

Custom Home

The Art and Craft of Custom Home Building ■ September/October 2006

Accessible Design

Houses that meet
the challenge

Easy Now

Accessibility becomes an ordinary luxury.

By Bruce D. Snider

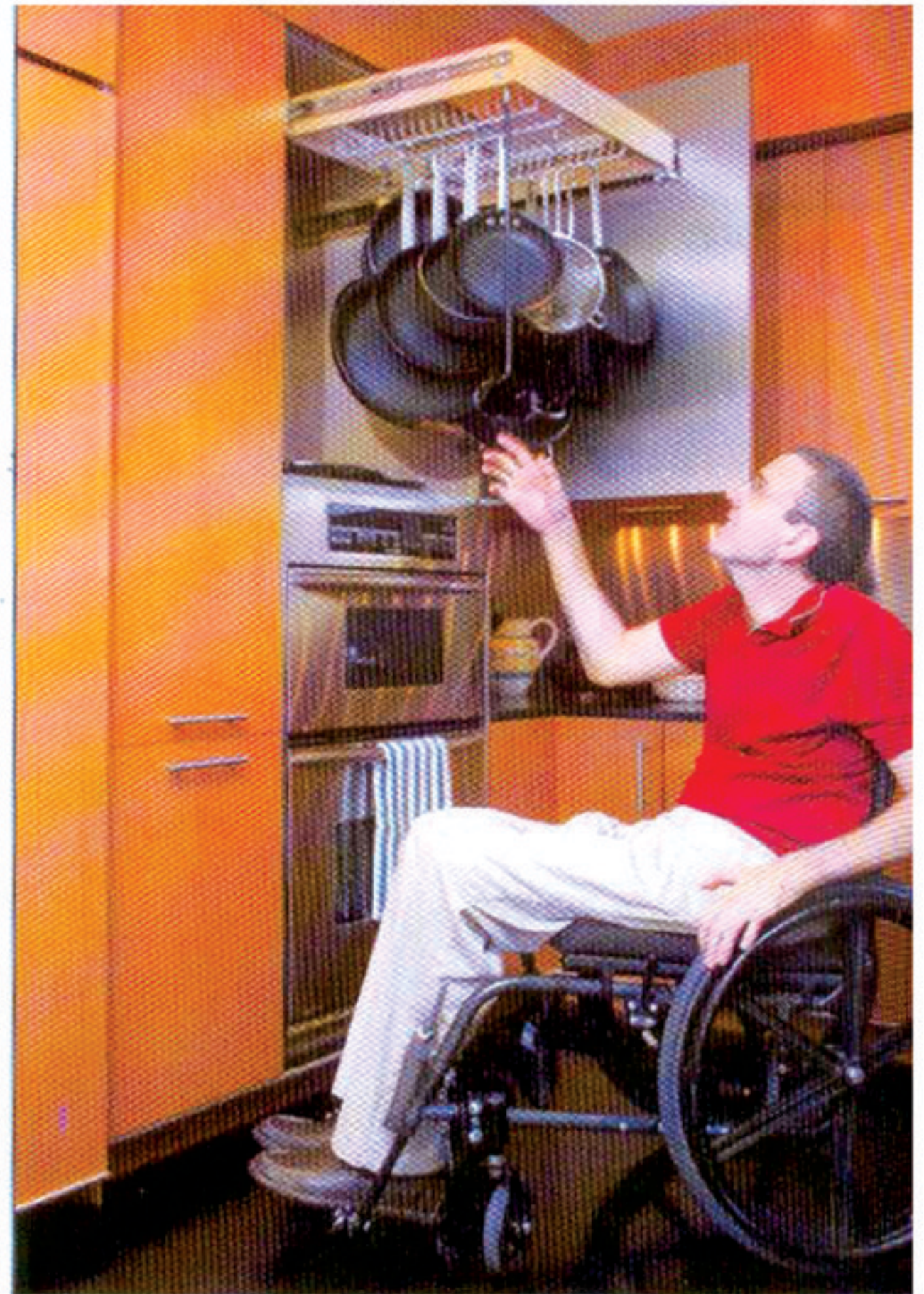
Every house tells a story about the people who live in it. That is especially true of custom homes, and it is even truer of the four that accompany this story. As the word “custom” implies, each responds to the characteristics of its site and the particular needs of its owners. But here those needs include full wheelchair access, open sightlines for a family that uses sign language, and a lighting environment tailored to an owner with impaired vision. And

while such considerations raise the bar for architects and builders, these projects succeed by any standard (one has already appeared in these pages as the winner of a Custom Home Design Award, for which accessibility was not a criterion). They are worth looking at, if for no other reason than that they are exceptionally fine homes.

But there is another reason. If you work in the custom home business long enough, a project like this is going to come your way. People—read that as “clients”—are born

with widely varying abilities, and those abilities are constantly subject to change. More than 400,000 Americans have multiple sclerosis. Some 11,000 each year experience a spinal cord injury. One in six of us over the age of 45 has a vision impairment that is not correctible by glasses or contact lenses. All of these conditions create accessibility issues. And as our population ages, accessibility will only grow in importance. When you look at these projects, you’re looking at the future of custom building.

Ask Scott Sevon. The Chicago-area custom builder is currently bidding a new home with extensive accessibility features. “It’s going to be a full-blown situation for a cerebral palsy family,” he says, “with lifts and doors”—that is, a ceiling-track lift to transfer the owners’ child from bed to bath and 36-inch-wide interior doors that can accommodate a wheelchair. The kitchen and bathrooms will also be configured for wheelchair access. It’s a big job, so Sevon has partnered on the project with remodeler Mike Nagel. Both men are graduates of an NAHB educational program called CAPS (Certified Aging in Place Specialist), which



trains remodelers, builders, and other professionals in residential accessibility. And while that training works for young clients as well as old, Sevon says, his reason for pursuing it was based in demographic reality. "What's occurring in our market—and I'm included in that—is the aging baby boomer."

The leading edge of the baby boom generation, long custom builders' bread-and-butter market, is now crossing the threshold of its seventh decade, and that fact carries major implications for the industry. "It is often these boomers who are making what may be the last move of their lives," says Elinor Ginzler of AARP. As director of the organization's Livable Communities program, Ginzler consults with builders, architects, and other designers on making homes and communities that accommodate people of widely differing abilities. "What we want them to think about is things like different-height [kitchen] counters, so if you choose to sit and chop, you can. And drop-down shelves, so if your range of motion is not quite as good in your arms, you can keep those beautiful bowls that you've always loved in a place where you can get to them." Also on Ginzler's list are curbless entries; open, single-level interiors; 36-inch doorways and generous baths with roll-in showers; and making the best possible use of natural light and supplementing that with a thorough program of ambient and task lighting. Each of these features makes it easier for clients to stay in their homes for the long haul, and none has a downside for those who don't need it yet. But don't expect your currently able-bodied clients to ask for them, Ginzler warns. "There's work to be done there. We boomers don't think we're ever going to age."

But baby boomers are heading for what educators call a "teachable moment." More and more are coping with the changing accessibility needs of their own aging parents and, increasingly, their friends. Nancy Hitchcock is an information specialist at the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. She answers the

phone when consumers and design professionals call for guidance in home accessibility, and many of those calls come from homeowners whose elderly parents are moving in with them. "That's going to be a real educational experience," Hitchcock says. "I can't help believing that people are thinking, 'When my parent is through I'm going to need this thing, too.'" Which, she is quick to point out, need not represent a sacrifice; quite the contrary. Hitchcock's recommendations draw on the universal design philosophy, which holds that buildings can be made greatly more accessible without sacrificing style, and that doing so makes life easier for all of us. Lower light switches and flush thresholds are not just for wheelchair users, she says. "If you're a child, you can reach the light switch. If you're a mother with a baby you can get into the house without wrestling with the stroller." The term "accessibility" has some unfortunate institutional connotations. But think about this for a minute: What do we call features that make a house more com-



fortable, convenient, and pleasant to be in? Luxuries.

The difference lies with the designers and builders who are ready to include accessibility as a routine consideration in any custom home, and their numbers are growing. The NAHB established the CAPS program in 2002 with an initial graduating class of 50, and it has taken off like a rocket. "It's our fastest-growing education program at NAHB, by far," says Jim Lapidés, communication manager for NAHB's Remodelors

Council. "We've just crossed 1,000 [graduates]. We've never seen a program we've done receive so much interest." Washington, D.C., architect Robert Gurney says that advising clients on their accessibility needs—both current and future—has become a matter of course. "It doesn't cost any more. It doesn't inhibit creative design. It's one of those things, like the green/sus-



tainability thing, that you just have to have. A lot of our clients go in saying, 'We're going to die in this house.'" And when Gurney hears those words, his mind's eye sees a first-floor master suite. "That's the biggest thing consistent with people thinking they're going to live in the house a long time." Accessible multi-level living is workable, too, though a bit more expensive. "Maybe you don't put the elevator in now, but you leave space for it. If you have the space and the foresight, you can do things like that."

That kind of thinking is second nature for architects and custom builders, who should find addressing accessibility issues well within their comfort zone. The task—assessing client needs, exploring alternatives, producing a solution—is simply an extension of their typical process. Boston architect Brad Walker views his clients' individual needs in regard to mobility, vision, and hearing as "part of a menu of program items. Some people have kids, some people work from home, some people have amazing views." And some, like the client (shown here) whose loft appears in this feature, use a wheelchair to get around.

The home that Walker designed for him takes that into account, just as it takes into account his personality, tastes, and lifestyle. That's what a custom home does. ■

Owner Brian Patrolia demonstrates his custom roll-out pot rack (opposite), revolving-door base cabinet (left), and entertainment center (above). For more of this house, see the next page.

Easy Now



Loft living has distinct advantages for wheelchair users: a single-floor plan, near total flexibility in layout, and a built-in elevator. But Brian Patroliia, the owner of this Boston loft, had more on his mind than just accessibility. "I try to work a couple of days a week at home," says Patroliia, who works in health care quality research. And as a single person with an active social life, "I wanted something that would work well for entertaining." Most of all, he says, "I was looking for something that was beautiful and well-designed." Wheelchair accessibility was a must, "But I didn't want that to be the primary feature." That program dovetailed perfectly with architect Brad Walker's approach. Walker had experience with both loft build-outs and accessibility standards, but he viewed Patroliia primarily as "just a client who was interested in good design." ■ The starting point was a broad, horizontal slice of a new six-story condominium building in Boston's South End.

Walker inserted a diagonal partition that emphasizes the loft's length and divides the space into public and private zones. A subtle ramp rises to Patroliia's home office, which overlooks the living/dining area. A change of floor material (from stained wood to limestone tile), underscores the transition from public to private. Extensive built-in cabinetry, which includes a low-slung entertainment center and a wall-hung wardrobe, furthers the horizontal visual theme and puts storage at an accessible height. Closet rods pivot down for an easy reach. ■ Hinged doors are unwieldy for wheelchair users, so here there are only two: at the entrance and the common bath. The master bath's door—paneled with a lightweight, translucent material—slides easily with a finger's push. Inside, a

On the Level

same stylish program, with a double oven installed at eye level, easy-access single-drawer dishwashers, and upper cabinets fitted with pull-down shelves. Wheeled cabinets that nest below the counter act as mobile preparation and serving modules. A small aluminum bumper runs along the lower edge of the white maple cabinets, protecting them from the metal footrests of Patroliia's wheelchair. Each of these common-sense details adds to the loft's convenience quotient, but the biggest boon came from simply letting it be a loft. "The openness is a design issue," Patroliia says, "but it also makes my life so much easier." —B.D.S.

wall-hung granite sink counter, a curbless shower, and lots of elbow room deliver ease of use with Modernist polish. An unobtrusive tiled recess by the toilet takes the place of a conventional grab-bar. The kitchen follows the

Project Credits: Builder: Sleeping Dog Properties, Boston; Architect: Ruhl Walker Architects, Boston; Living space: 1,700 square feet; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Edua Wilde. ■ Resources: Bathroom plumbing fixtures: Duravit, Circle 400, Kohler, Circle 401, and Vola, Circle 402; Cabinetry: C.W. Keller & Associates, Circle 403; Kitchen appliances: Fisher & Paykel, Circle 404, GE, Circle 405, Kitchen Aid, Circle 406, and Whirlpool; Lighting fixtures: Bega, Circle 407, ColorKinetic, Circle 408, Flos, Circle 409, Juno, Circle 410, Lightolier, Circle 411, and RSA, Circle 412; Paint: Benjamin Moore, Circle 413; Sliding door panel: Lumicore, Circle 414; Wall fabrics: Knoll, Circle 415.





The wide-open spaces and low-slung layout of this condominium loft deliver wheelchair access with a clean, Modernist flavor.

