

Using Room Dividers

by Clay Johnson

Whether in a remodel or in the construction of a tightly-budgeted new home, there are many times we would like to make a tight space feel larger than it really is. One good way is the careful use of room dividers.

Further dividing already cramped quarters might seem counterproductive, but when done properly it works. Japanese gardens are a good example. Walking through a Japanese garden, you can never see all of the garden at once. You are continually walking around a corner of a hedge or garden wall and discovering another little scene. If you have the opportunity, spend an hour in one of these gardens and then measure the actual size. You will be surprised how it seems much larger than it really is. With house design, you can use partial-height partition walls and other room dividers to accomplish the same thing.

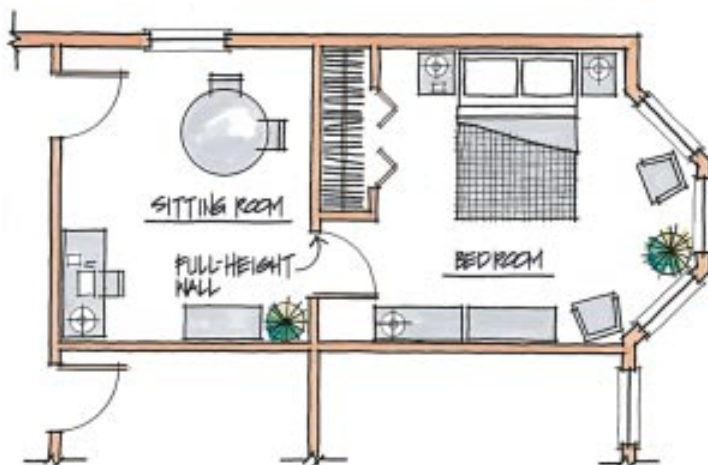
Closet Tricks

When most people walk into a room, they observe what is before them and mentally compare it to other rooms that they are familiar with. By looking at the edges of the space — the corners and where the walls and ceiling meet — people mentally define the volume of the room. An important factor in this observation is how much we can see at once. If we can't see all the edges, we don't know exactly how large the room is. This is why a divider can make a space seem larger than it is.

By obscuring the edges of a room, the divider implies that the room may extend farther. You can get double duty by incorporating a closet into the divider. Figure 1 shows a cramped master bedroom. When you enter the sitting area, you're faced with a smallish room; step through the door into the bedroom and you're faced with another small room.

Opening Up a Small Bedroom

Before



After

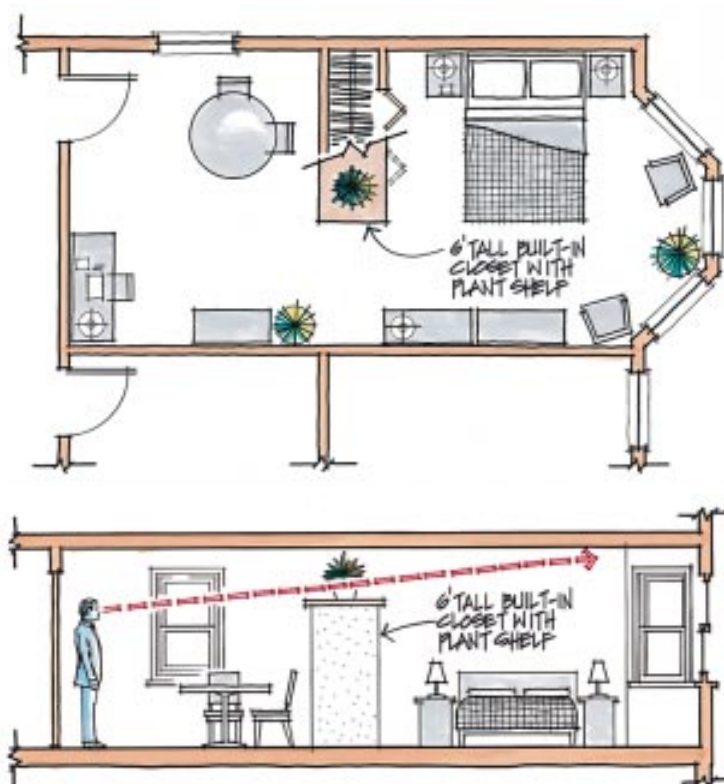


Figure 1. Replacing the partition wall with a 6-foot-tall built-in closet creates a spacious feeling master bedroom while preserving much needed storage.

Replace the wall between the two rooms with a 6-foot-high closet. Now when you enter the sitting area, you see the corner of the closet and realize that the room extends beyond. This gives the sense of a larger total space. Holding the height of the closet to 6 feet adds to this feeling, because the ceiling extends

beyond the sitting area and allows the natural light from the bedroom to filter over the plant shelf.

If, instead of adding the closet, you removed the wall and simply replaced it with a 4-foot-tall hutch or dresser, the effect would not be the same at all. Entering the room, you would be able to

see everything in the space and “size it up” immediately. The closet actually creates the illusion of greater space, while maintaining privacy and providing storage.

Partitions for the Kitchen

Modern kitchens are also an excellent place to use a partial-height wall (Figure 2). Many clients want their kitchens to be open and connected to the dining area, so the cook can socialize with guests who aren’t standing right in the kitchen. But once the meal is served, you don’t want to see the mess left in the sink and on the counters. It’s nice to sit down at a table that is not “in the kitchen.”

A 4-foot-high partition wall is the perfect “one way mirror” to resolve this conflict. With an attractive cap on this wall, a guest can stand and rest a glass of wine and talk with the cook. When dinner is served, everyone sits down to the dining table, lowering their line of site. In a sitting position, the only thing in view is the upper cabinets, effectively separating the dining area from the kitchen. Note that the height of the half-wall is not cast in stone, and you may have to adjust it a few inches up or down to get the desired effect.

Try Before You Buy

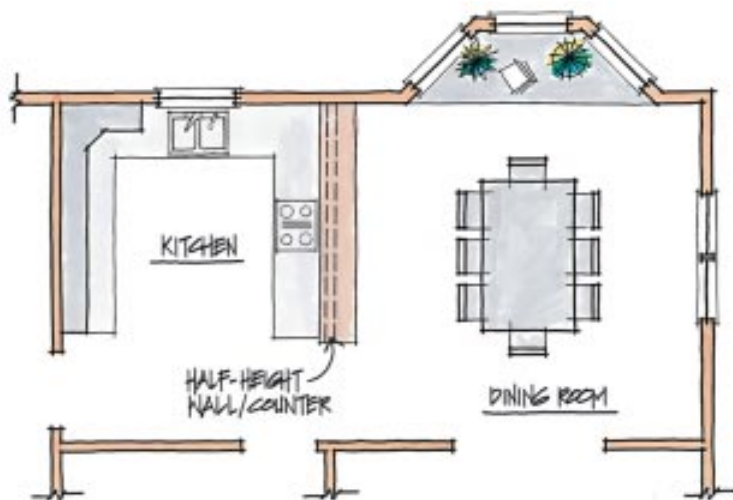
You and your clients can learn more about how these concepts work without breaking out the demolition hammer. I recommend using large sheets of cardboard from old refrigerator boxes to mock up examples in the space you are considering. To get a sense of what the area is going to be like, tack up the cardboard “partitions.” Bring chairs in and sit down. Walk through the area as if you were living in the space. This little exercise is easy and fun, and gives a good impression of what the finished space will be like.

Remember, there’s a limit to this design strategy. Don’t divide an area into spaces that are smaller than would be reasonable to use individually.



Clay Johnson, AIBD, designs new homes, remodels, and additions in Davis, Calif.

Kitchen Half-Wall



Before Dinner



Dinner Time

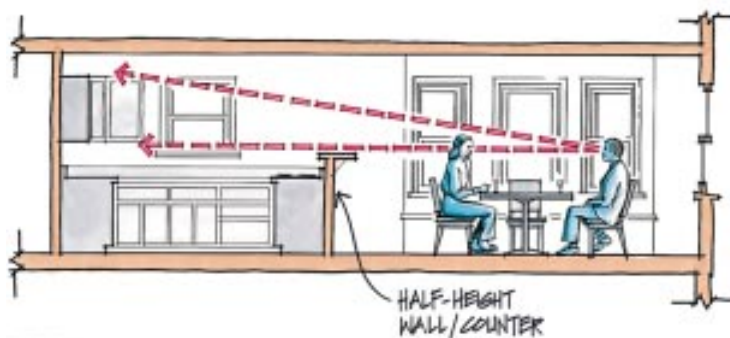


Figure 2. A half-height wall separating the kitchen and dining room allows the cook to socialize while the meal is being prepared, but hides the kitchen clutter from the diners.