


Lofty VISION

An architect takes his work home and creates
a loft in Chelsea for his family



A photograph of a modern loft interior. A large, light-colored cylindrical pillar stands in the center. To the left, a dark wood door is set into a light-colored wall. To the right of the pillar, a large, dark, abstract art piece is mounted on the wall. In the foreground, the backs of two dark wood chairs are visible, suggesting a dining or kitchen area. The floor is made of light-colored tiles. The ceiling is white with a square recessed light fixture.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID JOSEPH

By forgoing wall cabinets in favor of a single shelf displaying art objects, the architect ensured that the kitchen integrates smoothly into the design of this open loft.

A LOFT IN ITS RAW FORM IS THE modern architect's prized tabula rasa: no walls, no doors, no plumbing. It's essentially a sweep of pure space. The design dilemma is to maintain its free-flowing beauty while making it functional and livable. And some architects so relish that challenge that they choose to make a loft their own home.

Such was the case with David Howell, architect and owner of Manhattan's David Howell Design. He purchased a 3,000-square-foot space where the hip-hop band Beastie Boys practiced in the 1980s. Located on the fourth floor, the loft had nothing worth salvaging except big galvanized windows facing Broadway and 18th Street.

"I wanted a modern feel, clean-lined yet warm and organic and not too sterile," says Howell, who sought a home for himself and his family—wife Steffani Aarons, an interior designer, and their 6-year-old twin girls, Sintra and Bianca, as well as Isis, a big ginger-colored Abyssinian cat. His functional design called for a living room, kitchen, dining area, pantry, laundry room, four bedrooms, three bathrooms and a storage room.

Essentially a big rectangle, the space had a number of complications the architect needed to address. The linear-shaped loft threatened to look like a long corridor if not carefully designed. And with windows confined to the front and the back of the space, natural light was limited in other areas.

To add the illusion of more width, Howell laid the black walnut floor horizontally rather than vertically. He interrupted the rectangular space visually by dropping the ceiling and adding up lights in the living room, which is located in the front of the loft near the windows. The ceiling gradually rises to its full height in the kitchen, dining area and adjoining sitting room space.

With no walls to break the flow, this



Large windows overlooking Broadway and 18th Street shine light on the living space, which is visually separated from the rest of the home by a wooden raft traditional to New Zealand.



To avoid a corridor of doors, a drapery divides the living room from the guest room beyond.



central area is open and spacious. All other rooms fall along the perimeter. Bedrooms span the width of the back of the loft, with bathrooms, closets, laundry and pantry flowing along the sides.

With so many rooms—12 in all—Howell wanted to avoid a corridor of doors. Consequently, he hid all but two doorways behind niches and walkways. The two visible doors are nine feet high, preserving the space's vertical dimension by drawing the eye up to the ceiling. For a softening effect, two large draperies mark the entrances to the pantry and the guest room.

The 1960s midcentury furnishings in the living room focus on natural colors and modern contemporary shapes. A modular sofa from B&B Charles is grouped with two Milo Baughman lounge chairs on an antique Moroccan rug from ABC Carpet & Home. Howell, who was raised in New Zealand, breaks the living room space with a dramatic wooden body raft, a chaise used by Kiwis. Exterior walls beyond the living area are paneled in black walnut.

In the kitchen, rather than adding

A custom-designed marble mosaic table is highlighted by an Italian pendant lamp. The family also gathers around the 10-foot by 4-foot Corian island, which had to be brought in through a window.





A playful arrangement of colorful lamps on one wall above a credenza serves as both illumination and artwork.



cabinets to the upper portion of the wall, Howell designed a long ledge and placed a few carefully chosen art objects. "After the first shelf, the upper shelves become unusable," he says. Besides, he adds, when the kitchen isn't being used, the area becomes a more neutral part of the larger living space.

A huge 10-foot by 4-foot bone-colored Corian island, which had to be brought in through the window, is a family gathering spot. In the dining area, an Italian pendant light by Carlo Scarpa hangs over the Howell-designed marble mosaic table.

The bedrooms, which the architect designed as sleeping cells, are compact, just as the name implies. A king-size bed, however, fits easily in the master bedroom.

The girls, who like to share the same room, have a playful sleeping space with a colorful striped wall. On the ceiling, red and white umbrellas from Chinatown dangle from fishing line.

In the end, Howell used this blank canvas to paint a picture of modern domesticity for his family—without losing the loft's delight. ☺