

ESPLANADE

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER, 2009





Ruhl Walker Architects turns 5,000 raw square feet into a luxurious machine for living.

It seems easy enough; create a wonderful home out of a nearly 5,000 square foot loft space. But, as Brad Walker, architect and one of the principals of Ruhl Walker Architects points out, it's never quite that simple. How do you make the best use of a volumetric space like this and not have it end up sterile and hollow, no matter how many Warhols you throw on the walls or miles of Knoll sofas you install. We met up with the architect to talk about how the Ruhl Walker team made an incredible transformation in this space.

Text John T. O'Connor **Photos** John Horner

ESPLANADE: What was the client after with this space? Were they articulate regarding what they wanted to accomplish and maybe what to stay away from??

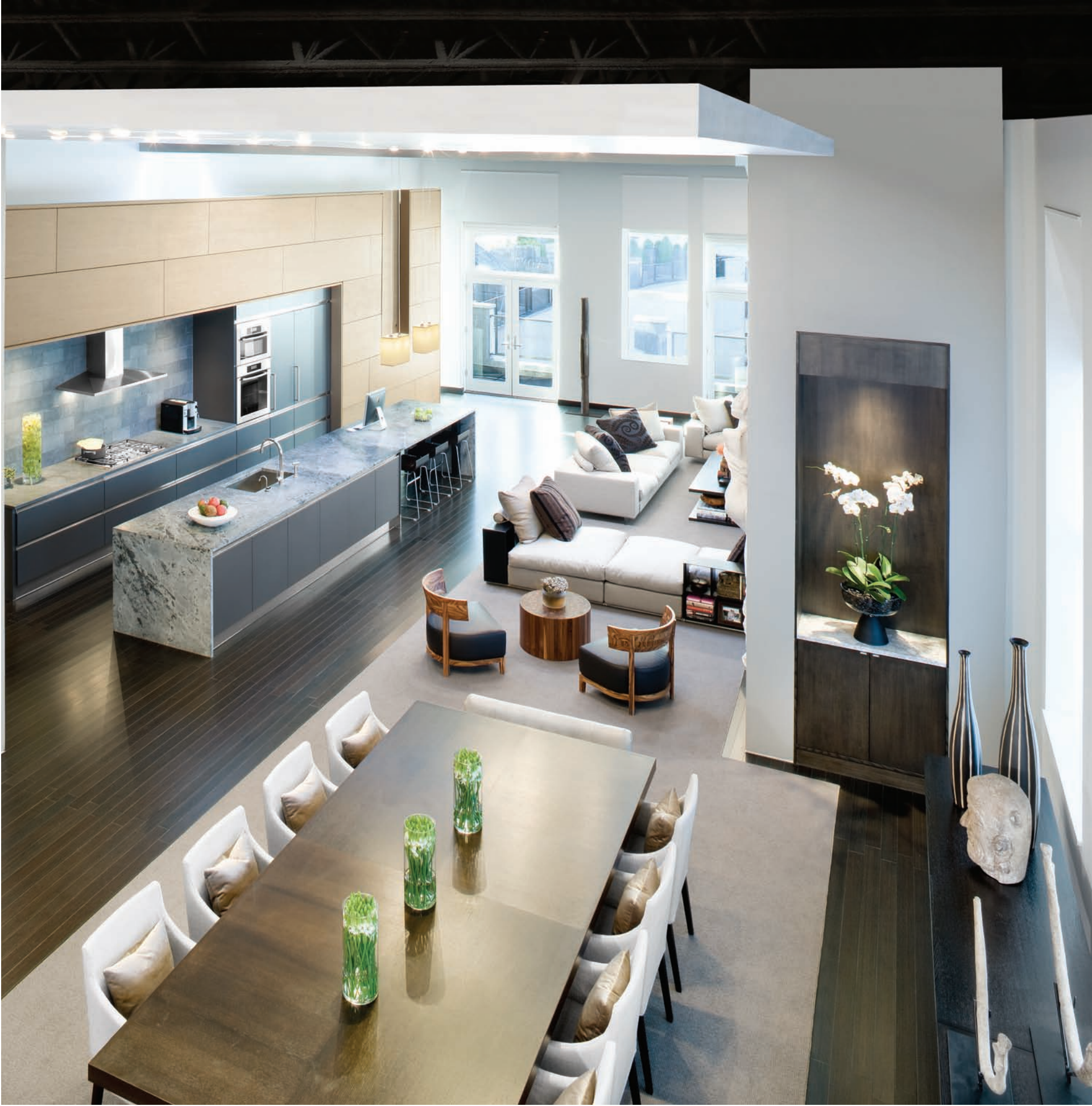
BRAD WALKER: The client came to us having bought the property after the original developer had already begun to build out the unit. The partially completed plan was being marketed as an amenity, but the unit had languished on the market. We walked through with our client and convinced them that the developer's plan was all wrong and that it forfeited significant value. The developer had placed the public areas (living, dining, kitchen) across the far, short end of the loft, about 70' away from the unit entry. So upon arriving in this magnificent space, you would have been confronted with a ridiculously long, and curved corridor before ever understanding that this was something other than a standard-issue developer loft. But it really was special. It's nearly 5,000 s.f. on three levels, and with 17' high ceilings in the main space.


ESPLANADE: How did you make your appeal to the client?

WALKER: We argued that these amenities - the sheer size and volume of the space - should not be hidden away at the end of a dark corridor, but rather, should be pushed front and center. Lofts as a housing type were originally large industrial spaces converted into housing and workspace. But so often today they are little more than studio apartments with inadequate natural light. Here was a loft - big, even vast, and in that it afforded that ultimate luxury - space - empty space - I wanted to play that up. So we arranged the living spaces laterally, as close to the front door as we could get them, and then



Instead of dividing the space in a traditional manner, Ruhl Walker decided on a plan similar to an Italian courtyard or piazza; a great space in the center, with "rooms" arranged around that space.





From the entry, one now gets a sense of the entire, floating plane construction. The main "loft" space is ahead, while bedrooms are hidden to the right.



organized the rest - three bedrooms, two studies and so forth around this one central “loft”. It works similarly to a courtyard, or an Italian piazza, where all the “public” life is in this large central space, and then the bedrooms and other smaller rooms look out onto it.

ESPLANADE: What devices did you use to visually define space?

WALKER: The main “loft” (the public areas of living, dining and kitchen) is bounded by two exterior walls with panoramic city views, and two planes that we inserted. These two planes - one straight and clad in beautiful gray wood panels, and one curved and made of polished plaster - are detailed to “float” in the space. They do not touch the high ceiling, and they do not touch the exterior walls of the apartment. Perversely, this was done to make the space feel even larger and more dramatic. The resultant space has no corners, and so the eye understands no limit to the room. You can understand that the room has a boundary - four walls, but there is always something beyond those walls - either the city view, or unexplored space over or around the two walls we inserted.

You can understand that the room has a boundary - four walls, but there is always something beyond those walls - either the city view, or unexplored space over or around the two walls we inserted.

ESPLANADE: We see you’ve used a floating staircase. It seemed like a very elegant solution to the traditional staircase, which can be quite encumbering to a project.

WALKER: At the entry, one encounters the curved wall, pulling you into the loft, and also, straight ahead, a partially revealed plane of expanded stainless steel mesh, which veils the floating stair leading up. This confluence is intended to provide a moment of both stasis and dynamism at the entry; a sense of “pause” as is appropriate upon arrival, but also a sense of urging either upward, drawn by the metal mesh with a skylight above it, or inward, drawn by the sweeping curved wall leading to the expanse of the loft and its walls of windows beyond.

ESPLANADE: The use of materials is quite astonishing here. In a Miesian way, you kind of let them speak for themselves in their purest forms. There is serenity to this space, but because of the materials chosen a great richness.

WALKER: We like materials that speak for themselves and that find life in the light, either daylight or artificial light in the evening. Nothing in our work is “faux”. Drywall is painted, and in this case the bamboo floor is stained, but everything else is a natural material in something very close to its natural



Breathtaking in its simplicity, the master bedroom can be closed off from the rest of the loft with a full-height, 60" wide translucent panel.

state - soapstone, honed Carrara marble, laminates, translucent acrylics and metal mesh, polished plaster, and a little bit of aluminum trim. Materials are typically assigned directly to an object, as opposed to a surface. So the curved wall is polished plaster wherever you encounter that curved wall, and the flat wood wall is similarly wood on all sides. So we aren't surfacing rooms, but rather the objects that define spaces - an idea which you correctly attribute to Mies.

ESPLANADE: Obviously, the interior designers were on the same wavelength. It seems a very symbiotic relationship. How did this come about and who are they?

WALKER: The loose furniture and accessories are by my very good friend Meichi Peng and her team at Meichi Peng Design Studio. Many of the larger pieces are custom designed in their studio. Meichi and I work well together - and very little needs to be said between us. We think about space the same way, and I think we just intrinsically like the same sense of calm infused with warmth and texture. It was a perfect fit for this project.