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Background for an Artist

Lowell Nesbitt's Studio: A Stable Remodeled

THE NETWORK OF STREETS connecting Greenwich Village in New York to its neglected waterfront contains some extraordinary buildings. The result of over a century of slow accretion, they range in style from sober little Federal townhouses to huge concrete-framed warehouses of no immediately apparent date. Collectively, they form a fascinating chronicle of changing urban needs and points of view.

Lowell Nesbitt is an artist who works on a giant scale. He has always needed space to realize his canvases. So it was natural for him, when he began to outgrow his SoHo studio, to look westward at a district that had hardly begun to be colonized by the creative avant-garde. Here were buildings that might be large enough to contain not only his paintings—but also his vision of himself.

What Mr. Nesbitt found was a magnificently bleak three-story structure dating from the 1850s. It had been used for many purposes in the course of its checkered career, most recently as a police stable. With a frontage of almost sixty-three feet and a depth of seventy-five feet, it was a solid cube of space with windows only on the front elevations. Inside everything was mysterious and musty darkness.

An intelligent artist is always aware

Artist Lowell Nesbitt's Greenwich Village residence is a highly personalized total environment that combines areas for living and working on a monumental scale, with wall space to display the artist's large canvases. "I am outrageously anxious to live with my own work," says Mr. Nesbitt. So architect Edward F. Knowles transformed an 1850 three-story former police horse stable into 18,000 square feet of flowing modern space, while retaining the integrity of original plank floors, brick walls and cast-iron columns. A view of the third-floor Studio reveals work in progress on the easels, two *Bicentennial Hats* silk-screen prints, and two *Tulips-'76* lithographs.

ARCHITECTURE
BY EDWARD KNOWLES, AIA
INTERIOR DESIGN
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Lowell Nesbitt is an artist who works on a giant scale. He has always needed space to realize his canvases.

of his own limitations, so it was natural for Mr. Nesbitt to turn to his old friend Edward E. Knowles—who was one of the architects of the Boston City Hall—to begin a process of transformation. A calm and witty man, Mr. Knowles's first priority was to open up the space, bringing in the light so necessary to all that was to follow. He did this, simply and radically, by slicing through the center of the building and creating an atrium twenty-five feet square—roofed by an enormous skylight of aluminum and glass. This single gesture was sufficient. Everything else could now happen in relation to the properties of light itself. In terms of materials, the house was reduced to its most natural organic state and left almost a shell. The original plank floors, brick walls and cast-iron columns are the modest elements serving as a backdrop for the lively personality who dwells here.

Each of the three levels contains a series of open and enclosed spaces. The latter are constructed of Sheetrock and form a sharp contrast to the materials of the original structure.

"I wanted to maintain the integrity of those parts of the building that were old, and at the same time clearly define the new," explains Mr. Knowles. "And by isolating the bedrooms and the bathrooms and kitchen within the core of the house, I was leaving the outer walls free for Lowell to hang his paintings. I was influenced by Mies van der Rohe—especially in his plan for the Tugendhat house, where he enclosed elements to articulate the flow of space with economy."

Lowell Nesbitt is as compulsively verbal as he is artistically productive: "Somebody—let's say it was Gertrude Stein—said, 'I work for myself and one mysterious stranger.' Perfect. It describes me exactly. Whether that stranger is an alter ego, or a projection of myself, is another question.

"Anyway, Edward knew when I asked him to design this space that I am outrageously anxious to live with my own work. That's *why* I moved. I wanted room, not only to look at my current paintings, but also to give myself a sort of retrospective of my earlier production. This building was ideal, of course, because it has so much blank wall space. I could most certainly fill it all—and probably will!"

Mr. Knowles, working with a rare degree of harmony with the artist, divided the house into three zones of activity, each one geared to a different part of Mr. Nesbitt's daily schedule. The first floor is centered on the extraordinary fiberglass pool located directly under the atrium.

"I think you can safely say that it's the largest indoor pool in any residential space in the country," says the architect, half ironically and half proudly. The artist's bedroom and the kitchen are also situated on this floor, making it essentially a domestic area. The second floor is both gallery and entertainment space. Mr. Nesbitt's own paintings are very much in evidence, as they are all over the house, but the artist plans to provide exhibition space for other artists here as well.

Lowell Nesbitt thinks of the spaces as being both tough and sensuous: "Let's say that Edward was perfectly aware of my needs when he created the feeling of openness. Even the enclosed areas are really translucent. The entrance to my bedroom is fifteen feet wide, for instance. In fact, only the

The artist's giant irises, painted in 1973, and Josef Levi's luminous 1969 light sculpture dominate the first-floor Sitting Room, counterpointed by the delicacy of a Chinese porcelain collection. Pristine vinyl-covered seating units and Mutschler laminated cubes rest on American Olean's quarry tiles. Plasterboard partitions define the area.

bathrooms themselves have doors."

"Speaking of dimensions," adds Mr. Knowles, "I gave Lowell a plate glass mirror that is sixteen feet long in his dressing room. After all, an artist must always be aware of appearances!"

In a period that is learning how to make do with lesser, rather than greater, quantities of space, Mr. Nesbitt has made a determined and generous gesture in the opposite direction by moving into 18,000 square feet.

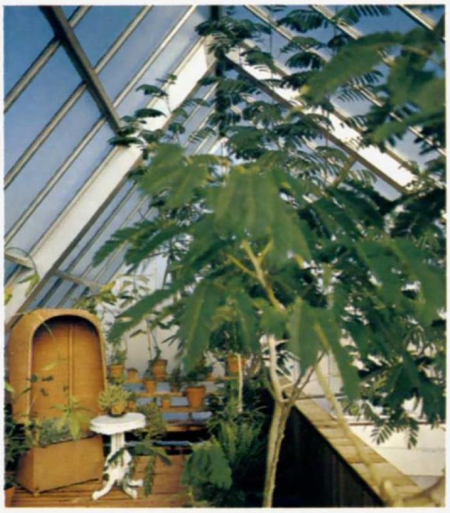
Also involved from the very beginning of the project was another old friend of the artist, Mara Palmer, an interior designer. As vivacious and articulate as all of Mr. Nesbitt's circle, she was responsible for such sudden surprises as the scarlet lacquer of the artist's own bedroom.

"I love Italian design," she explains, "and the great masters like Le Corbusier. So my suggestions were all in a sense classical. But I was trying to work very closely with Lowell's sensibility. I wanted to soften—make more palpable—certain aspects of the house, although I never did anything that would disturb the harmonies set up by Edward and Lowell."

One of the most striking things about the house is, in fact, the sense of mutual ease between three people of very different talents, who have worked so closely together on the realization of a unique space and the creation of a compelling background.

The result is an environment that transcends ordinary criticism. It is a grand gesture in an age of miniaturization, an act of industrial archaeology in a city that has only begun to appreciate its past, and also a surprisingly

OPPOSITE: The Dining Room is distinguished by large Nesbitt canvases at right angles: *Echo-'74* tryptych and *Studio Tabletop-'76*. In the foreground is his steel stairway sculpture. Iris vases, antique flatware and Baccarat crystal set the lacquered table; the stainless-steel chairs are covered in a vivid Clarence House suede. TOP: The sensuous After Dinner Room is an Eastern illusion created by minimal exotic furnishings—a brass table, richly patterned cushions and a Sarouk rug—plus the artist's nineteen-foot-long rendering of Colorado's San Juan Mountains. CENTER AND RIGHT: Single-color lithographs of irises and tulips line the walls of the Sitting Room, which faces the windowed frontage. The Mutschler seating platform appears as a floating island.



PRECEDING PAGES: Designer Mara Palmer insisted on the vibrant color of the Master Bedroom's lacquered walls and Harmony carpeting. "Red was the last color in my life," says Mr. Nesbitt, "but now I love it." Selections from his 1973-75 *Robe* series of oils adorn the partitions; at center is an oversize whirlpool bath. ABOVE AND RIGHT: Architect Knowles designed a vast aluminum-and-glass skylight over a 25-foot-square central atrium to open up the building and bring in the light. At roof level is a thriving greenhouse; on the ground floor there is a 20-by-14-foot fiberglass swimming pool, energized by Lowell Nesbitt's *Seven Electric Flowers-'75*. Terrace tiles by American Olean.

delicate mechanism for the conveying of a single human personality. It is finally—beyond the occasional flourishes of theatricality—the compassionate and intelligent container of remarkable sensibility. □

—*Peter Carlsen*