

Decore Score: The living hall reborn

by Rose Bennett Gilbert

Q: We can have either a living room and a dining room, or we can have a dining room and a family room. My husband votes for the latter - no "formal" living room, just a big playroom, I guess you could call it. We will be moving next year when our youngest goes to college. Will it hurt our resale value when we show the house?

A: That's then - now is when you need a room where your family can really enjoy living together, no matter what you decide to call it: family room or great room. In another day, the come-together space might have been a "living hall," according to historian Karen Zukowski, who says that the living hall concept was inspired by the central areas in medieval manor halls. The concept was revived during the aesthetic movement of the late 19th century, she says, when enlightened American families shook off the old "formal front parlor" tradition and rolled everything into a space for "cordial informality."

LIVING HALL REBORN - The living hall was designed by architect Alan Dynerman for a family who wanted a modern-day gathering space in their century-old Virginia farmhouse. Great Rooms and dining rooms are often what makes a family feel like a family. CNS Photo by Bruce Buck. The living hall we show here was designed by architect Alan Dynerman for a Virginia family who wanted a modern-day gathering space in their century-old farmhouse. The room is all about natural materials, natural light, and the preternaturally cheerful color combination of yellow and blues. As Karen writes in her book "Creating the Artful Home" (Gibbs Smith, publishers), "our own era has re-invented the living hall as the Great Room, which still fosters artful living."

That means living artfully now, while your family is still enjoying your home. Next year, when you are ready to sell and move, you can always rethink the room's function and rearrange things, the better to fit the expectations of others - like real estate agents and potential buyers.

Meanwhile, I say bravo! that you plan to hang onto your dining room per se. Too often in this age of fast foods and faster eating, we've been willing to opt out of sit-down dining together. What we're missing is nothing less than what makes a family family.

Q: My mother-in-law is having fits, but I want to do the baby's nursery over in black and white.

We already have a boy and a girl and I've had it with pastel blue and pink! She says black and white will cause an infant to become depressed. That worries me. Could it be true?

A: Scholarly studies abound, drawing corollaries between colors and emotional moods, even between colors and physiological reactions. Red is said to rev up blood pressure and stimulate the appetite; blue has a calming effect. Black? Well, black can be many things: chic and sophisticated, or exciting, even frightening. When black is mixed with its polar opposite white, the dramatic contrast is stimulating and energizing, especially for a newborn, whose eyes take a few months to focus.

When they do, the first colors they can distinguish are the primaries, red, yellow, blue. Think about tossing one of those bright colors into the black-white mix. That way, everyone will be satisfied. You will have pulled off your "radical chic" nursery scheme, mother-in-law can relax, and baby will wake up every day to a world that's visually thrilling.

Q: I had never heard of cork tiles for a floor, but it would seem like a great idea in a noisy house full of children and dogs - unless it is too fragile. What's your advice?

A: Actually, cork floors have been around since the early 1900s and some, like the ones in my century-old church, are still holding up in pretty good shape.

New manufacturing methods and high-tech finishes make today's cork even better suited for busy-floor duty. It's a natural, renewable material - the bark is harvested from cork oak trees about once in a decade - and it's soft and sound-absorbing underfoot, hard to dent and easy to keep clean. Cork is also a natural fire inhibitor that resists mold and mildew and is positively repellent to insects - in fact, termites won't touch it, according to cork industry advocates (learn more at www.naturalcork.com).

Â© Copley News Service

Decore Score: The living hall reborn by Rose Bennett Gilbert