

Successful Floorplans for Small Houses

The component method of design helps you make the best use of limited living space

By James Wentling AIA

Small houses are selling to two markets: first-time buyers, who can't afford larger spaces, and empty nesters, who can often afford extra space but no longer want or need it. For either market, the space you design will be more successful if you first analyze the needs of the homeowners. The *component method* is a tool to accomplish this.

The component method lets you examine the needs of your buyers and emphasize the components that fit their lifestyle. We consider four component zones:

- Community: public space frequently shared with family and guests
- Privacy: more secluded space used primarily by the couple
- Ceremonial: formal space used mostly for entertaining
- Outdoors: exterior space such as decks and patios.

This approach helps you determine not only how much space should be allocated to each component, but also how rooms should be arranged in the floorplan, and how each area should be finished.

ished.

Sometimes the needs that shape our use of these components conflict. For instance, in a starter home, a young couple will appreciate privacy in a master suite, but they will also want convenient access to the bedrooms of their children.

A different conflict exists for empty nesters. While the children have moved out, they still return for visits, sometimes with grandchildren. So, space remains important, but it's needed only sporadically as private bedroom space.

Some things we try to incorporate in any small-house plan. For example, open floorplans always help reduce the feeling of smallness, and vaulted ceilings (or rooms open to the second floor) add an air of luxury. Almost everybody wants a breakfast nook and convenient access to a deck, patio, or yard. And everybody likes an efficient floorplan, which helps busy, young parents combine activities and reduces hard-to-take steps for empty-nesters.

In the case of small houses, the likely buyers have different incomes and different needs. An optimal plan for empty

nesters is not likely to suit the needs of a young family, although it may satisfy a young childless couple.

First-Time Buyers

For first-time buyers, we consider:

- Less-than-peak income, which will limit the number of amenities we can include.
- The presence or likelihood of children.
- Busy lifestyles that may include two jobs as well as parental duties.

Because of the family, we emphasize the community component. Young buyers may want formal living and dining rooms, but they probably can't afford them. So, to save money, we sacrifice this formal living area (largely ceremonial) and add these formal areas to community family spaces (see Figure 1).

In our 1,068-square-foot ranch, the formal dining room is out, but the breakfast nook or informal dining area is included. The formal living room also is absent, replaced by a more functional family or great room, which must be big

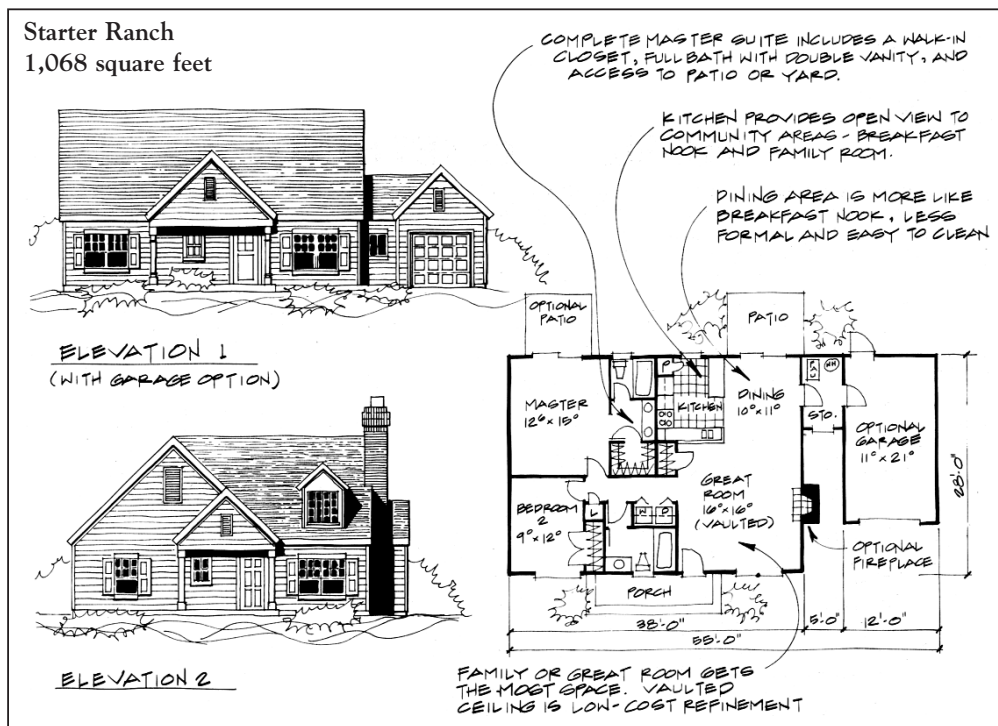


Figure 1. A starter ranch emphasizes "community space" used by the whole family while playing down more formal space. Despite its compact size, it retains the important master suite.

Two-Story 1,428 square feet



FRONT ELEVATION #1

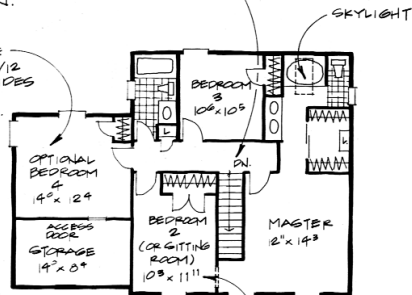


FRONT ELEVATION #2

TURNING THE EAVES TO THE STREET CREATES A DIFFERENT LOOK AT NO ADDITIONAL COST.

HALLWAY BUFFERS CHILDREN'S ROOMS AND MASTER SUITE, BUT IS SHORT ENOUGH FOR QUICK ACCESS TO CHILDREN.

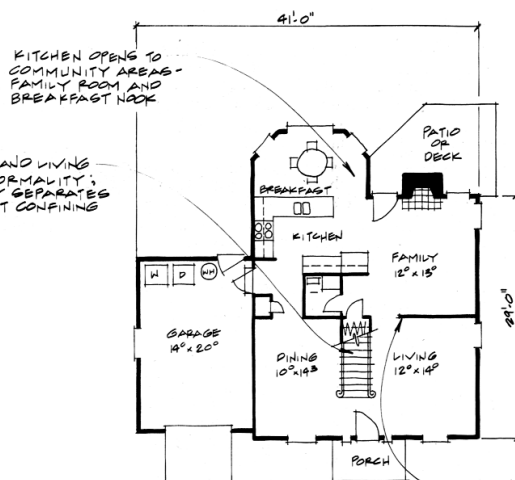
EXPANSION SPACE OVER GARAGE. 1/12 ROOF PITCH PROVIDES FOR OPTIONAL FOURTH BEDROOM.



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

BEDROOM 2 CAN BECOME A SITTING ROOM FOR MASTER SUITE.

SMALL DINING AND LIVING ROOMS ADD FORMALITY; THE STAIRWAY SEPARATES THEM WITHOUT CONFINING THEM.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

ELIMINATING HALL COULD COMBINE FAMILY ROOM WITH LIVING ROOM FOR GREAT ROOM.

Figure 2. This compact two-story leaves more room for formal spaces, such as dining and living rooms, as well as family spaces like breakfast nook and family room.

enough to serve both the family and guests. Parents should have a clear view of the family room from the kitchen and breakfast nook so they can supervise children. Entry from the community areas to a side or rear yard is a must. A vaulted ceiling is a low-cost way to create openness.

The bedrooms—the privacy component—are in a bedroom wing on one end of the house. In families with children, the need for a retreat from the chaos is vital; it is best satisfied with a

master suite that says “adults only” (despite the reality that children will invade this space). The master bedroom, if in the rear, provides an opportunity for access to a patio or deck. The tub provides additional privacy if placed behind a separate door, away from the vanity.

Two-Story

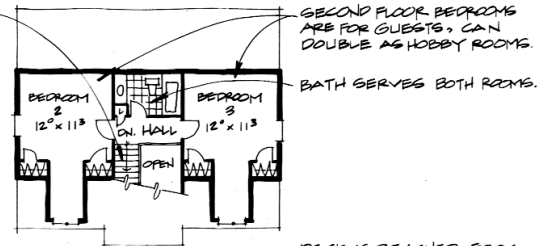
The 1,428-square-foot two-story (see Figure 2) can remain small and affordable but offer opportunities for a bit

Empty Nesters 1,750 square feet



SECOND FLOOR CAN BE LEFT UNFINISHED FOR LATER EXPANSION.

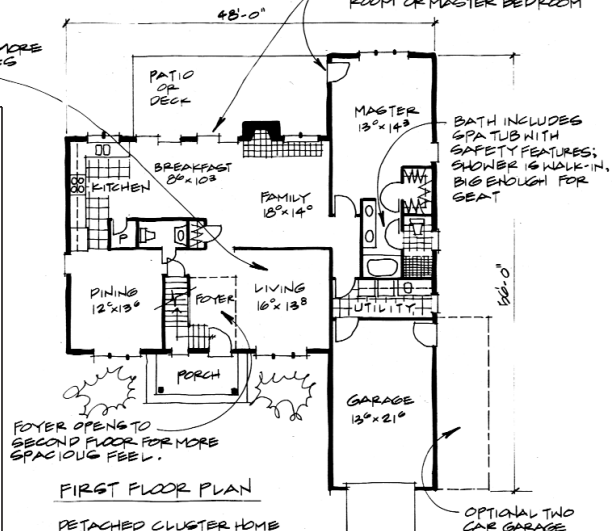
LIVING ROOM GETS MORE SPACE THAN IN HOMES FOR FAMILIES.



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

SECOND FLOOR BEDROOMS ARE FOR GUESTS, CAN DOUBLE AS HOBBY ROOMS. BATH SERVES BOTH ROOMS.

DECK IS REACHED FROM BREAKFAST NOOK / FAMILY ROOM OR MASTER BEDROOM



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

DETACHED CLUSTER HOME

OPTIONAL TWO CAR GARAGE

Figure 3. Empty nesters want one-floor everyday living, with hobby or guest space on the second floor.

more formality, a variation in design, and room to grow. We continue to emphasize the community zones, but we give added attention to the ceremonial aspects of the home.

To keep costs down, we still try to avoid unusual angles and jogs, but we do make two concessions. One—turning the gable end to the street—changes nothing on the interior but dresses up the facade. The other, a bumpout off the kitchen, serves as a breakfast nook and a formal dining room.

Again emphasizing community, the kitchen is open to both the breakfast nook and the family room. The family room has access to the rear yard or patio.

The dining (10x14) and the living room (12x14) are not especially big, since they are more formal, less practical ceremonial space. To provide openness, and to counter the absence of vaulted ceilings on the first floor, we separate them by a stairway but not by floor-to-ceiling walls.

The second floor provides master suite privacy with a short hall, compact enough to retain quick access to children's rooms. The second floor also provides expansion space, by supplying a fourth bedroom if a dormer is placed

over the garage. Doing so requires a roof pitch of 8/12 or 9/12. The fourth bedroom, in turn, frees up a bedroom adjoining the master suite for use as a sitting room, making the master suite a complete retreat from hectic family life.

Empty Nesters

For couples without children and especially empty nesters, the community component is less important than for family buyers. Empty nesters no longer need or desire to separate the family room; even for grandparents, this type of space will be used infrequently and for short periods, so it can be eliminated or scaled down to become an open extension of the kitchen (see Figure 3). A breakfast nook remains desirable but can incorporate more formal features and finishes.

The ceremonial component receives greater emphasis in our 1,750-square-foot house. A separate and formal dining room appeals to either young or mature buyers but is probably more important to seniors, particularly in traditional markets. The living room grows to 16x13 and extends to the foyer, which opens to the second floor.

In the privacy component, a ground-floor master suite attracts older couples. Secondary bedrooms are often used by guests, rather than by immediate family,

so their number may shrink to just one or two. Secondary bedrooms can move to the second floor, with a shared bath, leaving the everyday living to the first floor—much easier on older homeowners. A den or hobby room that converts easily to guest quarters may add an additional bedroom.

Luxurious baths are part of the package for couples without children. For older couples, consider potential mobility problems. A spa tub should be easy to enter, with non-slip floors and grab bars. Showers should be of the walk-in variety

and may include a shelf wide enough for comfortable sitting.

Outdoor access should come from two areas: the breakfast nook, which is likely to be a center of daily activity, and the master bedroom. ■

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