

TEN COMMON FLOOR-PLANNING PITFALLS

(AND HOW TO AVOID THEM)

BY JAMIE FISHER

When looking at a house, we all see many things — everything from the quality of craftsmanship, to the texture of the finishes, to the view out the window. As an architect, I see these things too, but mainly I see the design, and its principal element, the floor plan. It's always frustrating to see a well-built house that has basic floor-planning mistakes — especially ones that could have easily been avoided.

What follows are examples of the most common

mistakes I see, along with some possible solutions. Bear in mind that these examples illustrate general principles — the only ironclad rule is that exceptions occur. Every design must be looked at individually, and the appropriate response developed for each situation. There will be instances where each “mistake” will be the right thing to do. But if you know what the rules are, then you'll be a better judge of when it's appropriate to break them.

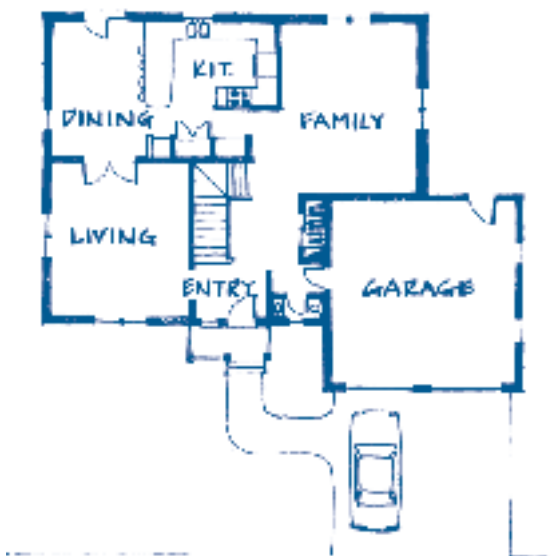
Case 1. *The Walk up the Driveway*

It's not often that you walk up a driveway and get a welcoming feeling. The big curb cut and the lack of steps or railings signal that it's a place designed for something other than you. You'll probably be greeted by the rear end of a couple of cars; maybe the garage door will be open, exposing what most people use as a big closet (see Figure 1a).

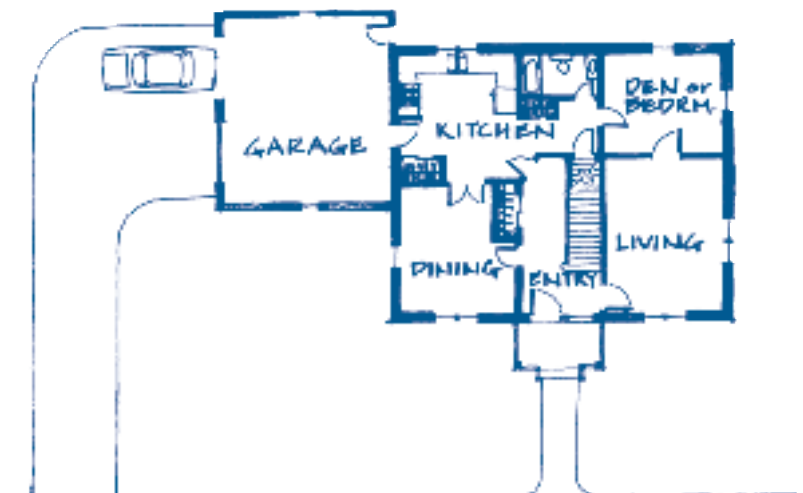
The best solution here is to get the garage off the primary

elevation. (Even the owners of thoroughbreds used to keep their horses in a stable that they invited guests to tour after they arrived.) If you can't do that, then try to provide a dedicated pedestrian path from the street to the front door (Figure 1b). If this isn't possible, then turning the garage door 90 degrees to the people door will at least put it in its proper place.

1a.



1b.

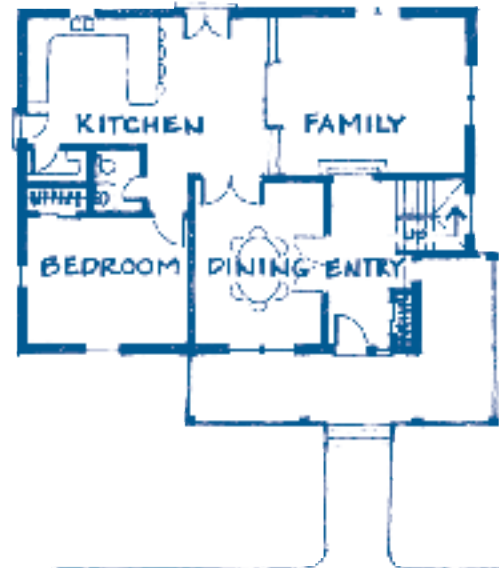
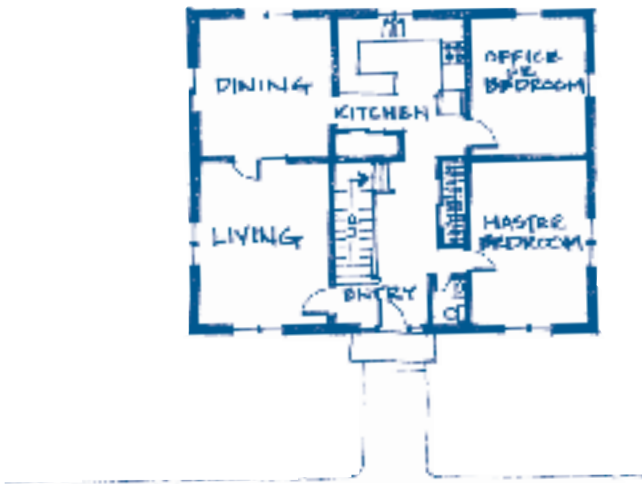




2a.



2b.



Case 2. *The Abrupt Entry*

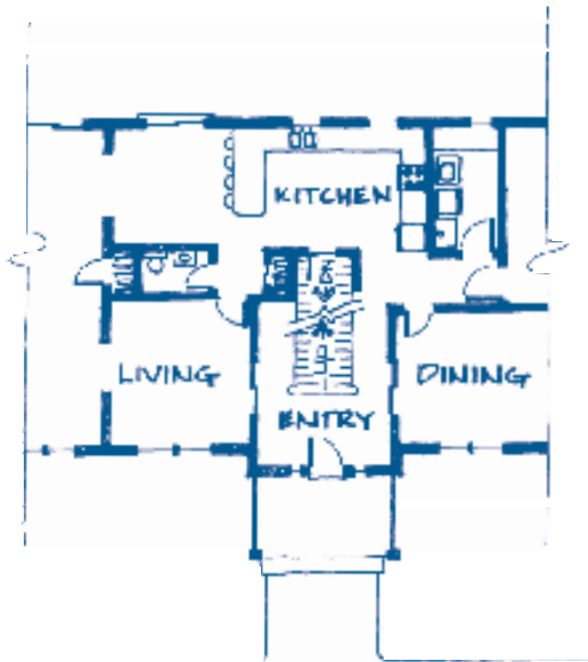
Entering a house is a process of passing from public to private. This should be done gradually, by moving through successive layers of increasing intimacy. The more layers, the more satisfying (usually) the act of arrival. The changes in layers can take many forms, including changes in elevation, floor finishes, lighting, spatial character (tight room to expansive room, high ceilings to low ones), or room focus (a room that faces an entry porch versus one that opens to an interior courtyard).

The double-height foyer, so much in vogue today, is notoriously bad in this respect. Imagine entering the house in Figure 2a. The landing and the foyer are merely extensions of one another separated by a wall of windows. The process of arrival is abrupt, sudden, simplistic. And the generous,

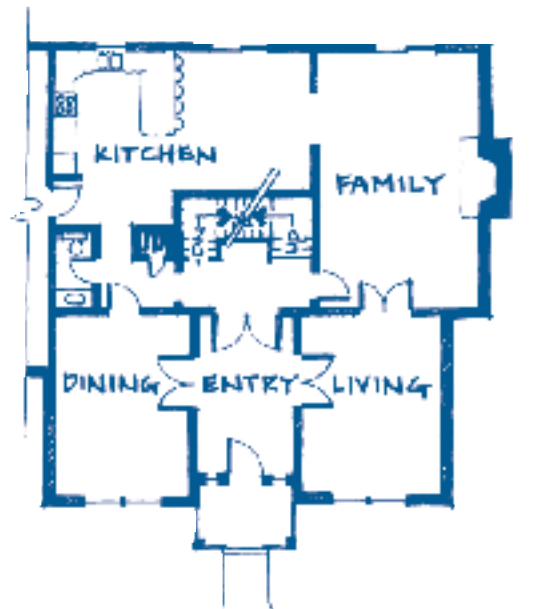
light-filled foyer loses much of its potential impact, because even though it's big and bright it's less big and less bright than the landing.

The house in Figure 2b is more modest, but more sophisticated in its manipulation of light and space. Nothing hints at a two-story volume within. You take three steps up to a covered porch with a low ceiling, then enter a tight, windowless vestibule. Your frame of reference shrinks and your eyes dilate to compensate for the reduced light. When you finally move into the double-height, light-filled stair hall, it's a delightful surprise: You don't expect to see so much natural light. This creates a sense of intrigue that causes you to look up, reinforcing the vertical nature of the stair hall.

3a.



3b.



Case 3. *The In-Your-Face Staircase*

Look at the house in Figure 3a. You walk in the front door and bam! There it is, commanding you to climb. The stair is certainly grand, but it's at odds with the floor plan. The location of the stair means that everyone has to pass through the front of the foyer — the most formal part of the house — whenever they move from a bedroom to the kitchen or family room.

The placement of this stair results from a misreading of history. In the traditional European city residence, the grand stair linked the street-level entry to the public rooms on the second floor. But the modern American house has its public

rooms on the ground floor, so the stair serves the opposite purpose of separating the public and the private. What does this mean for stair design? While it's entirely appropriate, especially in modest houses, to put the stair near the entry, its location and design should be driven by the home's internal organization rather than by the entry sequence. Look at Figure 3b. By pulling the stair back to the core of the house, you get a better foyer, a better relationship between the living and dining rooms, and circulation paths that reflect the way people actually live. And you can still build an impressive stair.

4.



Case 4. *The Up-Close-and-Personal Bedroom*

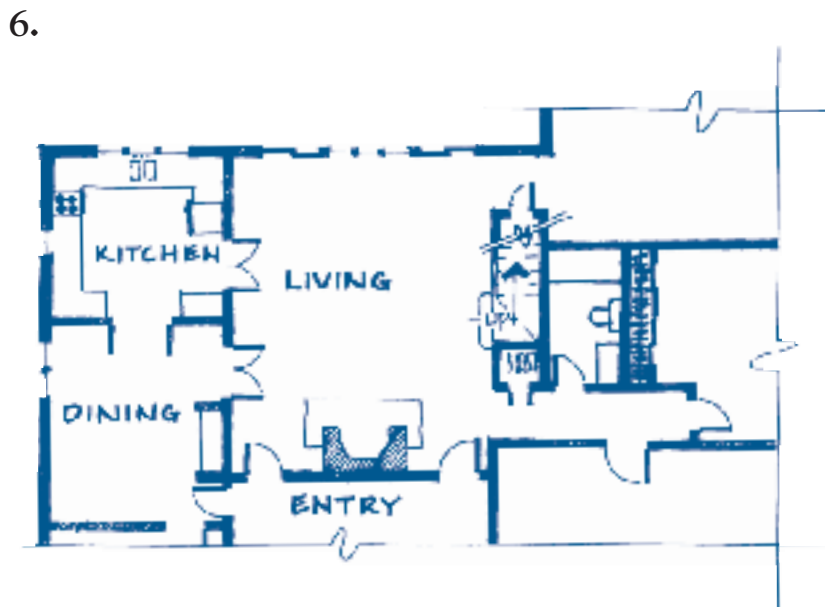
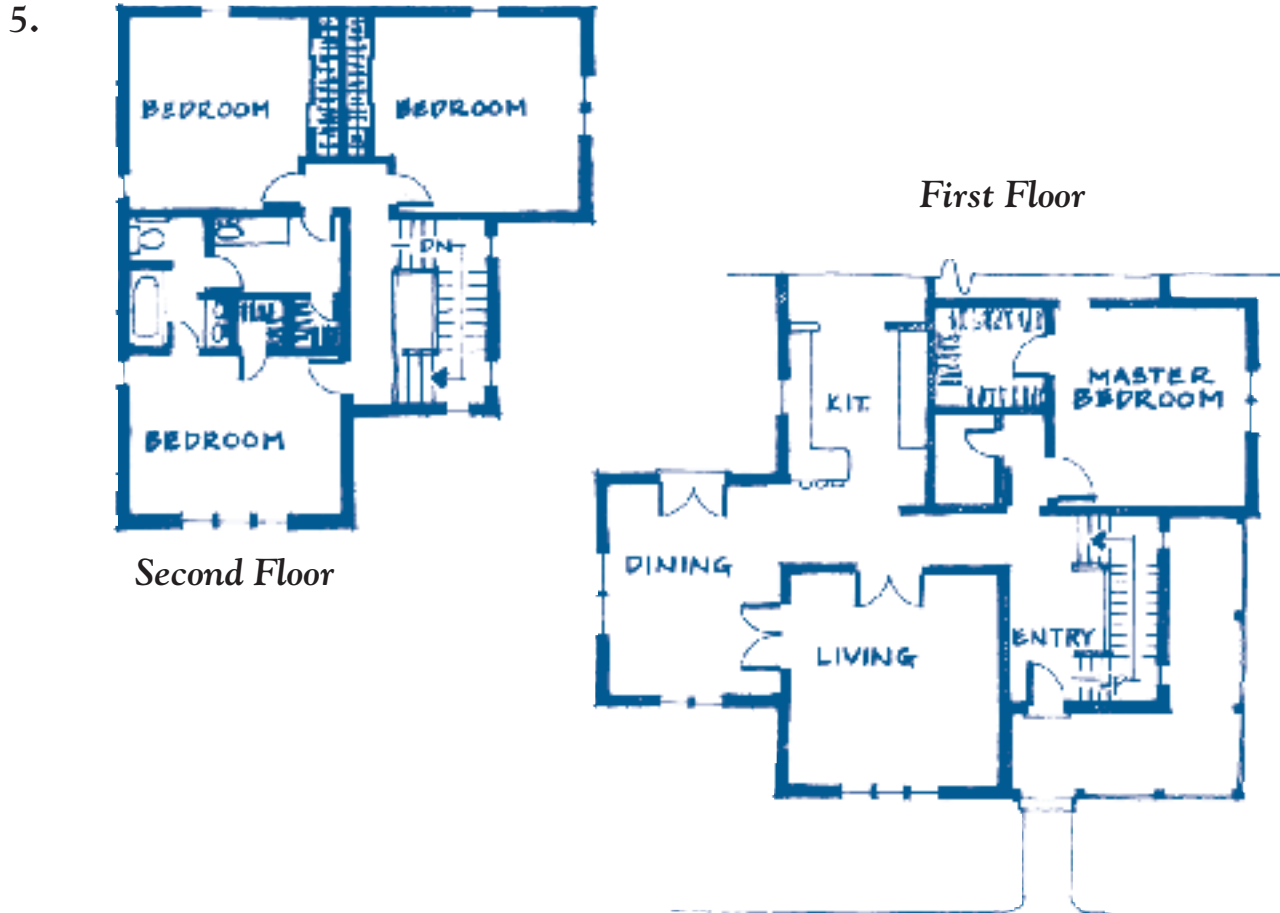
A properly zoned house provides gradual transitions between formal and informal, public and private. A floor plan that violates this expected order creates a jarring effect — it just feels wrong. Take the house in Figure 4. The door to the master bedroom is right next to the front door. If you leave the bedroom door open, you'll get a panoramic view of the entire room. This may be fine for a guest room, but it's inappropriate for a regular bedroom — and it's certainly not proper for a master bedroom. Like the executive whose stature is reflected by the number of gatekeeper subordinates around him, the master suite should be located in the most remote part of the house.

The other bedroom shown is just as bad — there's no separation between it and the home's public spaces.

Case 5. Switchback Stairs

Avoid stair configurations that make you turn one way and then the other in rapid succession. It's irritating. In the house in Figure 5, climbing the stairs and entering any of the upstairs bedrooms requires this maneuver. On the ground

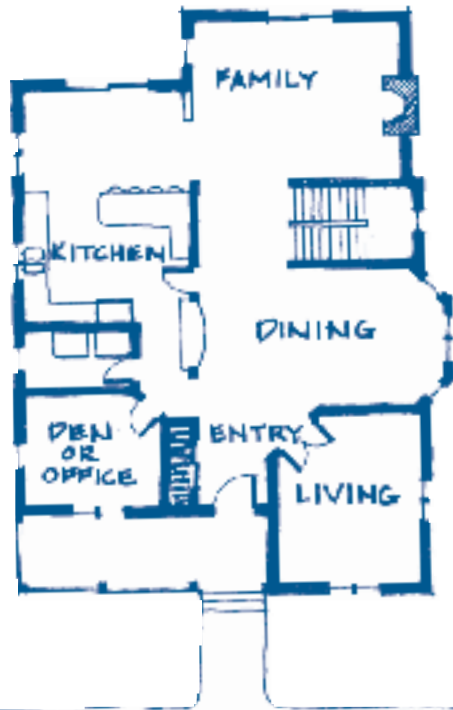
floor, there is also a proximity problem between the bottom tread and the front door. Someone could easily get conked. Reversing the stair solves both problems and improves the home's internal circulation at the same time.



Case 6. The Living Room as Lobby

Most homes have one room that serves as the center of family life. I'll call it the living room, but it's also known as the family room, great room, or parlor. It's a place for people to hang out, to relax, to be with one another. But it's hard to relax in a space designed for circulation, and the multiple circulation paths through the living room in Figure 6 leave no place for anything except circulation. Where are you going to put a couch? Or a television? Ideally, living rooms should be cul-de-sacs. Barring that, they should have as many circulation-free corners as possible, and those corners should be large enough to handle the appropriate furniture and activities.

7.



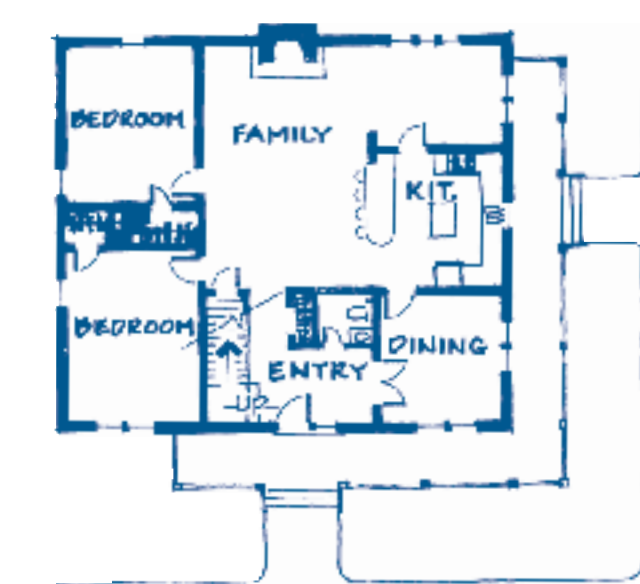
Case 7. *The Dining Room That Won't See Food*

Sit-down dining isn't as common as it once was, but the demand persists for formal dining rooms. To save space, some designers de-emphasize the dining room by shrinking it or by dislocating it from the kitchen. Both of these strategies have problems.

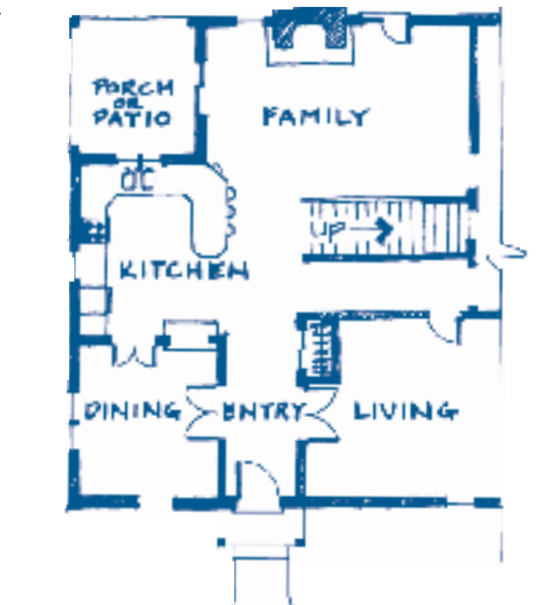
Ten feet is too narrow for an enclosed dining room. Eleven feet is acceptable if you can do without a hutch or buffet. If you can't afford to spare even this much space, then one way to make it work is to make the dining room part of the home's circulation pattern (Figure 7). Dining rooms double well as circulation space: Most of the time they're not used for dining, so the table and chairs are collected in the middle of the room, freeing up the periphery. When dining is going on, the diners take up much more room, but since everyone is sitting down there's also less need for circulation. Formal dining rooms also work well at the interior of a house with a minimum of direct outside exposure, because when dining, people are focused on one another rather than on the surroundings. (The same isn't true for breakfast rooms, which want to be bathed in morning sun.)

It should go without saying that dining rooms need an immediate connection to the kitchen. Even a short hallway will make it unlikely that the dining room ever gets used. A pantry is the only permissible transition space.

8a.



8b.



Case 8. *The Sink That Turns Its Back*

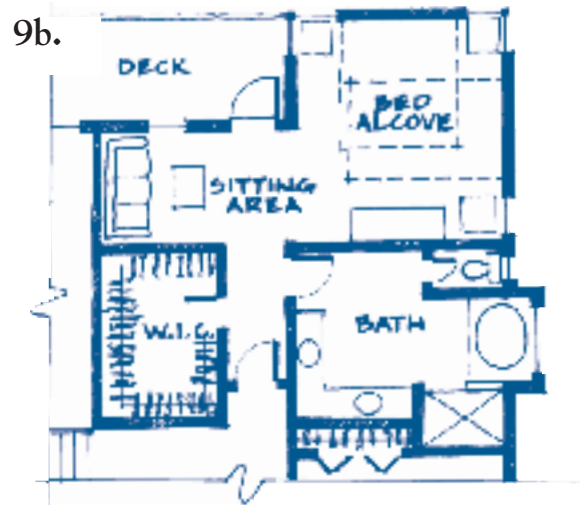
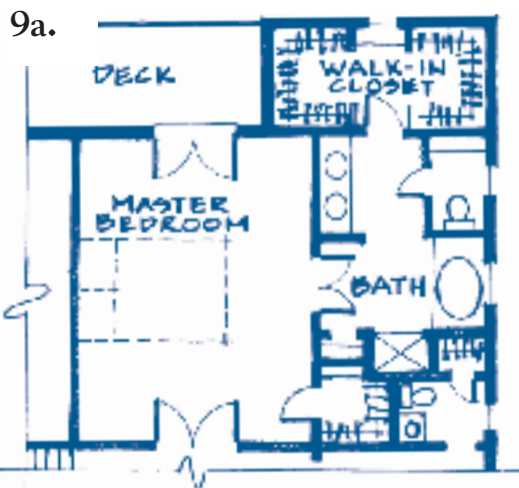
Americans have long expected to find a window over the kitchen sink. As kitchen plans have become more integrated into family rooms, however, this has sometimes resulted in the cook having his or her back to the activity in the family room, as with the plan in Figure 8a. A sim-

ple, elegant solution is shown in Figure 8b. The cook gets a window, but with a less than 90-degree turn of the neck can face either a visitor sitting on the bar stool or the people in the family room.

Case 9. The Royal Bed Chamber

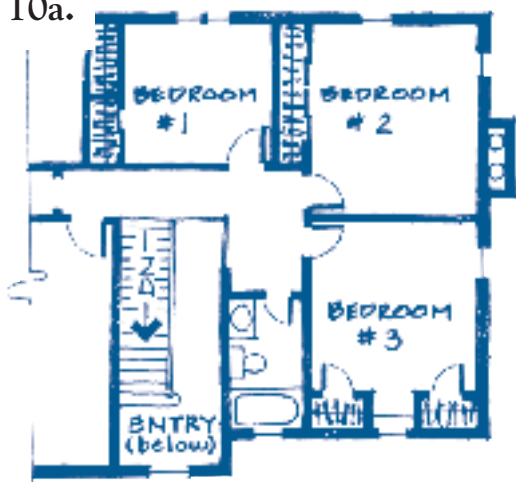
The problem here is a design that celebrates knee-jerk formality but that doesn't work well or feel good. Take the master suite in Figure 9a. It's both formal and symmetrical. The opposing sets of double doors — a solid pair of doors to the hallway and a pair of French doors to the deck — provide a strong visual axis, while the placement of the bathroom door creates a secondary axis. But to what end? The single light source at the end of the room will create an irritating glare. The only place to put a bed is opposite the bathroom door, leaving no room for secondary activities like exercising, reading, working, or sewing. The view through the French doors from the bed consists mostly of the blank wall. And moving between the two sets of doors requires you to walk around the foot of the bed.

A more sophisticated use of this space is the series of informally connected, irregular rooms in Figure 9b. The entrance



to the suite is a recessed door with a dropped soffit. Inside the entry, a short hallway separates the bathroom and the walk-in closet. The closet and the bathroom serve as a dressing room. As you move farther into the suite, the door to the deck is ahead. To the left is a small sitting area with enough room for a couch, a desk, an exercise machine, or a crib. To the right is the bed alcove, with light coming in from three sides. It can accommodate a bed in two different positions depending on the view, the seasons and the owners' whims.

10a.



10b.



Case 10. The Maid's Room

People don't have maids' rooms anymore, but some secondary bedrooms deserve the name: They're cramped, dark, awkward. It seems that the grander the master suite, the meaner the other bedrooms. If possible, try to provide at least one secondary bedroom with space for either a queen-size bed or a pair of twin beds. These rooms should also accommodate one or more nightstands, a dresser, and preferably a desk.

Size is only part of the problem. Although small bedrooms are a fact of life, an intelligent layout can make them more usable. The placement of the doors drives the layout. (This is true of all rooms, but it's more pronounced with small ones.) When you enter the room you shouldn't walk into the side of a bed or another piece of furniture. And you shouldn't have to weave through a maze of furniture to get from the door to the closet, as you do with bedrooms 1 and 3 in Figure 10a. The surest way to avoid this problem is to place the closet near the entrance but outside the swing of the entrance door, as is done in the revised layout in Figure 10b.

There's also a temptation in a small room to place the entrance door's hinges 4 inches away from an adjoining wall so that it lies neatly against the wall when open. But it's often better to place them 15 to 18 inches away from the wall, since this leaves room behind the door for a hamper or coat rack. Bedrooms 1 and 3 in Figure 10b both use this technique.

Finally, it's best to have natural light entering a small room from two directions, as is the case with bedrooms 2 and 3 in Figure 10b. If that's not possible, then put two windows on the outside wall, or place one window off-center so that light washes one of the side walls, reducing harsh glare, both of which were done in bedroom 1 in Figure 10b. ■

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