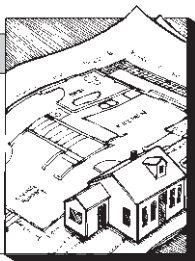


Defining Space Without Walls

by Gordon Tully



If houses were simply collections of adjoining walled boxes, we would all die of boredom or live outside in tents. Instead, we enjoy letting rooms flow into one another across ambiguous boundaries. In both new construction and renovation, we need techniques for separating spaces without using the complete barriers created by full-height walls.

In renovations, we often need to split up existing rooms without creating a maze of little walled spaces. The space-division problem in renovation is further complicated when we pull down a wall between rooms to discover that for structural reasons we must leave some remnant of the old partition, such as a dropped beam or post.

element serves several vital purposes: it defines a place for a floor mat and coat hooks; it provides a useful closet; and it keeps visitors from bursting in on the family or guests, thereby preserving a sense of privacy and shelter in the living area.

Creating a new wall for furniture. Typical examples here include a bedroom where the bed needs to face a window opposite the entry door or a half-high partition to conceal the desk area in an office or alcove.

Defining a passageway through a room. Any situation in which you must walk through one main room to get to another requires special attention. To some degree this occurs in every room, since you make (willingly or not) a pas-

sageway where the old wall was. It often works well to trap the vertical element within a larger structure, such as a kitchen island or a "screen" made of bookshelves or glass blocks. The illustration shows how I handled a complex intersection of rooms by doubling columns and placing a railing between them.

Tactics for Dividing Space

There are a number of tactics you can use to divide interior space.

Furniture. Always consider furnishings the first choice for dividing space. Ninety percent of space-division problems can be handled through furniture placement, which carries the double advantages of being inexpensive and easily changed. For example, a couch with a finished back divides a sitting area from a passageway quite effectively, with no need of being backed up by a low partition or bookcase.

Lighting. This should always be your second tool. Lighting can change and define space quite dramatically, especially when used in conjunction with other space-defining elements such as furniture groupings.

Skylights work especially well, since they combine lighting with a change in the ceiling plane. Putting artificial lighting up in the skylight well will make the effect evident both day and night. One trick I've seen is a mock skylight well in a windowless bath; the well conceals gro-lites that illuminate hanging plants. Even at night the "skylight" effect is quite real.

Low screen walls or railings. These elements are important and obvious candidates for dividing space, but must be used carefully. Use them only when a definite and relatively permanent space division is desired, and always consider first whether the same effect can be created with furniture.

The height of a partial wall is important: too low a wall or railing will tend to look like a piece of misplaced furniture and will fail to provide an adequate sense of enclosure; a screen or wall higher than about 3 feet, on the other hand, can make a space seem uncomfortable and trapped. Consider carefully the effect you're trying to achieve when deciding on height.

Full-height screens. The next step up from the low wall or screen is the full-height screen made of latticework, vertical bars, glass blocks, or other elements that are less than visually solid. A full-height screen functions much as a wall does, but without totally enclosing a space. As the famous architect, Charles Moore, showed so well, simply puncturing an ordinary wall with lots of holes turns it into a screen. Another approach, popular with Modernists, is a low fixed partition topped by vertical slats or bars.

Changes in ceiling height. This kind of change should always be used in conjunction with other techniques, such as screen walls and lighting. The most dramatic ceiling-height change is to punch through the ceiling into the next level. This is often easy to do at the top level of a renovation. Such double-height spaces form an important element in both new house design and renovation, but are complicated in design and execution; they deserve lengthier treatment in another article.

It is much easier to drop part of a ceiling. Don't be afraid to bring a section down to the code minimum to increase the contrast with the rest of the ceiling in the room. Be careful where you end the dropped section, however. Like other changes, the break

should occur in a place that relates to other elements.

If you drop a ceiling across one end of a room, you create a simple division between the high and low parts of the room. If, however, you drop the ceiling around two, three, or four sides of a room, you create a special problem requiring sensitive handling: Which is the main ceiling and which is the secondary one? If the lowered ceiling areas are wide enough, the high ceiling will seem to be a "pop-up" set into the larger, lowered ceiling. If the lowered ceilings are narrow, they appear to be a border around the larger, higher ceiling. By varying the width of the lowered ceiling around different sides of the room, you can create complex and interesting special effects.

Changes in flooring. These changes should be considered an adjunct to other changes. Floor breaks generally should run from one fixed element to another. In other words, the spaces should look as if they dictated the floor change, not the other way around.

Floor changes may sound easy and cheap, but they often involve considerable expense. Dropped floors are typically practical only in additions and new construction, but can (as in the 1970s' "conversation pit") be an effective way of creating an intimate corner in an otherwise large, open room.

Strategies for Dividing Space

Some basic strategies will help you divide spaces effectively and attractively.

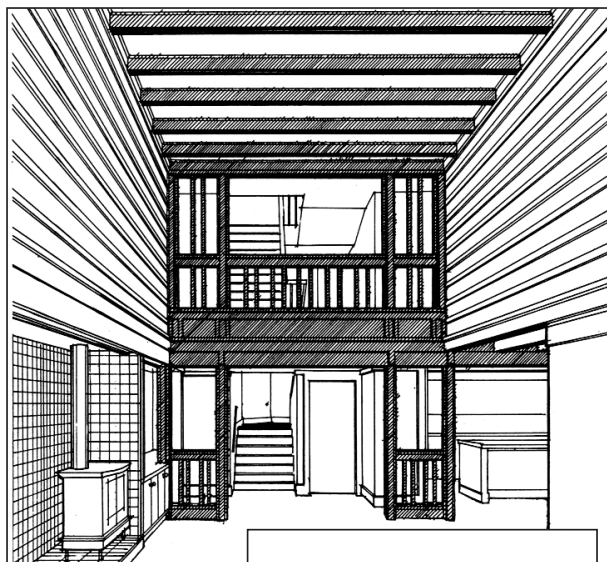
Reinforce one design idea with others. Don't use any of the above techniques in isolation. For example, simply changing wallpaper is no way to divide the living room from the dining room. You need a break in the wall plane, or perhaps a dropped ceiling, a change in lighting, or a skylight; then go ahead and change the wallpaper.

Tie partial enclosures into the surrounding architecture. I am allergic to things that "stick out" arbitrarily. A space divider should be part of an overall system of spatial enclosure, so that it looks like a logical extension of the architecture. A low railing that doubles as a bookcase or ends in a column, for instance, seems a more integral part of a house than does one that stands alone.

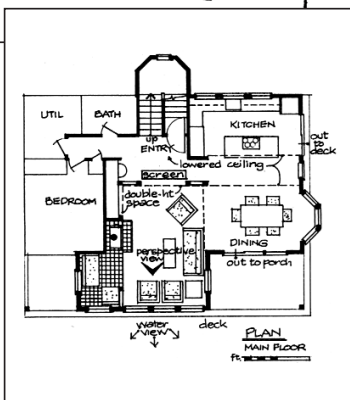
Choose dimensions carefully. Dimensions work together, and proportions have real effects on the feel of a place. There's nothing wrong with a 30-inch-wide passage, for instance, but it should be in a context of tight quarters. A narrow passage will feel less confined if it runs under a lower ceiling. If you're subdividing a large space, be more generous.

Used thoughtfully and conservatively, partial enclosures can help make the most of the space in any house, large or small. At their most successful they don't draw any attention to themselves, but seem an integral part of the living space. For more ideas on how to use them, take a good look at rooms or groups of rooms that feel comfortable and well-proportioned, and note how some of the techniques described above are used—or, conversely, how they are misused in rooms or houses that feel too wide open or too claustrophobic. Such attention to interior proportions will help you keep the latter type of space out of your own designs and renovation projects. ■

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In this seaside house (plan view, inset) a screen was needed to visually separate the stair from the double-height living room. Doubling the columns and placing a railing between them accomplished this and also served several other functions: a guard rail was incorporated at the second-floor landing; a dropped beam and lowered ceiling for the main heating ducts were concealed; and definition was given to the corner of the dining room, which extends to the right in the drawing.



Why Use a Partial Enclosure?

Partial enclosures are useful whenever you want visual separation or privacy but do not need (or want) to completely stop the flow of air, traffic, or sound. Certain situations where partial enclosures are appropriate arise again and again in designing both new homes and renovations.

Defining an entryway. Any time the front entry opens into a main living area, separating the entry with a storage

sageway wherever there is no furniture.

Creating storage. Small houses or apartments can often gain both storage and aesthetic quality through the addition of a storage island toward one side or end of a space. Often a table can abut one side of the island, with a passageway running along the other side.

Making an obstruction seem intentional. When removing a wall in an old house, it's not uncommon to end up with a chimney or a structural