

Decor Score: Open up to the idea of open spaces

by Rose Bennett Gilbert

Q: What if we take the walls down between the kitchen and dining room so the space is all one? My wife is cool to the idea. She says we won't be able to entertain "properly," by which she means in a separate dining room. Judging from the new houses several of our friends have bought, "proper" dining rooms are old hat. What's the story here?

A: It's a story with two endings, both of them happy. On the one hand, many Americans are moving away from formal - or proper - dining rooms toward the kind of multifunction room - or great room - your friends must have.

OPEN DINING - Entertaining in the kitchen, and how! This open floor plan invites big parties into this scaled-up space for cooking, dining and taking it totally easy. CNS Photo courtesy of Matthew Kowles. With our daily lives increasingly busy and, therefore, more casual these days, it makes sense to gather the whole family in one place for meals, relating and relaxing.

On the other hand, these increasingly busy times are leading many other families to rediscover the importance of sitting down around the dinner table to eat, to share the news of the day, to become a closer-knit unit. As interior designer John Saladino once put it so insightfully, "The dinner table is about the only ritual left to the modern American family."

There are many ways to preserve that ritual, and they don't all depend on walls that physically separate the kitchen from the dining room from the living room, as in days of yore. The spacious room we show here was a center of attention at a recent designer show house in Saddle River, N.J. The wide-open space functions on three levels - as kitchen, "formal" dining and sitting room - without sacrificing its graciousness, thanks to the skills of interior designer Diane Paparo (www.paparo.com).

Taking the chill off the enormous room, she painted the walls a warm brick red and gathered stationary draperies between the window arches, purely for their softening effect. Another soft touch, the rug under the lacquer and glass dining table (of her own design), separates the sitting/dining space from the working kitchen and its businesslike, stainless-fronted appliances.

With dressy furnishings such as the vintage rosewood dining chairs, curvaceous loveseat and traditional wing chairs, the sitting/dining area assumes a living-room attitude at the same time it functions as a wide-open-to-everything great room for the family.

The moral of this two-pronged story is clear: even where there is no wall, you can still find a way to the lifestyle you envision, whether that's truly casual or totally "proper."

Q: We have a typical city apartment, where the bedrooms and bath open off a long hallway. It's dark and depressing, I think, to look down that hall as you step from the little foyer into the living-dining room. We have added a couple of sconces down the hall, which helped, but now I am thinking of mirroring the small wall at the end of the hall.

My husband thinks it's a weird - he says "tacky" - idea. What do you think?

A: You have arrived, independently, at one of the most effective manifestations of the feng shui philosophy. Mirrors can relieve long, dark hallways in the liveliest of ways: they are said to capture the "chi" (life energy) of a space and reflect it back into the living area.

We came across a charming example of bouncing chi during a recent holiday party at the Manhattan apartment of designer and teacher Jamie Gibbs and his partner. Blessed with a hallway not unlike yours, Jamie simply had plate mirror cut to fit the hall's end wall, floor-to-ceiling, so it looks built-in.

One glance down that now-brightened hall and you jump to the optical conclusion that the apartment is twice as lively and twice as large.

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