

Michael J. Love, IIDA, RAS

Founder and Principal of Atelier Design Associates

*Interview conducted by
Daniel Eudaly
in 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Raised in a military family, Michael Love graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington with a degree in architecture in 1980. He also received advanced training from the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the Americans with Disabilities Act, Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, and Fair Housing Act in 2000 and 2004. Love is a Registered Accessibility Specialist in Texas and has numerous accessibility-related registrations and professional affiliations. He is the founder and principal architect for Atelier Design Associates and has been a leading proponent of the Texas Accessibility Standards and the Accessibility Professionals Association.

Topics Discussed

- Texas Accessibility Standards
- Architectural accessibility in Texas versus other states
- Development of Atelier Design Associates
- Evolving attitudes towards accessibility in architecture
- Disability advocacy in architecture
- Opposition to accessibility in architecture
- Key figures in improving architectural accessibility
- How the disabilities of others rather than Love's own disability impacted his work as an accessibility specialist
- Key figures in local disability rights activism

Eudaly

So why don't we start with some of your background and biographical information?

Love

<topic>Texas Accessibility Standards</topic>

Okay. I have a degree in architecture from UT Arlington, and it's a bachelor's degree. And going through the program my goal had always been to become an architect, and that was until I found the...development of the ADA and concurrently the Texas accessibility program [Texas Accessibility Standards]. And upon the implementation of the ADA, Texas started developing a similar program through [Governor] George Bush to help ensure that Texas took advantage of the ADA and to help ensure that those projects constructed in Texas actually did comply. And, that intrigued me. It intrigued me for many reasons.

I had a college roommate that had a daughter that was severely disabled, and I also had a brother-in-law that was an incomplete quadriplegic, so I knew personally what some of the challenges are in those projects that we were doing on the architectural level, and as we were discussing before the, architectural barriers is a key term, and it was interesting through my years in university unfortunately they really didn't speak much to accessibility. It was granted before the ADA went into effect. It wasn't really much in development, it was very loosely developed at that time.

ADA concept has been around, probably in its infancy, from the end of World War II. And did not really come into light until the civil rights [movement] of the '60s, and that's where the ADA was born out of the civil rights movement. Well, nice...concept there was...it worked very well into what I wanted to be doing professionally. And so, I took my organization, and—which is Atelier, and changed gears from being a commercial planning group, and I did some residential design and basically ended that and focused on the Texas accessibility program [Texas Accessibility Standards]. It is a program that is managed by the TDLR—the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation—and it was developed back in the early '90s. I was one of the first accessibility specialists, or actually, at that time, we didn't even call it that, it was contract provider or independent contract provider where the state would give us a license or a contract to go out and try to review plans and inspect buildings for compliance.

Well, that went on for a few years until they changed the program and it was further developed into a licensee program where they're registering independent contract providers or now called registered accessibility specialists. You'll hear the term RAS—R.A.S.—that's a Registered Accessibility Specialist, and...to give you an idea of how long I've been going on that program, my RAS license number is double-0-7. (chuckles) So a lot of that, I enjoy touting that, but it's, uh, a neat program. And I still am a RAS today. Still actively look at projects, even this week, reviewing plans and inspecting buildings to ensure compliance. And, if the architect and contractor has the concept—grasped the concept of accessibility—it actually is not a difficult program to achieve. The difficult manner is in an existing building you're trying to make something that doesn't work comply. And if the owner had not gone through and, over time, removed those barriers, it suddenly is a problem when they are developing their project in Texas because we actually check on those things.

<topic>Architectural accessibility in Texas versus other states</topic>

Here's the fallacy: The other 49 states, with the exception of California, really don't check...on compliance with accessibility. It's all left up to the civil courts, and that's a very expensive thing for a building owner to have to deal with... as you can imagine. And, so, it's a true benefit to a building owner in Texas that we have this program. That at the time of construction you're actually having it looked at, and you're comfortably assured that your building substantially complies.

Not saying that it always does...some things change over time, for instance, in Arlington we've had these heaving soils of the droughts and heavy rains, and that plays extreme havoc on sidewalks and pavements and the like, which really does affect accessibility in a big way. The program, I guess, has further developed that we now have probably, I would say, 250 active accessibility specialists in the state, but unfortunately, as I mentioned, we don't have a program elsewhere that compares to this, with the exception of California. California has a program. They call it the CASP, or C.A.S.P. [Certified Access Specialist Program], and it was modeled, depending on who you talk to, it was modeled after the Texas program, and there

are some strong similarities to it. The other states we hope look to that, but it has...we haven't seen that yet.

Personally, I've been active with one of the key organizations of the Registered Accessibility Specialist Program, and originally it was called TRASA, Texas Registered Accessibility Specialists, but we've changed our name to APA, or Accessibility Professionals Association. And I've had the pleasure of being a president of that organization, and it's made up of RASes primarily, and we're branching out for it to be a more national organization, and we do have members in other states other than Texas.

The ultimate goal I have personally for that organization, though, is to take our knowledge base and experience of all the RASes and expand that out to the rest of the country and help those building owners...help those architects and developers to be assured that those professionals they're working with actually do understand the concepts of the ADA and actually meet those obligations because what we find is individuals that have been either self-taught or reading the standards are not necessarily getting it 100 percent. It may be left to interpretation—any government document can be.

And, with the experience we have, if you can imagine 250 RASes in the state over the last twenty years, we have inspected tens of thousands of projects. So there's a tremendous amount of information that's available there. We want to expand that program and then to have an advanced certification program to architects, engineers, building owners, contractors, others that deal in this industry. And, so when you are seeking someone to work on your stadium project, for example, you know that that individual has had knowledge, experience, and testing in compliance with the ADA and what its concepts are.

But the A.D.A and the Texas law is very, very broad. It deals with things from those stadiums and hospitals and buildings and all those things that we would expect it would. But it also extends out to things such as swimming pools, piers, boating platforms, playgrounds, miniature golf courses...bowling alleys—all kinds of things are touched by the ADA And that's why I think that if you just look at it as an architectural law, and call it architectural barriers, or in Texas we say *elimination* of architectural barriers, then it gives you an idea that if its architectural, that law touches it. Elimination of architectural barriers is something that's so inbred [inculcated] into the Texas program when you register a project in Texas you get an EAB project number—nobody knows what EAB project number stands for—it's the Elimination of Architectural Barriers. But it's, that was something that was set up in the very, very beginning. It's one of those terms that we use that nobody else really has a comfort level as to why it's that way.

Eudaly

Thank you. So, how about a little bit more on how your particular firm developed?

Love

<topic>Development of Atelier Design Associates</topic>

Okay. As I mentioned, my brother-in-law was a incomplete quad. He was down in Conroe area in the Woodlands, and so I...I had to deal with him...daily, from time to time. And, obviously, my wife did. And, he had the best of many things with respect to, yes, he was disabled. It was very much on his own doing that he was disabled.

However, he was placed in an apartment complex in the Woodlands. What a neat program! Well, the Woodlands is designed to be totally accessible. It's not designed to be accessible for the sake that it complies with the ADA, it's accessible because there's golf cart paths that go everywhere throughout that community! And if you can get a golf cart there—guess what?—you can get a wheelchair there, too! And it works out tremendously well. Well that's where I started understanding that you didn't have to look sterile, hospital—you didn't have to scream

"handicap" if you wanna call it that. The term "handicap," we don't use in our industry because of the connotations that some individuals have challenges with. I have some friends that are disabled that use the term frequently. But, I prefer to use 'person with disabilities' or other terms similar to that. First person is a very, very key... basis to deal with individuals with disabilities.

So...I wanted to start looking into how we can make environments really user friendly without them *screaming* "accessibility." And it's really not difficult to do. You can design in most cases, especially in new construction, something to fully comply without having to have a ramp. You can use a lower slope, get rid of the handrails and all the landings and everything else that goes along with it, and it just looks like a natural, environmental area. A walk that should be there.

And, so I started developing our firm to respond to that some. Of course the Texas program is just a matter of our review and inspection of work that other designers do. We don't really input very much in the accessibility other than telling them, "Did it comply? Or did it not?" And, when we look through these thousands of plans we start looking at it and realizing, well, they could have done it another way and would have been so much nicer. And that's where we decided, well we'll start consulting in that regard. We had been fortunate to have, I've been to lots of continuing education programs on that. I haven't found architectural courses that really respond to that *extremely* well. I'm sure that there are some out there, I just haven't found them yet.

But there's courses such as at Harvard. We, I've been there a couple of times and looking at that...where you're there for an intense course over a week. And visit with some of the other individuals who are there. I also try to attend as many webinars and seminars that are available to us. You have to have, you have to maintain eight to twelve hours of continuing education a year for our licenses, well generally, we'll all get thirty plus. It's not difficult to do, there's a lot of programs that are out there. One program that is very helpful is the Dip TAC or the ADA...Access Board webinars. The [United States] Access Board actually puts on a webinar every two months, and you can attend those very, very easily. And it's great knowledge because it comes straight from the horse's mouth. These are the individuals that actually wrote the ADA These are the individuals on the government level that deal with it on a daily basis and have to interpret what they wrote, and so they have training that's available on webinars and...neat, neat program.

And so, from that I decided that, well I want to share that information any time possible. So, through the APA I've started working with them very closely on their education committee. I chair their education committee for years, and now I'm working on their advanced certification committee. But I would conduct seminars on a variety of programs through APA, through AIA, which is the architects' association [American Institute of Architects], IIDA [International Interior Design Association], which is a similar organization for interior designers. I've even had continuing education courses at the university here, so I think that all of us should do our part in trying to good...get good information out to the community and those individuals that can use it.

I've paired up in the last several years with a group called PLAN, or Professional Liability Agents Network. Well that's the ENO insurance company that many architects, engineers, et cetera get their insurance through. And, of course their goal is to keep their insurance rates manageable by training their members in...to comply and avoid those problems in the future. And, so I've enjoyed conducting courses with them over the last...over the years and there's usually about, give or take, 250 architects and engineers...primarily architects, in the Dallas and Fort Worth area that attend that on an annual basis. So that's, that's very enjoyable.

I've had the opportunities of speaking from Austin and San Antonio region all the way to, the last year was Alabama. I was in Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, and upstate New York, and some of the other areas before that, so it's been a pleasure visiting with different people across the country and finding their interests, and they truly are, to me, more interested in other parts

of the country than they are here in Texas. Because Texas has, in essence mandated it, and so they've heard about it, they've had to deal with it, and so they get more of it here in Texas than anywhere, but when you get outside of Texas, people are just hungry for the education on the ADA because they just don't know it. They don't know what they have to deal with and what some of the ramifications could be, and the ramifications are huge to a designer or a contractor if it, uh, misses something. So it's exciting to work with them, and you feel more appreciated working with someone that's eager to learn about it.

Eudaly

So, over time, how would you say attitudes towards disability and accessibility have changed? What have you observed, especially in your field?

Love

<topic>Evolving attitudes towards accessibility in architecture</topic>

Well, I've...I have enjoyed watching it now for twenty-five years. And, so that's...there's a whole generation of society that has been educated and experienced, grown up with the ADA. And, unfortunately we still have individuals that are...more mature than that that are still producing in our society either through architecture or construction. So many disciplines of construction whether it be electrical, or concrete, or plumbing, or whatever—and traditionally in a construction industry it's from the basis of a journeyman—you have experience working under someone else that has more experience than you, and you learn from them. Well, this...these standards were so different to what many of them learned under, and so it's been difficult for them to change those old habits.

We still see in inspections today over an existing—could be something as simple as a bathroom that should fully comply, and it doesn't, and is something that you could tell that they just were either not paying attention or not knowledgeable of what their obligations were. You can construct something compliant just as easily as you can construct it noncompliant if you know what you're doing. Yes there are some difficult things to construct. I certainly appreciate that, and if you're paying close attention you can even get those things pretty close. I look for substantial compliance. That means that it doesn't inhibit access. If someone was going to utilize that facility—it could be whether it's just a curb ramp or a ramp going into a building, or a bathroom, or whatever, that it's not going to cause them harm or keep them from getting into the building using it as it is intended. That's substantial compliance. There can be some deviations in that—a little bit. You know, a little bit of cross-slope. Construction is not an exact science by any means, nor is architecture. And the intent is to achieve that substantial compliance, I think.

Eudaly

What would you say, or could you expound on your firm's involvement in the disabled community as a whole and in advocacy for it?

Love

<topic>Disability advocacy in architecture</topic>

In advocacy, I...I know I'm an advocate on a personal level. On my...in our firm on my professional level, I would say that... we're an advocate only on the basis that that is our goal to meet what the intent of the ADA is. I do have friends that have disabilities that are looking for greater compliance than what the ADA standards are, and I can understand why their needs are not met by the ADA. But the ADA does not cover all individuals with disabilities. It covers *most* disabilities. And you speak to one of the founding groups of the ADA, and you'll probably hear them say it might take...it might accommodate 95 percent of persons with disabilities, but you always have those that it cannot cover. It would be too extreme for it to

apply to every individual because there is such a broad range of disabilities, and as being an advocate I often speak.

You'll hear this at my seminars that I consider our industry very, very self-serving because I'm looking forward to Texas being compliant when I need it. And I know that I'm going to need it someday. We all age, and we all attain certain disabilities when we do that—others meet those needs sooner than others. And, I've been blessed that my disabilities have been insignificant compared to what others have been. But I don't...I don't look at myself or Atelier as being an advocate for persons with disabilities. I see that we are serving persons with disabilities as I think our industries and the industries that relate to architecture and construction do as well.

Eudaly

So, along the way, who has worked with you? Who have been some of your major allies?

Love

<topic>Key figures in improving architectural accessibility</topic>

Major allies...I would say that, very much so, it would be our peers in the Texas program. We learn a lot from each other. We seek the information from each other, try to make sure it's correct, accurate. Allies throughout the years I've enjoyed knowing Marsha Mazz, with the [United States] Access Board. Marsha was instrumental in the development and writing of the ADA, and she is—she still with the Access Board—she is not *on* the board anymore, but she is still with the...architectural barriers program in Washington, DC. There are several other peers along with that, and I've had the fortune of knowing several of the members of the access board. And it's interesting to get to know them and get to know their perspective. There's...I won't go into naming all of the many, many, many different names there, but most part it's surrounding myself with a lot of individuals that know a lot more about it than I do, and that's what I learn from.

I have an individual here in the office, Sharon Massey, she's a registered [accessibility] specialist as well, she has been for many years, and she has *tremendous* knowledge on the ADA and the other related standards. I didn't mention that it's just the ADA—or I *should* mention that it's not just the ADA—there are *many* standards that relate to accessibility. We have the building code industry, its standards and the ANSI standards, American National Standards Institute—they write certain guidelines, and it's those guidelines from ANSI that the access board took and developed their manuals from. There's the federal government's standards—several of them—the, then there's the apartment standards [Department of Housing and Urban Development's Accessibility Requirements for Multifamily Housing and for Federally Assisted Housing], or the Fair Housing standards [Fair Housing Accessibility Guidelines] that are prominently used as well. So I mean there's just a wide variety of them. And our biggest challenge is probably keeping them all separate. 'Cause they're all very similar, but they all have their unique requirements.

Eudaly

Has there been any significant opposition to what you're doing?

Love

<topic>Opposition to accessibility within architecture</topic>

I don't...I don't know that I would necessarily consider it significant—there has been opposition. The...in politics, Texas is in the midst of politics as it is across the country. Ironically, Texas was very successful in passing our program, but it's been *extremely* frustrating and difficult for other states to have any type of accessibility compliance and

obligation. Few, few states check on that. Florida looks at it a little bit, Washington State looks at it a little bit, and as I mentioned, California looks at it pretty strongly, and none of them approach the level that Texas requires.

In Texas we have individuals that are... They just don't want government oversight—at all. And they, there's even a challenge with the TDLR program that they...some feel that there should not be the need for oversight in Texas because nowhere else in the country do we have anyone looking over the shoulder of a registered design professional...and contractors, et cetera. That...there's no need for it...that they should know their job and they should do it well and do it professionally and if it's a problem, then that's what the courts are there for. Unfortunately it's a very expensive thing for the building *owner* if those things are not necessarily met.

I would also say that there are just individuals that just don't want to embrace disabilities. If...we'll hear, even today, on inspections that, "Well we don't have anybody that's disabled that comes into our building" or "We don't have any disabled workers." The law's basically based upon the *life* of the building, number one, it's not who occupies that building today. Number two is, if they don't have...if they've never had anybody that's disabled come into the building, one of the reasons may be because *they can't get into the building!* It's ironic, and the person that screams that the loudest is probably the person that has the worst problems getting from the parking into the building. And, yes, we actually do deal with people that have that attitude.

But...another one is, that it's almost like everyone's an expert on what the needs of disabilities are, and sometimes it's because they've had a family member that had some type of a disability. Our laws, though, are not restricted just to maybe an individual that's in a wheelchair. That's a very common misconception. We deal with a wide range of disabilities, whether it's cognitive, hearing, sight, mobility impairments—just a number of things. If an individual, the vice president of a company somewhere went skiing in Colorado and broke their leg and came back, suddenly they start realizing the importance of some of the guidelines and standards that we've been trying to get them to comply with for a number of years. We never know when we might have that need.

Eudaly

How do you think your personal experience with disability has impacted your career?

Love

<topic>How the disabilities of others rather than Love's own disability impacted his work as an accessibility specialist</topic>

My personal experience with disability is experiencing the disabilities of others, primarily. I do have minor disabilities...that I have...congenital deformities where my hands were deformed. But, again, I was blessed that through the medical fields they managed to take care of that and I really don't have problems—it's rarely do I encounter the challenge that I cannot use my hands as most anyone else would.

But, much more of my understanding of disability comes from observing others, and I'm the type that I want to know...I want to know what challenges other people are having. That some things that even I can take for granted—might be reaching the light switch or something—that there are individuals that cannot do that. And, then to me it's intriguing to find out, well, what *would* work. What would make that really successful for you. And, there again, you have the guidelines that were written for *most* individuals, but not all individuals, and so you can't put that extra burden on a building owner, I don't think, in the commercial world, but you could, if you were designing a personal space for that individual in their home or others to really make that space work well for them.

Eudaly

You mentioned that there's been great interest in what you do from outside of Texas, in other states...

Love

Mmhmm.

Eudaly

Can you...examples of that?

Love

<topic>Accessibility in other states</topic>

Okay. When I go and speak to a group of architects or interior designers in other states, they don't have the obligation usually to have a continuing education seminar on accessibility. In Texas there is that obligation, but one hour must be on accessibility of some form—and so it can be a wide range of programs. So one hour a year is insignificant in a career. You truly need much, much more information to be a practicing professional that incorporates accessibility into your project. Some people definitely do understand it and definitely do have that background and knowledge, and I applaud them for finding it. But when I go outside of the area, the design professionals just seem to be hungry for understanding what the law says, and always seem to come up to me after the seminar and say, "I didn't know this, and I'm going to incorporate that into my design." or, "How can I learn more about this?" and I'll share things such as the Dip TAC webinars that I mentioned earlier. There's just a number of programs out there...

But as I mentioned earlier, the advanced certification program the APA is working towards is a new life goal for me. I would very much like to see that accomplished. The Department of Justice who is charged with enforcing the ADA actually has in their development a goal to be able to provide that education certification. I don't know that our government will ever do that, so I'm looking to see if the commercial world, our world—if we can help develop that to a point that the Department of Justice or others would actually agree that this is an acceptable type program.

Eudaly

Is there anything else to say?

Love

<topic>Key figures in local disability rights activism</topic>

Oh, I could talk all day on accessibility. It's my favorite subject. But...as far as on a local level, I do hope that you have the opportunity to speak with individuals such as John Dycus or individuals with H.R.A. [Helping Restore Ability]. Vicki Niedermayer is a terrific resource for that. She deals with individuals on the frontline on a daily basis. She's a terrific candidate. John is, is very instrumental in having the perception of what's wrong in our world and has concepts of trying to address those without making someone feel that he's trying to ram something down their throat. He's a very, very good knowledgeable person. There's many, many individuals here in town. Donna Anderson is another individual that's...she's sight impaired, has a service animal—terrific understanding of the development of the ADA and how the ADA serves society. I feel inferior compared to those individuals—they're great...

Eudaly

Is there anything else that should go in the archives, you think?

Love

Oh, not from my perspective, but I hope that you'll seek the understanding and background—there's a lot of history that individuals like Jim DeYoung have. Philip Pierce is another individual in the state that's at Texas A&M. He used to serve on the access board as well. I mean, we could go on days just talking about different individuals, but I am pleased to have been a participant in understanding the development of the ADA and actually applying it. It's something I never fathomed when I was in college, but it's been a wonderful opportunity for me—and I really appreciate your interest as well. This is an important thing I think for the University of Texas at Arlington, it's an important thing for our society, and I hope that it's something that can expand to getting more information about the ADA out to others in our society. So anyone that's interested in learning, listening about it I applaud them as well, so thank you very much.

Eudaly

All right, thank you.