The profession of architecture will likely never again see a pioneering and persevering architect like Robert Lynch, FAIA.

As a 9 year old boy growing up in Winchester, MA, Robert contracted polio, and was paralyzed below the chest. Before the Kenny's treatment and the Salk vaccine, the medical treatment of that time was to put both legs in plaster casts and receive daily aquatic and physical therapy.

His father, Dr. Clement Lynch, and his mother, Eleanor, arranged for him to continue public school with the help of a full time attendant, Walter Burke. Just finishing several years with the depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps [CCC], Burke inspired young Robert Lynch with stories of building stone retaining walls and timber bridges for parks, but more profoundly, imparted the benefit of his experience in engaging a nation of young people to build a better environment, a stronger nation, and a more responsible society.

With Burke’s inspiration and support of his parents, Lynch built much of his own wood furniture while sitting on the floor, and during summer vacations from college, built stone retaining walls and trimmed flagstones to neatly fit into patios and walks, all while sitting on the ground! He was a determined young man in many regards, and it was a harbinger of his life’s tenacity and perseverance.

A month before his high school graduation in 1944, Lynch had developed his above the chest strength and balance so as to maneuver up and down stairs using hip-length steel braces and using crutches. He was able to manage, though with considerable difficulty, to learn to live on his own at a prep school for one year prior to beginning general studies at Notre Dame University.

Undeterred by having to use stairs only for classes on the 2nd and 3rd floors of academic buildings, Robert took up weightlifting with a fervor and was soon a champion in his weight class, bench pressing nearly 300 lbs, twice his body weight!

As his curriculum in “Arts and Letters” was drawing to a close, Lynch took some career tests, while never forgetting the inspiration of Walter Burke and the CCC. The registrar at Notre Dame quipped, “Oh, by the way, starting next year, the architecture degree will be a five year course.”

Lynch recalls taking counsel with parents Clement and Eleanor, and they approved of him earning another college degree. Lynch so well recalls the words of his father at the time, “For someone so disabled, Robert should become super-educated.”

After 23.5 years of formal education from kindergarten forward, Robert returned home to Winchester, and was hired by one of Boston’s finest architectural firms, Maginnis, Walsh, and Kennedy, a 49 year old company that had but one client at the time, the Catholic Diocese. Gene Kennedy, AIA told him at his interview that the firm didn’t need architectural draftsmen, they needed structural draftsmen. Robert had all the required coursework leading to a degree in Architectural Engineering, and was soon doing significant work for the dome of the National Shrine at Catholic University in Washington, DC.

Robert later designed and dimensioned all stonework for the limestone walls of the new Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore, detailing many of the granite entrances, and drew many of the inscriptions carved into stone lintels. Completed in 1959, it is thought to be the 3rd largest cathedral in the USA.

Robert laughed at his beginnings in architectural accessibility as a
niche specialty, “I didn’t choose this specialty, I didn’t even think of it. And it all began with parking tickets in 1954.” As it turns out, Lynch had made friends with a meter-maid near the firm where he worked so he didn’t have to feed a quarter into a parking meter every hour. With a new meter-maid on duty, however, he soon had a ticket every day! He soon received a summons to court for 33 tickets, but lost his case.

A group of disability advocates took up his cause and their collective determination and Robert’s dedication soon caused the passage of the Massachusetts Architectural Barriers Bill. Lynch was appointed to this new state “Access Board” and was elected to serve as chairman. Over time, some 1,000 complaints had been reviewed by Lynch and his board and he was able to rewrite all state regulations to reflect the findings of the court cases and hearings. This led to the creation of state compliance boards across the country. In due course, Lynch addressed the AIA Board of Directors to adopt Accessibility as a national issue for the profession.

The AIA responded by creating a committee of 55 architects to study this new issue and to produce new design standards for accessibility. It was no surprise that Robert was named the committee chair. Because of his leadership, vision, and determination, the Boston Society of Architects nominated Robert Lynch for elevation to the national AIA College of Fellows, and he was honored in 1977 at the national AIA convention in San Diego. By 1980, the American National Standards Institute [ANSI] published the AIA study committee recommendations as the first set of national design standards, a huge milestone for the profession and the nation. Arriving in Arizona in the mid-1980’s, Robert spent the next 30 years serving the profession, the people of Arizona, and the nation at large with his writing, publishing, lecturing, and teaching. He taught a popular course at Scottsdale Community College for many years.

In December, 2011 AIA national president Clark Manus, FAIA finished his presidency telling of Robert Lynch’s early years as an inspiration to all architects. Noting an America that is increasingly sedentary with an older demographic that is often challenged by the physical world architects create, Mr. Manus wrote, “Lynch’s story is not unique. His narrative belongs to all of us. We all began life by being carried and cared for. It’s also the future that many of us are headed for. Architecture can help us into that future, or it can be our hell.”

Robert always acknowledged that he could not have had such an amazing career and life without his wife, Diana Hoover Lynch, whom he wed in 1960, and the family love of 3 children, Stephen, Kathryn, and Susan. His many published books on architectural accessibility became a “family affair” on many occasions, and a major effort was completed in 2014 for his voluminous book, *Encyclopedia of ADA.*

Never scolding or critical of architects who were new to changing design standards, Robert was always uplifting in spirit and tone, and his dedication and perseverance inspired all around him to think of building design in universal terms. We are all so much more aware and richer in the knowledge provided by this pioneering architect. © 2014, James Logan Abell, FAIA