



Graceful Transitions

by Gordon Tully

Previously I suggested that it's an abrupt experience to move directly from one room to another through a doorway. Moving through a transition space, like a hallway, allows you to get prepared for the next event, especially in small houses. Here are some tricks you can use to make the passage between separately defined rooms more graceful.

Is It a Doorway or a Hall?

An ordinary 4-inch stud wall can feel like a thin screen, especially if the door casings are narrow or absent. A thin wall provides little natural sense of enclosure, but if you make the walls thick, as in southern houses with brick walls, or southwestern houses made of adobe, then the walls take on a sense of permanence, which separates two rooms very decisively.

If walls can't be thick, wide door casings (perhaps thickened with moldings and a backband) can provide just enough transition to make a difference. Walls that accommodate double

sliding doors, as in double-parlor plans, can accomplish the same effect.

Another device for creating transition is found in many Craftsman-style homes. Create a storage wall or closet between rooms by erecting a second wall parallel to the first, then put a doorway opening in each of the two walls. This creates a short passageway between the two doorways, which can be enhanced by building in shelving or drawers in the side walls (Figure 1).

Fireplaces and flues also provide excuses for creating passages, like the ones shown in Figure 2. A similar effect, although on a smaller scale, can be created by adding a continuous bookcase on the wall. The doorway through the wall and bookcase becomes a transition through a rectangular arch.

Wall Openings Eliminate Surprises

Another way to ease the transition between rooms is to add glazing. This lets a person preview what's on the

other side of a door. Naturally, this compromises visual privacy, but it maintains acoustic privacy and allows control of air circulation.

I once visited designer Alexander Girard's adobe house in New Mexico. His kitchen was completely enclosed in a separate "blockhouse" built inside a larger room (Figure 3). The blockhouse walls didn't reach the ceiling, and there were small windows between the kitchen and the outer room as well as doorways in and out (Figure 4).

The effect of the design was enchanting — you felt like a fish swimming in and out of the rocks as you entered and left the kitchen. Girard had used two of the devices mentioned above — thick walls and additional openings — to lubricate the transition between the rooms. And because the walls were thick and stood on their own, he could use a third device, the elimination of the top of the wall.

Define the Direction of Movement

There is yet another reason why the Girard scheme works so well. The small room is definitely "inside" the big one, and that clarifies the direction of movement. You are never puzzled about whether you are going in or coming out, as when you pass between two equal-sized rooms with thin walls.

Installing ordinary double-hung windows in an interior wall is another way to make openings between rooms. If you go the extra step and install exterior siding on one side of the wall, you will define an inside and an outside, further clarifying the transition between the rooms. This idea, which at first sounds kooky, is very useful in office planning, but also has its place in the home, especially when you need to borrow light from another room.

Traditional paneling serves a similar function. A fully paneled room with pilasters and a cornice feels very much like an outdoor room, as if the walls of the space were the facades of four surrounding buildings. When you go through a door in such a wall, you have the sensation that you are leaving the room and entering another building. Used this way, classical paneling eases the transition between rooms. Blank modern paneling does

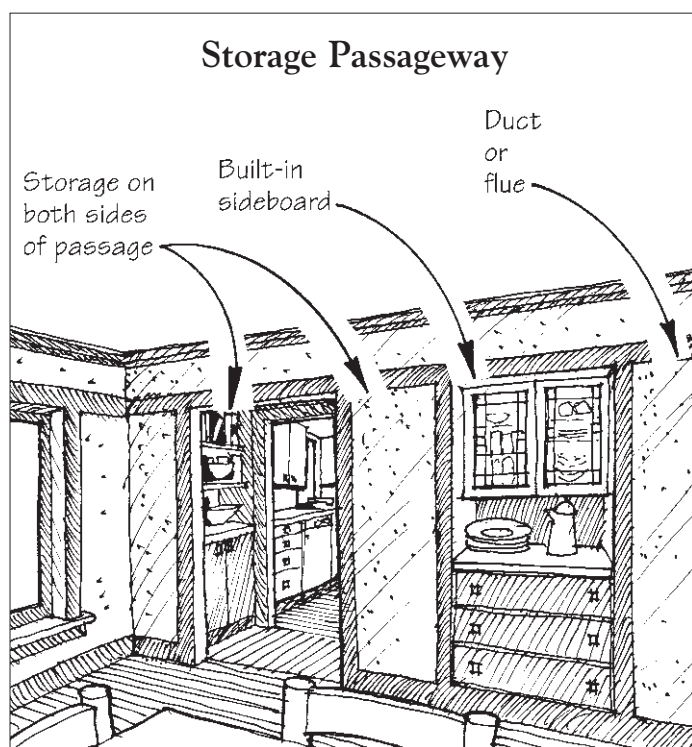


Figure 1. Two walls built 3 feet apart separate the dining room from the kitchen. Between the walls are storage units on both sides of the passage, a built-in sideboard, and space for a duct, flue, or possibly a basement stair. The "double door" passage makes a nice transition between rooms.

Thick Storage Walls

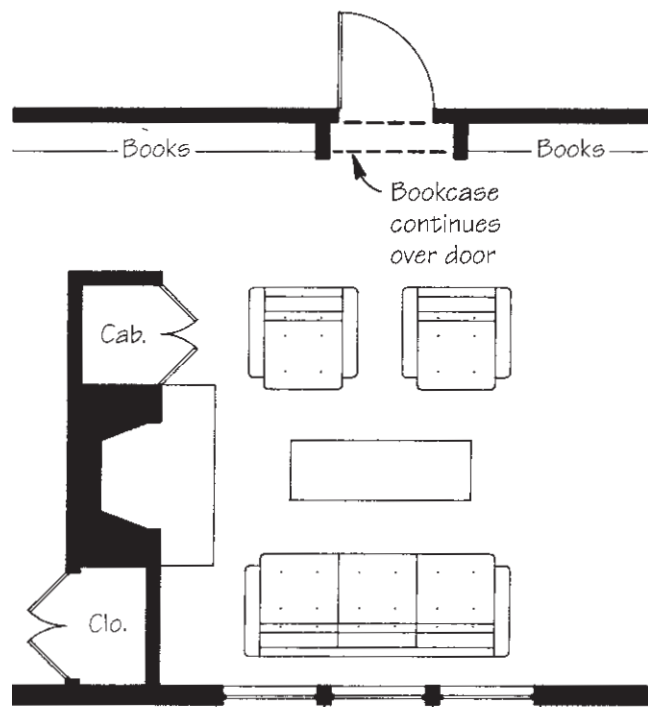


Figure 2. Bookshelves surrounding a doorway (top of drawing) can create an arch, which adds a graceful, spatial transition between rooms. A fireplace can also create a "thick" storage wall between rooms.

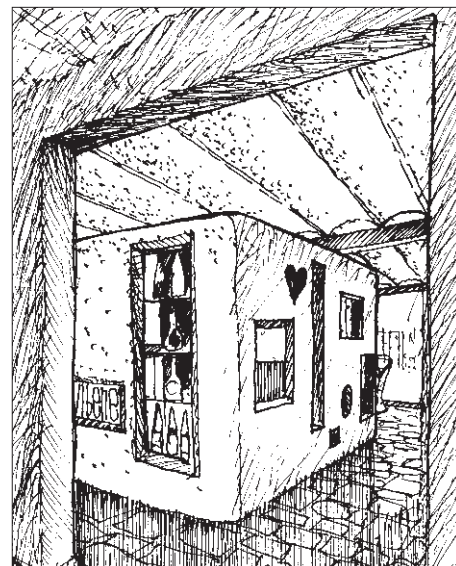


Figure 4. This view of the "outside" of Girard's "Blockhouse Kitchen" is drawn from inside the dining room. A person moving into the "Blockhouse" is treated to interesting transitions, both physical and visual.

not have the same effect.

Elements That Ease Transitions

There are many other ways to ease the transition between rooms, and all of them need to be in the designer's repertoire.

One simple measure is to change floor levels at the doorway. The act of moving up or down stairs creates a diversion that helps elaborate the passage between rooms. Naturally, this is unacceptable in a house intended to be accessible, and it always complicates the framing. But the effect is dramatic and effective.

Sometimes the ceiling on one side of a door can be made lower than that on the other side. By itself this won't help much, but if you run the low ceiling into the higher room, you create a noticeable transition space under the lowered ceiling.

Try, whenever you can, to insert a little passageway between connecting rooms. As we've seen, closets, baths, staircases, and other devices can be manipulated in planning to create these linking spaces. The effects of avoiding abrupt doorways between adjacent rooms will be worth your planning efforts. ■

Blockhouse Kitchen

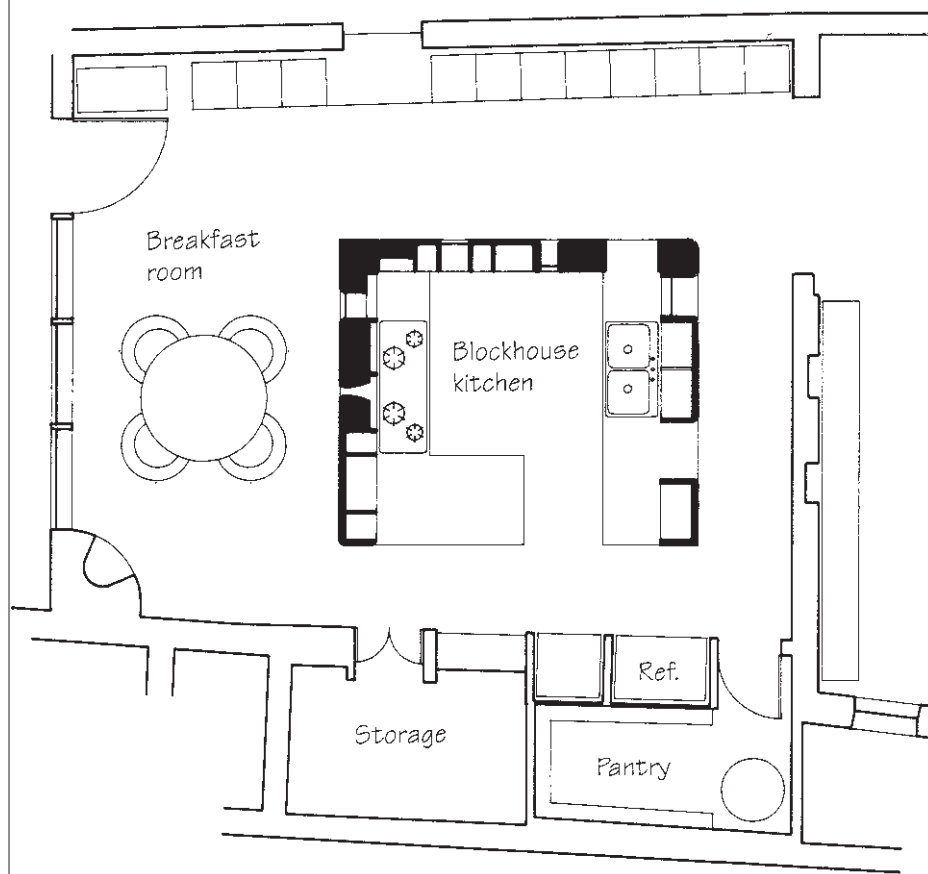


Figure 3. This floor plan shows Alexander Girard's "kitchen within a kitchen." Openings in the thick adobe walls offer plenty of visual transitions between odd-angled rooms.

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