and their evocation of an exterior surface. Between this wooden wall and the front windows are a small office for Jacobsen and an entry hall/vestibule.

"It dissolved the line between inside and outside," Engle says. "With this exterior siding material you feel like you don't really enter the house until you pass through the wood."

To provide partial concealment of the now front-and-center kitchen, Engle's third major concept was placing steel plates on either end of the bar island and the main cooking area to function as "blinders." Guests entering the living room pass by the kitchen without noticing it. Meanwhile, as hostess, Jacobsen loves the configuration. "I never miss the action," she says.

What of the accessibility requirements? These were handled with kid gloves. A new polished, charcoal-tinted concrete floor was laid, perfect for wheelchair mobility. The bathrooms feature pocket doors to maintain interior maneuvering room. The master bath also sports his-and-her sinks mounted at appropriate levels within a concrete counter.

> Engle combined the kitchen and a powder room into a "service core," the dimensions of which suggest a shipping container.

"The whole idea was to accommodate without making a big deal about it," Engle says.

And this is just the way Kucher, injured in an accident as a young man, wanted it. By his own admission, he is in a "kind of denial" about his condition and didn't want physical reminders of it in his home.

A potential problem spot was Kucher's office in the rear corner of the building, where the demands of the elevation required the floor to be a few steps up from the main level. An interior 1:12 ramp would have been overtly noticeable and likely cut into the living room. Kucher deems motorized lifts as "slow, loud nuisances." The solution was simple: Kucher "commutes" to work by going out the front door and around the side of the building, where the sloping sidewalk serves as a ramp to a steps-free exterior office door. The trip even provides mental benefits, helping him separate work from home life.

"Our focus was not merely accessibility," Engle says. "It was to provide a flexible space for a couple who has a great art collection to live and entertain." AIA

AIAPERSPECTIVE

THE BIG BAD WOLF AT THE FRONT DOORS

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT THE CHALLENGES FACING architects whose practice is residential design couldn't get worse along comes a confounding variable—the weather. This past winter, communities as far apart as Berlin, Germany, and Berlin, N.H., endured major disruptions. Even Chicago's public schools had to close, something long-time residents of the Windy City could not recall. The culprit? Record cold and snow.

Last May, Nashville saw some of its worst floods in history, and earlier this year great swaths of Australia resembled inland seas, as normally meandering rivers burst their banks. What once were called 100-year events clearly seem to be happening with disturbing regularity across the globe. Seen from one perspective, more severe weather is an argument for the flexibility and convenience of working at home. After all, if you don't have to go to an office, you avoid nightmarish commutes when the weather turns ugly, while the environment reaps the bonus of less pollution as the family car sits idle in the garage.

On second thought, what about the obvious fragility of our nation's electrical grid, brought down again and again by the increasing tenacity of storms? Working at home is not an option if the power is out and you're up on the roof feverishly shoveling snow to keep the roof from collapsing under the weight of a snowpack it wasn't designed for.

If work at home is truly to replace or compete with the traditional office, bold action is called for on a number of fronts. Like the nation's utilities, bold action means an unprecedented investment in a reliable and efficient national power grid, equally secure from the acts of nature and terrorists. For government, bold action means collaborating with the design and construction industry to draft building codes that anticipate, rather than react to, natural disasters.

The contribution of architects is of a different sort. Confronting climate change represents a unique opportunity to expand an understanding of sustainable design to embrace the concept of survivability. It means designing structures that maintain critical life support in the face of what are no longer extraordinary weather conditions.

Will fostering survivability turn the design of America's homes cost more? Probably so. Yet, once lower insurance premiums and the efficiencies of reduced energy consumption kick in, homeowners are likely to see cost savings. AIA

Clark D. Manus, FAIA, 2011 President

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS