

Loft-Living in



the Woods



A painter and a musician get creative in their affordable home made from a simple plan and common materials

BY ROBERT GERLOFF

Bruce and Sara Qualey asked me to design their home in the North Woods of Wisconsin, and they were quite clear about what they didn't want—the type of quaint, woodsy lake house the locals call a cedar chalet. Often found in northern lake communities, cedar chalets are characterized by huge walls of windows facing the lake, cavernous interior spaces, acres of pine paneling on the inside, and a log or cedar exterior. Bruce and Sara were equally clear about what they did want—a relatively small (2,500 square feet or so), open, informal, inviting house with living space, a master bedroom and bath, and a guest bedroom. And because Bruce is a bassist, he needed a music studio in which to practice and store his bass fiddles. Sara, a painter, wanted her own creative space, too—a detached painting studio. They wanted lots of wall space on which to hang paintings, and lots of windows facing both the lake and the marsh. And they wanted to build all this for about \$200,000.

I was getting nervous. It seemed like an awful lot of house for their budget. But then we drove out to the site and bushwhacked along a faint deer trace until we

Carving out space for a cozy room

While designing the house, one of the few disagreements the Qualeys and I had was over what I called the cozy room. They could not imagine why the house would need a small, quiet space when they had such a nice, big living space. They said, Why not just make the master bedroom and bathroom larger?

I pushed the issue and said that psychologically it would be important during the long winter months to have a room they could escape to, a study where they could work on their computer, relax on a daybed, and retreat from each other and the world outside.

They were still not convinced, but I asked them to trust me. They did, and much to my relief, they use the cozy room throughout the year. It has turned out to be one of their favorite places in the house and is the room most requested by overnight guests. —R.G.



stood at the spot where Bruce and Sara imagined building their new home. It was high on a narrow glacial ridge overlooking a lake on one side and a finger of marsh on the other. It was breathtakingly beautiful. Any worries I felt melted away and I couldn't wait to start sketching.

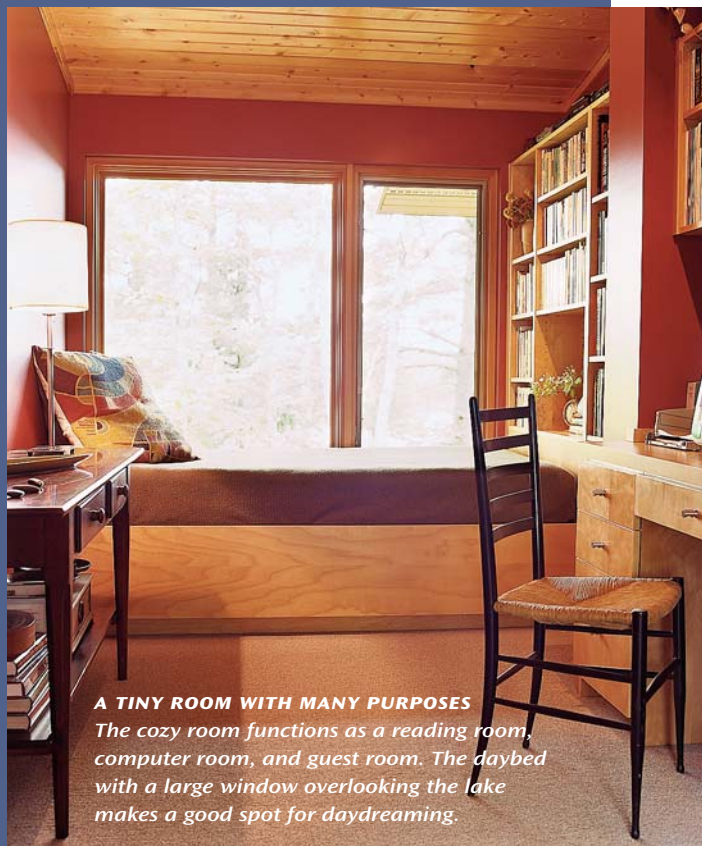
A mix of lofty and intimate rooms

Over time and at many meetings, we worked out a unique aesthetic: Rather than being a quaint cedar chalet or a modernist house, all white and pure, the design took on the feel of an artist's loft nestled in the woods.

A loft is characterized by wide-open space in a big box of a building. Artists developed loft-living out of necessity: Thousands of factories and multistory warehouses in cities across the country were abandoned during the 1950s and '60s as transportation switched from urban railroads to suburban or semirural interstate highways.

Artists could rent studio space cheaply in these otherwise abandoned buildings, and to save even more money, they often wound up living in their studios, cobbling together the plumbing for kitchens and bathrooms. What we now think of as loft-living combines tall ceilings, open space, exposed building materials, and lots of big windows.

Like the layout of a loft, the plan for Bruce and Sara's house is simple. The kitchen, dining room, and living spaces are all in one big open room with gently sloping ceilings 12 feet high at their peak. This space flows out onto a screened porch and then to a deck that cantilevers out over the ridge (photo above).



A TINY ROOM WITH MANY PURPOSES
The cozy room functions as a reading room, computer room, and guest room. The daybed with a large window overlooking the lake makes a good spot for daydreaming.



TWO WAYS TO BE OUTSIDE
When it's too buggy to be on the deck, the adjacent screened porch is the next best thing.



A LOWERED CEILING makes the master bedroom more intimate, and wide windows that meet in the corner provide a continuous view of the lake.

IN THE BATHROOM, small tiles and brushed-metal fixtures add another touch of urban style to this remote lake home.



A plain rectangle acquires character

Early in the design process, homeowner Sara Qualey's fear was that a long, narrow house would look like a pre-fab home. Originally from Elkhart, Ind., known as the birthplace of the manufactured-housing industry, Sara wanted her new home to have a different look.

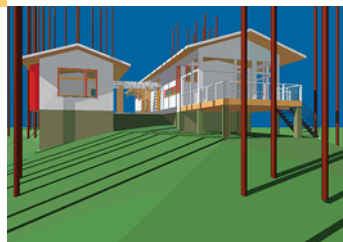
"When I saw Robert's initial concepts, the footprint of the house was a long rectangle. I was trying to get past that, but it looked like a double-wide trailer. However, once we saw the elevations—the scale drawings of the side, front, and rear (below left)—I could see the deep overhangs on the roof, the bumped out window seats, and the interesting windows," says Sara.

Robert also prepared perspective drawings on the computer that showed the house from several angles (below right). These drawings made it much easier to get a feel for the shape of the house and how it would sit on the land.

"I've never been fond of low-pitched roofs—our last house had a much steeper pitch—but the elevations and computer drawings helped me visualize the house and understand how all these things would make it look unique, not at all like a double-wide trailer," she said.

LONG AND NARROW TO FIT ON A RIDGE

The building site for this house was a ridge overlooking a lake, and the land seemed to call for a long, narrow structure. In addition to complementing the topography, this house, because of its shape, benefits from good cross ventilation and natural light in every room. Large windows on the lake side capture afternoon sun and lake views.



Half a flight up from the living space is Bruce and Sara's bedroom with a bath, dressing room, and a small retreat we called the cozy room (see sidebar, p. 56). Half a flight down is a two-stall garage and a mudroom. In the basement is a guest bedroom with tall windows, Bruce's music studio, and a type of room I'd never designed before: a climate-controlled storage closet for Bruce's bass fiddles.

Simple plans for a tight budget

The only way we had any hope of bringing the house in even close to Bruce and Sara's budget was to keep the construction very simple. We designed the foundations of both the house and studio as simple rectangles, with no fancy angles or curves to complicate construction. We also designed the footings to be poured at one level, simplifying both the excavator's and the mason's jobs.

In thinking through any construction project and in presenting working drawings to a builder, we try to make the construction look as straightforward as possible. If the builder feels the house will be easy to build, the house will cost less than if he thinks it will be difficult. We don't always succeed, but as one example, all the materials used in the Qualeys' house (except the master bathroom tile) were from a local lumberyard and local suppliers. We didn't want the builder to worry about ordering exotic materials from distant suppliers. Despite the simple nature of both the plan and the construction, the house feels rich and varied.

Everyday materials with a twist

The budget dictated a straightforward simplicity, but we worked hard to create some variety and whimsy. While all the rooms are large and simple, there are plenty of smaller, more intimate window seats or nooks to retreat to. The change in ceiling height from one area to another helps to add character and variety to the house: Bruce's studio in the basement has a low, flat ceiling; the living space has a tall, sloped ceiling; and the master bedroom has a low, sloped ceiling.

We struggled to find the right balance between walls for hanging paintings and windows for views to the



MINIMIZING THE GARAGE *Painting the garage door gray helps it blend with the stucco-covered foundation.*

LOWER-COST VIEW *Using mostly fixed-glass windows saves money.*



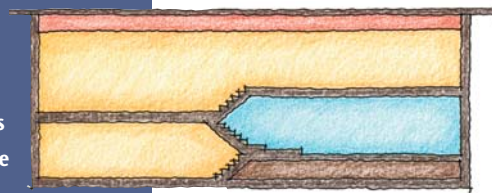
A continuous roofline saves money

This house is essentially a simple split-level. What makes it unusual is that the walls of the upper two levels all meet the roof at the same height. The ceiling in the master bedroom is 8 feet high, and the ceiling on the living level is 12 feet high, but outside the roof is one continuous level.

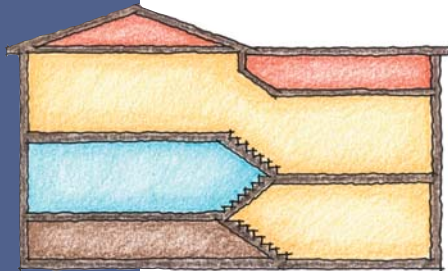
With this design, we were able to create a loftlike main living space and cozier rooms on the upper and lower levels. And we reduced construction costs at the same time. Why? Because the basement is used as living space rather than just a place for mechanicals and storage, and the continuous roofline simplified construction.

“We both love the varied ceiling heights, which lend snugness to the bedroom level while making the living room and kitchen feel really open. The house isn’t that big, but the open floor plan and high ceilings make it seem much more spacious,” homeowner Bruce Qualey says.

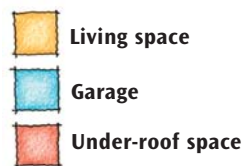
“When you enter the house, you see right through to the lake. The kitchen, living room, and dining room all flow together, so when we have guests, whoever is in the kitchen can still be part of the group.”



This kind of split-level allows for higher ceilings



A typical split-level



UP A SHORT FLIGHT OF STAIRS, the 8-foot ceiling shelters the cozy room and master bedroom suite.



surroundings. We put large windows on the wall facing the lake and ran low horizontal windows on the wall facing the marsh. This allows for several feet of wall space above the windows for hanging paintings.

The window pattern is intentionally asymmetric: We installed narrow windows both horizontally and vertically. We also placed large, fixed-glass windows next to narrow casement windows (bottom right, p. 59). This arrangement saved money—a fixed-glass window is less expensive than a window that opens—but still brings in light and breezes. And it gives the house its own look but doesn’t cost much more than symmetrical windows.

We mixed materials, contrasting new with old, modern with traditional, and industrial with woodsy. For example, the ceilings are paneled in simple 1x6-inch pine, a material as common—and inexpensive—as gypsum wallboard in northern Wisconsin. The walls are basic wallboard painted in rich colors to complement the paintings. Trim around the windows was kept to a minimum to avoid distracting eyes from either the art or the view. The fireplace is a black industrial box, and its surround is corrugated galvanized sheet metal (photo, p. 54).

We originally designed the floor to be a raw, exposed, 1½-inch-thick concrete slab with in-floor radiant heating tubes, but that proved too difficult and expensive, so the final flooring is 12-inch vinyl composition tile—one of the simplest and least expensive floorings available. Sara designed some tile patterns to add a dash of funkiness to the floor.

Blending in with the environment—almost

The house is clad in many different materials, and the colors are drawn from the surrounding land. House and studio sit on a stucco base in its natural cement color, which is also the color of the underlying granite bedrock. The lower-level garage has a door painted the same color as the foundation, so it blends into the house.

The primary siding on the house is cedar shingles stained a mossy green. The primary siding on the studio is a vertical board-and-batten siding stained a birchy yellow. Bump-outs on the house and studio are





narrow lap siding in a soft berry-red. The windows are a bright cranberry-red.

Our hope was to mix simple colors, materials, and textures in such a way that the house would have the fluidity of a painting and the relaxed unpredictability of a jazz improvisation, which would suit Sara and Bruce perfectly. **H**

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See Resources on page 94.



A 12-FOOT LOFTLIKE CEILING makes the house look like an urban oasis in the woods. Vinyl composition floor tile in a variety of colors adds some whimsy.

WALLS FOR ART, WALLS FOR WINDOWS A balanced mix of walls and windows was needed for viewing the lake and for hanging art.