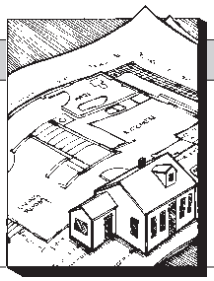


Liberated House Plans

by Gordon F. Tully

Nearly every human experience can and does take place in a house, and the organization of a house and the spaces within it should take this variety into account. This is not to say that our homes should have spaces for each kind of experience and emotion—that in addition to endless places to eat, sit and work, there might be one room for sadness, another for celebration, another for love, and yet another for disagreement and confrontation—but simply that our designs should acknowledge these various "functions" of a house.

Luckily for our budgets, we can do many different things in the same space—but this creates a tension. On the one hand, spaces need to be as abstract as possible, open to many moods and uses. On the other hand, rooms should be exactly suited to their use.

Where and how do we draw the line between suitability and flexibility? In far too many cases, I think we draw it too close to suitability, letting ourselves get pushed around by technology and ideals of spatial perfection.

The Stratford Model

One of my favorite American houses is Stratford, the Lee Mansion in Westmoreland County, Virginia (see sketch). A Colonial house, it has few specialized spaces within the building; the "technical" spaces, such as kitchens, baths, shops and storage rooms, were placed in outbuildings.

The plan is organized around a large central space for entertaining and gathering. This space has windows with long views and grand stairways at the north and south. At the east and west, a corridor connects the main room to stairs on the east and west. Each corridor serves four subsidiary spaces arranged like leaves on a branch. The ground floor is much the same, with a central service space and eight more rooms off the flanking corridors.

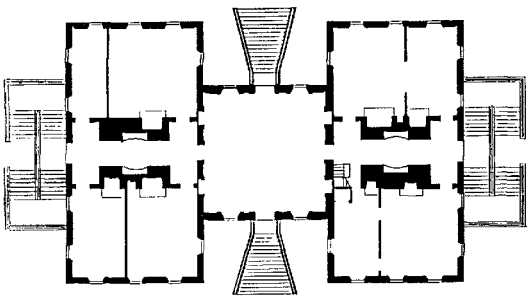
Focus in on the two flanking wings, because they illustrate very clearly what I mean by abstract and flexible spaces. Each wing is a squat rectangle set under a hip roof that is crowned by the arched mass of four double chimneys. Each chimney serves a fireplace, and each fireplace serves a room, of which there are four on each level.

You might think that the architect would have placed two or four windows on the front and rear walls (one or two per room), but instead there are three widely spaced windows—and herein lies the delight of the plan. The wall separating each pair of rooms cannot land in the middle of the wall because there is a window in the middle, so each pair consists of a large and a small room.

But there is more. The space between the windows is quite large, which enables the dividing wall to land either right next to the central window, creating two rooms of *almost* the same width (see upper right pair in plan), or to land right next to the end window, creating the narrowest and widest possible rooms (see upper left pair in plan). This contrasting pair creates a beautifully symmetrical room on the right, and a room on the left so narrow that the fireplace is eliminated (I believe this was the gentlemen's smoking room).

Using a simple and bold structure, a two-room-against-three-window rhythm, and variations in the wall location, nearly every room in the building has a unique plan. Beyond this, each room is unique because of its position relative to the center or the end, the upstairs or the downstairs, and the north or the south. Yet each room really is exactly the same. (I have no idea how the Lees actually used each room, and no doubt another family would have used them differently.)

Abstract spaces are always better than specialized spaces. They wear longer, allow more continuous and creative use, and will still respond to tomorrow's living as well as today's.



Stratford Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia, 1725

Applying the Principles

Stratford is an 18-room house built at a time when life was technologically much simpler. But its principles apply to many much smaller houses of the period.

In today's small house, we barely can find room for all the technical apparatus we seem to need to live "well." Designing a small, modern house is similar to solving a jigsaw puzzle—we search desperately for the one possible solution.

Many spaces—laundries, bathrooms, closets, small halls, kitchens, dressing rooms, offices, garages and furnace rooms—have special functions and are useless for anything else. Accommodating each of these in an appropriate place and within a limited overall shell can tax the best designer and leave little room for more generalized spaces.

The pull between the abstract and the specific is not simply technological. Our living patterns force us into other kinds of specialization. For instance, everyone in our culture needs and expects a private bedroom after he or she reaches a certain age.

Yet privacy is a rare luxury in this world. Where there is little, the society compensates by sharing and by adjusting the family structure, the care of children, and attitudes toward nudity, sex and elimination. Unless we make these adjustments (and we probably have to do so together, as a culture), we will need our privacy.

Even so, since we know that most of us get along with a fraction of the privacy we routinely expect, we at least should question how much privacy we really need. My partner once built a house for himself in London on a small lot where a row house had been before it was bombed in World War II. He designed the kids' bedrooms, which measured about 7½'x8', with bunk beds, tiny closets and fold-down desks.

Plans such as this work fine and demonstrate how to meet privacy and other needs without spending a fortune on luxuries. The liberated square footage can be added to more abstract communal spaces for use by the whole household.

Likewise, it is possible to wash and eliminate gracefully in a 6'x6' space if you replace the bathtub with only a shower. We simply do not need the appallingly hedonistic bathrooms that have become a symbol for up-to-date living. (They will die a natural death when we have to pay a reasonable price for energy once again. I wonder what people will convert them into?)

I worry about forces in our lives that suggest we are merely machines, like the popular "Transformer" toys, and must be plugged into exactly the right service outlet to be regenerated. A house is not a machine for living, as architect Le Corbusier would have had it. It is an abstract extension of our lives and bodies, a diagram of our experience, and a place to live together and share with others.

My plea is to keep technology and personal whim from co-opting all the available resources. Abstract spaces are always better than specialized spaces. They wear longer, allow more continuous and creative use, and will respond to tomorrow's living as well as today's. ■

Gordon F. Tully is president of Tully & Ingersoll/Massdesign Architects in Cambridge, Mass.