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DESIGN

Why Open Plan Homes Are Actually a Terrible Idea

The combining of common rooms was already losing its luster. But as the pandemic has triggered demand for private spaces like home offices and dens, designers are looking for a new solution.

By Sarah Karnasiewicz

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THE OPEN-CONCEPT interior has demonstrated remarkable staying power. The plan that typically combines entryway, kitchen, living and dining room into one “great room” has dominated home design for decades. Why? For families, it facilitates a benign surveillance state with the kitchen island as parental command center. For young couples, the loft-like atmosphere conveys a whiff of midcentury Bohemianism. For competitive cooks, it offers a stage. Real-estate agents love how it photographs. (How “airy!”) Developers embraced it because it’s cheaper. TV execs boost it because market research showed dudes tune in for demolition. Plus, it’s a surefire way to foster a “sense of togetherness.”

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Of course, there's the rub. With Covid-19 driving work and school (and almost every other activity) into the domestic sphere, families rub shoulders 24/7. As a result, the demand for private ancillary spaces—sculleries, libraries, sitting rooms—that percolated pre-pandemic seems to have kicked into high speed. Now fusty old things like doors seem a luxury.

“The den is hot,” said San Francisco architect William Duff with a laugh. “I don't think the open plan is dead, but I do think we're going to be paying more attention to creating purposeful private spaces with a more thoughtful balance between the two.”



A desk tucked into a Chicago kitchen designed by Amy Kartheiser creates the sort of hideaway that open-plan homes lack.

PHOTO: WERNER STRAUBE

“Clients are now drawn to more-private areas to entertain, such as parlor-style spaces,” said Nina Magon, a designer in Houston. “Rather than going out to restaurants, many people are having small get-togethers with family or a few people they trust.”

SPACE PROGRAM

Three tactics for carving up a cavernous room



Shelf Service

Double-sided bookcases “provide discretion and separation while leaving the sense that the room is open,” said New York designer Kevin Dumais. He suggests pieces with powerful scale. Balboa Wide Bookshelf, \$2,498 serenaandlily.com

Deeply Felt

Brooklyn designer Gabriella Horn recommends textiles that block sound and light. “I’ve installed curtains using hospital ceiling tracks—believe it or not, it can be really chic.” Try inexpensive, playful Oddluag Sound Absorbing Panels, \$30 for pack of 15, ikea.com

Screen Time

For divvying up a big space, the screen remains ideal. To absorb noise well, choose dividers with soft



surfaces such as cork, paper, leather or textiles, like this plush velvet Ombra screen by Chiara Provasi, \$7,020, [1stdibs.com](https://www.1stdibs.com)



In Brooklyn, architect Andrew Lyon reports that in the past homeowners approached him with a desire to open up the entire living floor of their brownstones. These days he rarely has such conversations. One couple with which he is consulting decided to keep the rooms on their primary living floor well-defined, adding a master suite and roof deck upstairs as an airy escape.

Sometimes simpler strategies suffice. When Atlanta designer Jessica Davis renovated her own open-plan home, her solutions included sliding metal screens, partial perpendicular walls and shifts in material—from tile and salvaged magnolia-wood paneling to white brick, for example—to create a sense of separation.

In a New York City apartment, Chicago designer Wendy Labrum took a light touch, using a movable bookshelf to form distinct spaces for two children to rest and work. These pieces

block noise and provide privacy, she said, “but people don’t need to be afraid they are going to destroy the aesthetic of their house.”

In her own Ross, Calif., home, designer Alison Pickart used custom drapes lined with sound-deadening flannel to partition off an open hallway in the eaves above her kitchen, in which she set a desk. “Now when I need to take a work call or my daughter—who has been operating out of the dining room below—is in a class, I can pull the drapes and the sound is totally mitigated,” she said.

Amy Kartheiser, a Chicago designer, recently tricked out an unassuming corner of a family’s kitchen, extending the counter to face a serene wall of glowing glass blocks and installing a bar stool. The petite nook is now a sought-after refuge. “The kitchen might seem an odd place for a desk,” said Ms. Kartheiser, “but it turns out to be the perfect breakout space, tucked away from distractions.”

Clever design interventions and flourishes like this were integral to early iterations of the open-plan concept pioneered by master architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra, but they faded away as the masses co-opted the style. “When you look at the famous modernist homes architects designed from the 1920s through the 1960s, there were nuances—pass-throughs, more screens and textiles, more subtle ways of creating a sense of rooms within rooms—that you rarely see anymore,” said design critic Alexandra Lange. In context, today’s revival of such tricks reads as a correction of the open plan gone astray.

“There’s no mystery in the open concept. No hallways, no sense of a home unfolding,” said Mary Keenan-Sadlon, of Chicago, who commented on an article about open-plan living The Wall Street Journal published earlier this year. “And mentally, it creates a sense of vulnerability. You’re literally exposed every time you open the front door.”

Science backs up her critique. “Creating refuge spaces that make you feel protected—with niches and nooks or booths or even canopies—can lower stress and help you focus,” said Bill Browning, founding partner of sustainable-development consulting firm Terrapin Bright Green.

“Clients are willing to give up a little square footage for highly functional spaces—like discrete mud rooms or dens,” said architect Michael Chen, of New York firm MKCA. “The trick is finding that perfect balance between openness and hiding.”

CRUMBLING WALLS / A Timeline



PHOTO: DOROTHY HONG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

1800s: The Urban Rowhouse

Many limestone, brick, and masonry row houses in eastern U.S. cities are built with living spaces on the parlor floor separated by large or sliding pocket doors. Without an open plan, the middle of the narrow home, with windows only at the front and rear, would receive no light and airflow.



PHOTO: JAMES CAULFIELD/FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT TRUST|, CHICAGO

1901: The Prairie School

Frank Lloyd Wright publishes a plan for “A Home in a Prairie Town” in Ladies’ Home Journal, which features a fluid, open living space and lays the groundwork for an influential new All-American style. In Chicago’s Frederick C. Robie House (1910), shown here, a central fireplace suggests separation.



PHOTO: BARCELO PHOTOGRAPHY

1929: The International Style

Richard Neutra finishes work on his groundbreaking Lovell “Health” House, a streamlined three-story open-plan home perched on a cliff overlooking Los Angeles. Considered the first steel-framed house in the country, it marks a seminal moment for the International Style in America.



PHOTO: FRED LYON/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

1945-65: Mass Modernism

Post WWII, with millions of young families seeking homeownership, developers like Cliff May and Joseph Eichler (who built more than 11,000 homes in California alone) absorb influences from architects like Wright and Le Corbusier and sow suburban communities of open-plan A-frames, split-level and ranch houses.



PHOTO: JOHN DOMINIS/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

1965-1985: The Artists' Loft

In the 1960s artists begin taking over empty buildings in urban neighborhoods, like New York's Soho, that have been abandoned as manufacturing zones. Residents box in bathrooms and sleeping nooks and hang sheets in the windows for insulation and privacy—the birth of the urban “loft.”



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

1990s: The HGTV Era

Booming development and house flippers keep the open plan alive as a status symbol among the masses. But some critics start to question whether the appeal is more about cost cutting (fewer walls = less materials) and TV ratings (there's nothing more exciting than a sledgehammer) than good design.

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