



Circulation: A Moving Experience

by Gordon Tully

House planners usually focus on spaces when they create a design. They decide what spaces are needed, size and arrange them, then polish up the results.

In my own work, I try to think about how spaces are linked, through elements collectively known as “circulation.” These circulation elements include halls and galleries, and those parts of rooms people move around in.

Two Kinds of Circulation Space

There are two types of circulation space: “internal” and “public.” Internal circulation space serves the space it is in, while public circulation space serves other spaces.

Look at the plan of the renovated living room (Figure 1). The internal circulation space has been darkened, while the public circulation space is shown in a lighter shade.

Notice how the public circulation gets you to your destination — in this case, the living room. Once there, you can either sit and talk or move around using the internal circulation. Consider the nice balance between rest and

movement in the room. You are not compelled to move, but if you choose to, it is easy and convenient. In order to relax in a space, you need this balance between rest and movement.

Although the public circulation area is part of the living room, it is not defined by walls. The space must be there, however — a fact you can easily prove by blocking this route with furniture.

Now look at the drawing of the same living room before renovation. Notice the clearly defined public circulation path running diagonally through the living room. See how the public corridor through the room upsets the balance between movement and rest.

It's tempting to think of public and internal circulation as just abstract concepts. But imagine that you are sitting in the original living room talking to someone on the opposite side of the room. A person walks between the two of you, interrupting your conversation, if only for a moment. On the other hand, a person using the public circulation route at the other end of the renovated living

room will have minimal impact on your private conversation.

The Central Hall

Public circulation also occurs in the separate spaces we call halls, corridors, galleries, entries, and passages. It is nearly impossible to draw a floor plan that lacks all of these separate public circulation spaces, but some plans make more use of hallways than others.

Look at the two plans of contemporary 18th century houses, one in Massachusetts (Figure 2), the other in Virginia (Figure 3).

In the northern house, the separate circulation spaces are kept to a minimum and consist entirely of a tiny entry and the stairway linked to the upstairs hall. In this plan most of the public circulation takes place within the rooms, linked only by doorways. By contrast, the most important space in the southern house is the central hall, which contains a monumental staircase, connecting each room in the house. While it is possible to move between adjacent rooms by passing through a door, there is always another route through the central hall.

These two houses exemplify two distinct circulation patterns, which I call the “central hall” plan and the “linked rooms” plan.

Look again at the New England house in Figure 2, a classic linked-room plan. Because the back kitchen does not open off the front hall, the two front

Improving Circulation

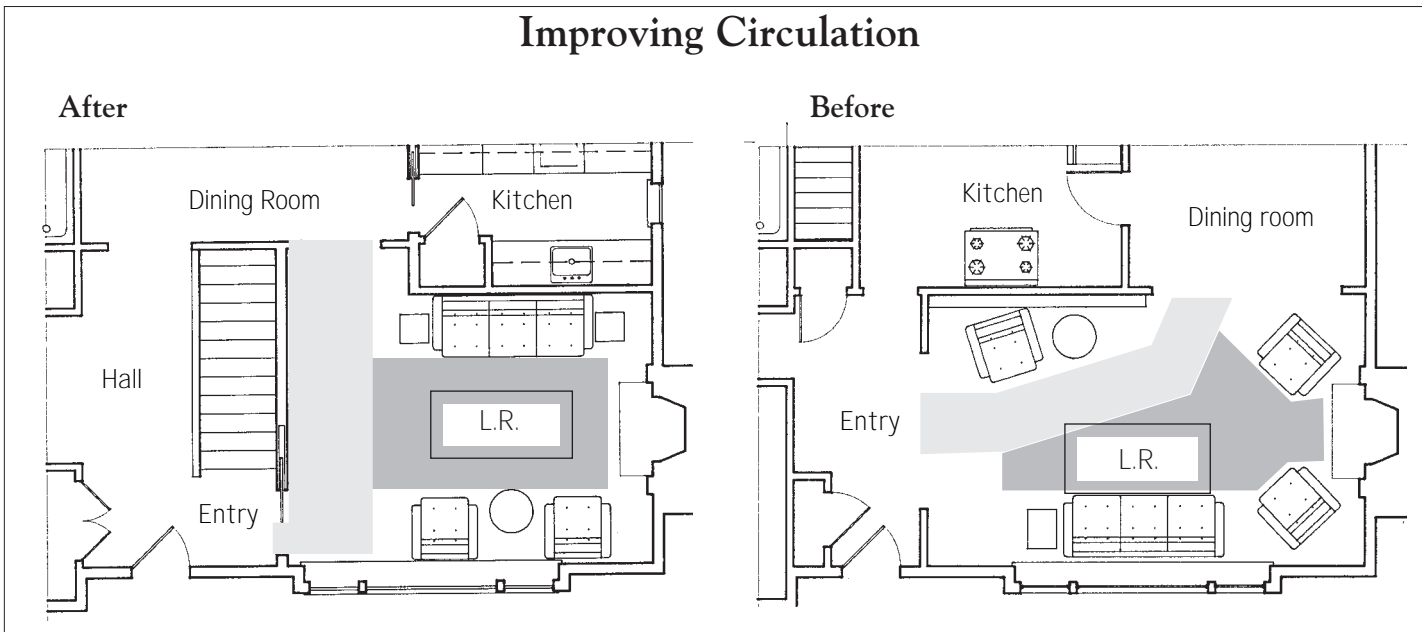


Figure 1. In this renovated living room design (left), the public circulation runs across the end of the room, leaving uninterrupted internal circulation in the seating area. Before the living room was renovated (right), public circulation cut through the internal circulation, interrupting any sense of privacy.

rooms have public circulation through them. This creates a loop of public circulation through the entire downstairs. This plan works fine as long as each room is large enough. But there should be room for a seating group around the fireplace and a public passage outside the group. This public circulation must avoid the “cut through” type of plan shown in Figure 1.

How Does It Feel?

Circulation impacts more than simple traffic control. Consider how you feel when you move directly from room to room, versus moving through a central hall between rooms.

Moving directly from room to room through a door can feel abrupt. On one side of a door the family might be sitting around the fireplace; on the other side there might be music, an intimate conversation, or an argument. Passing through a door in a wall is something like moving offstage in one play and suddenly finding yourself onstage in another.

On the positive side, a linked-room plan implies an intimate, cooperative sort of life. Imagine the 18th century family seated at the big table in the kitchen. Mother is sewing, father is reading the Bible, the kids are studying. The focus is on staying put around the fire, being together.

Exit Stage Left

When you move from a room into a central hall, the experience of movement is very different, even though you pass through a doorway. You have more choices once you are in the hall. You can catch your breath between encounters, have a private conversation away from the others, reprimand the children, receive newcomers. The central hall plan makes coming and going easy and graceful, thus encouraging entering and leaving. It presents a classical vision of hospitality and independence.

Continuing the theater analogy, with the central hall plan you move offstage from the first room into a sort of “backstage,” where you can collect yourself before going onstage again in the next room.

Back to the Trees

The old houses in the above examples didn't have the many specialized

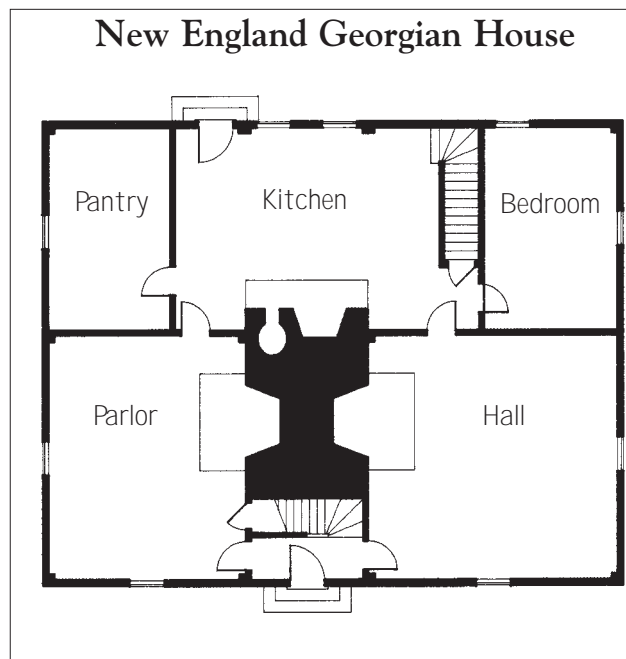


Figure 2. In this 1730s New England house, there is no central hall — a classic “linked room” plan with public circulation paths running through every room. Poor circulation is the tradeoff for a sense of intimacy and togetherness.

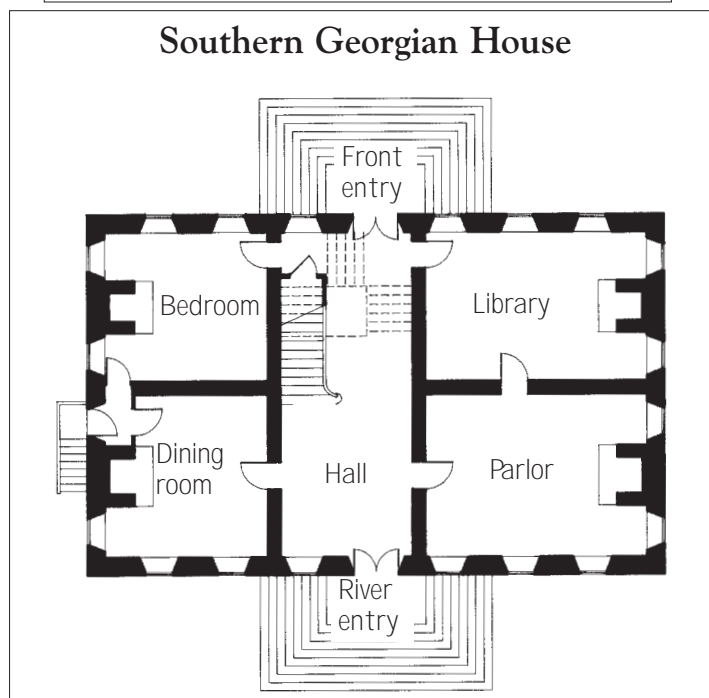


Figure 3. This 1730s southern house has a “central hall” plan, with the fireplaces split up and moved away from the center of the house to the end walls. The central hall provides public circulation to each room, greatly improving the overall circulation pattern. The spatial effect is more open and less intimate than in the linked-room plan.

spaces we have come to expect in homes today. Homeowners want separate kitchens and baths, a laundry and mud room, storage closets, and utility rooms. To accommodate these specialized spaces, another plan type has become common, one I call “treelike.”

The idea behind such a plan is to arrange the rooms or spaces like leaves along a system of branches (see “Fine-Tuning the Floor Plan,” *Building With Style*, 9/93). Unlike the other plan types, treelike circulation fosters a sharp separation between movement and rest. You can't use the long narrow halls for much of anything except movement.

Few of today's plans are of all one type or another. Often, the living spaces are arranged in a linked-room plan, to which is attached a “treelike” pattern.

In conclusion, the quickest way to spot a “good” plan is to study its circulation patterns. Focusing your attention on how people circulate in a house will make you a better planner, or at least help you give constructive criticism to your clients' plans. ■

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