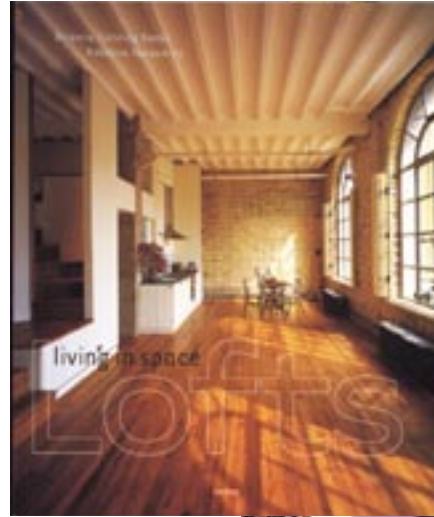


# LOFTS: LIVING IN SPACE

a review by Victoria Carlson



By Orianna Fielding Banks and Rebecca Tanqueray, with special photography by Michael Harding.

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■ **Center** Wanting to partition her vast warehouse as little as possible, the owner uses large columns, for both structural and aesthetic purposes, to divide one area from another.

■ **Right** Separating the bedroom from the main living space with a simple curtain gives flexibility to go open-plan again whenever you like.

Coming up with lofty notions is one thing. Coming home to a loft apartment is another. That's why this timely book is worth noting. This is a much-needed resource that offers elegant, responsive, and varied ideas for making loft living work.

Big plans for converting big spaces need practical and artful solutions to manage all that scale, all that open space, and all those potentially industrial-strength problems. Adaptive re-use in residential design may call for revising users' assumptions and adaptations to such unusual spaces.

Loft living may or may not be a viable and significant solution to urban problems, but it is opening up new spaces and options for many. And among

those making over and/or moving into former factories, sawmills, barns, churches, and warehouses are families, single women, home business owners, and "empty nesters"—people of various incomes and interests, including many who are far removed from New York. How can these unique residences become not simply trendy showplaces, but homes? And how might such housing, emerging often from blighted areas, create and sustain urban neighborhoods?

This book doesn't have all the answers, but it provides some useful advice and inspiring designs of lofts in American and European cities. Clearly intended as a style book and introductory how-to guide for a popular audience, this handsome volume offers creative examples and information to benefit both loft dweller and design professional.

Banks and Tanqueray trace the loft's history, from its gritty, art studio origins in mid-20th-century New York, to its international and often upscale image of residences that resemble galleries. They praise the loft concept to heights that rival the scale of the structures they describe. This book elevates the loft as the housing ideal of a new age.

Open spaces offer plenty of options. But can lofts really be "all things to all people?" The book's well-photographed examples include an impressive range of styles, from the hot-colored geometry of a Belgian living room in a former factory, to the subdued neutrals and minimal lines of the many examples of modernist elegance. In contrast, other interiors accommodate collections of antique bric-a-brac, international crafts, and traditional touches that complement the loft's essential historical elements. Also included here are funkier, playful touches of pop culture and unabashed kitsch, as well as some heavy-duty industrial elements refined. These various representations of style demonstrate the loft's versatility and potential for housing truly personal effects.

A particularly impressive feature of the book's pictorial representation is a feeling of warmth in loft interiors, achieved through skillful handling of light, texture, materials, color, and details. These lofts are anything but the stereotype of cold, austere spaces of inhuman scale. Even the more minimalist interiors have a subtle, inviting glow about them, reflecting thoughtful choices in color, lighting, and materials such as wood.

The important issue of how to divide a loft's open space into various living zones receives ample attention here, with interesting options. Banks and Tanqueray offer innovative examples of space-defining elements both fixed and stationary. Walls and screens curve in appealing ways, softening hard edges and emptiness. One unusual and family-friendly solution is the "pod" concept, shown here creating private bedroom spaces for the children in a Belgian family living in an open-plan loft: wooden boxes on wheels give kids a novel kind of free-wheeling space, while the rest of the household enjoys flexibility in moving such "rooms" around. The authors treat each major residential zone—kitchen and dining area, home office, sleeping areas, bathrooms, living area—with options for defining spaces structurally and through effective use of color and materials. Ample and attractive storage systems are also featured.

The scale and open plan of most lofts make furnishing these homes challenging. Here the authors show a range of furniture styles, with suggestions for

using furniture in new and multiple ways. Modular, built-in, and outscaled furniture options are featured. The authors suggest allusions to the structure's industrial history with materials and objects that evoke old machines. But for most loft dwellers, it seems buying new furniture becomes a necessity. A list of sources for furnishings, home, products, and fixtures is included, with websites and stores in various US locations (although the directory might include more options from various geographic regions and cities).

In discussing the purchase and design process, this book provides more than a sophisticated picture book of "style." The authors set forth general but thoughtful guidelines for selecting a loft to buy or to rent, for developing a clear sense of remodeling and interior design priorities, and for locating the best design professionals (both architects and interior designers) to help with the process. While the book encourages use of professional design services, its suggestions for "space planning" will help new loft dwellers to envision using space in ways that fit their needs. Whether the remaking of the loft is a "do it yourself" or profes-

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sional job, such insights are essential.

*Lofts: Living in Space* celebrates a housing trend that is established in some high-profile areas, emerging in others, and under-explored or perhaps overhyped in some locations. It's obvious that lofts offer the aesthetic and functional advantages of space, but as big, vertical spaces reclaimed from distressed conditions, they may pose physical challenges as well. Energy efficiency, acoustics, and environmental safety require professional expertise, but a responsible owner or occupant needs to consider such matters. The book might do well to emphasize these and related practical issues.

The text also gushes over the pleasures and convenience of urban living, without facing the fact that not all cities today are centers of entertainment, cultural attractions, comfort, or essential services. Such enthu-

siasm assumes a thriving (or at least rebounding), relatively safe downtown or urban area with residential essentials such as stores and services nearby. This is not the reality of many American cities of various sizes and regions.

Recently, I accompanied a friend who was shopping for a rental loft apartment in a large-but-shrinking Midwestern city with a ghost of a downtown—where the brave new “loft district” is one of few signs of hope or of progressive urban revitalization. When I asked the property manager where residents buy groceries (since no stores existed nearby), he responded with a solution that sounded rehearsed and desperately enthusiastic. “The Internet! You just click through your list, and the market delivers your stuff to the door!” On-line shopping may indeed be the future (if it is not already the present), but relying so completely on cyberspace to compensate for lack of neighborhood resources—for a sense of neighborhood, even—is troubling. A small screen can glow only so brightly in a big open loft space surrounded by urban wasteland. Potential loft dwellers should consider such issues before becoming urban pioneers.

This book might do well take a more realistic and wider look at the urban environments of many loft properties or potential loft developments. While the optimistic view that loft development stimulates new commercial investment in previously marginalized areas might prove accurate, the complex problems of cities—in education, safety, services, and other vital areas—require considering a bigger picture in which lofty views become less glamorous. A general work such as this cannot be expected to tackle an issue as big as urban revitalization. This celebration of loft living might nonetheless balance its romantic, fashion-conscious vision of urban life with more serious consideration of what is actually required in changing urban areas from sites of industrial decay and commercial vacancy to centers that promote and sustain residential growth.

Still, this is an inviting look at an important housing trend. For those contemplating or preparing to make such a move, and for design professionals who transform empty buildings and lofty ideas into unique homes, it's an essential resource. ■