

# Using Interior Columns

by Rosanne Minerva

**C**olumns, either round or square, are a common exterior design element, most often used to hold up porch roofs. Bring them indoors, though, and they can be useful for solving two seemingly opposite space problems.

Used in place of full-height walls, interior columns can open up a dark or confining plan and create spaces that flow together visually. On the other hand, used within a vast, ambiguous space like a modern “great room,” columns can create focus and definition, resulting in smaller, more comfortably scaled spaces that people relate to better.

## Opening up a Cramped Plan

In a traditional floor plan, rooms are typically enclosed with four walls and have one or more doorways for access. Often, a lot of space is devoted to hallways and stairwells, which are generally placed on inside walls without windows, and consequently are dark. Such a layout can feel confining, particularly in the “public” spaces — the kitchen, the living and dining rooms, and the den. Even a large home may seem small because the design compartmentalizes the available space.

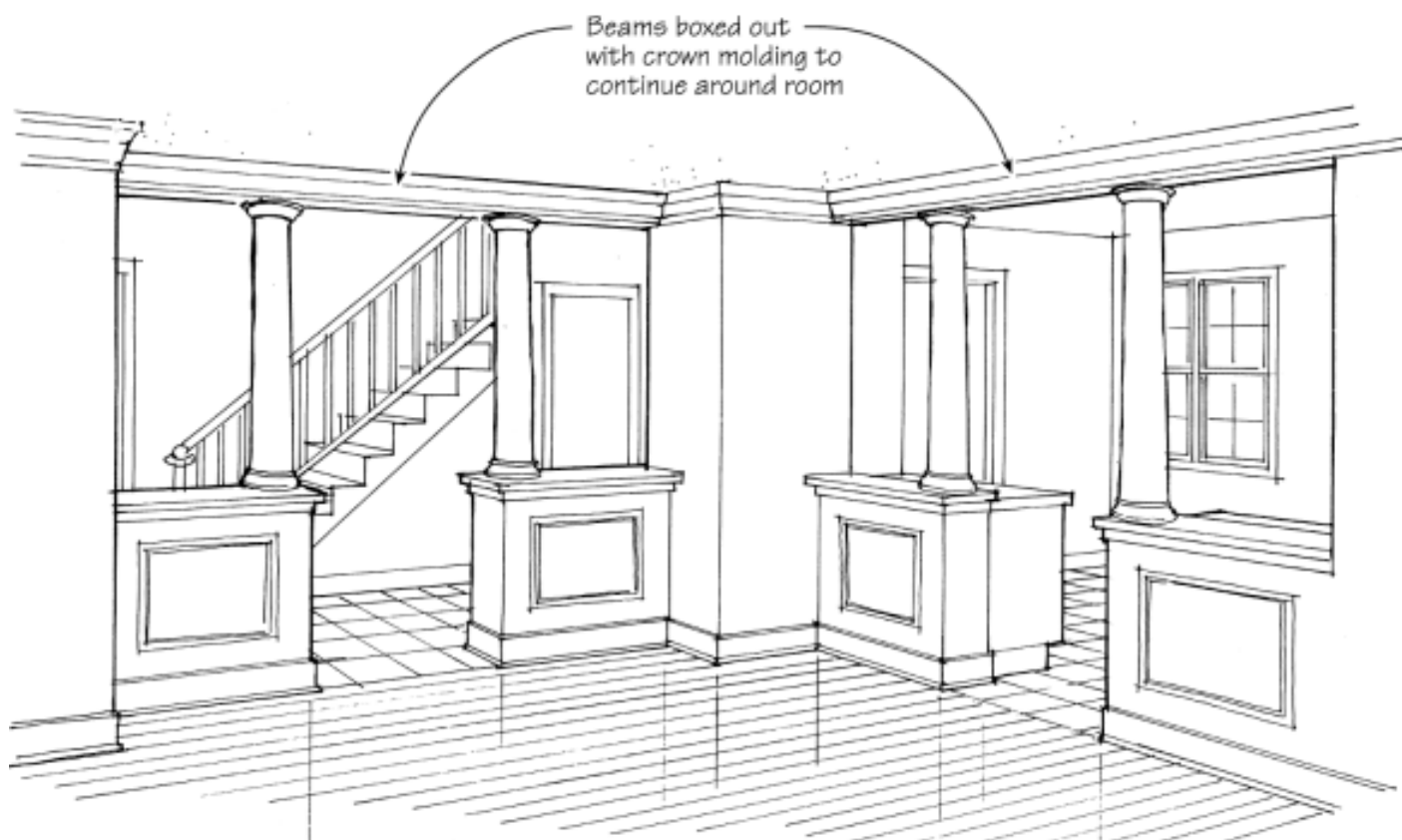
Replacing the walls between rooms

and circulation areas with half-walls or columns gives the open feeling of a more contemporary layout and brings light to darker areas. Sometimes, opening even one room with columns can provide the needed sense of spaciousness, and transform the feel of the entire house (see illustrations, below and opposite page).

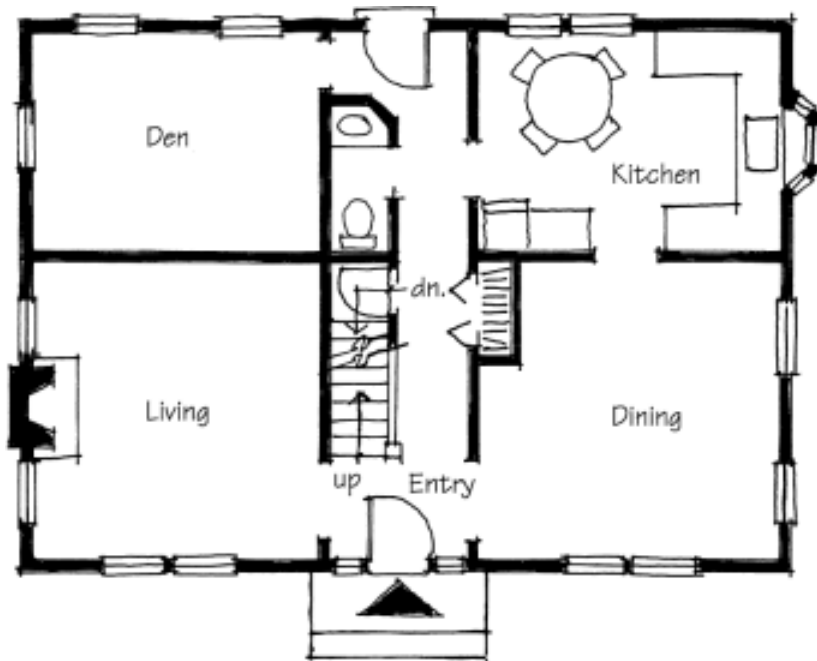
## Scaling Down a Vast Space

In contemporary home design, the “great room” seems to have taken the place of the traditionally smaller and separate den, dining room, and living room. The intent of this open-plan design is to

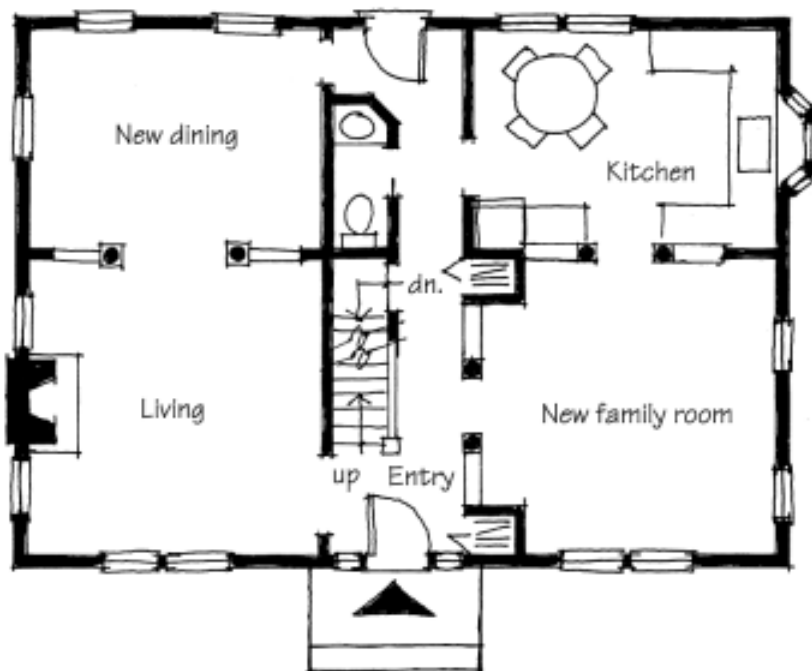
## Opening Up a Traditional Plan



A cramped traditional plan is transformed into a more spacious contemporary arrangement by replacing full-height walls with half-walls and columns (see before and after floor plans, opposite page). The formerly dark stairway now receives sunlight from the family room windows. Half-walls and columns between the new dining and living rooms create a similar effect on that side of the house.

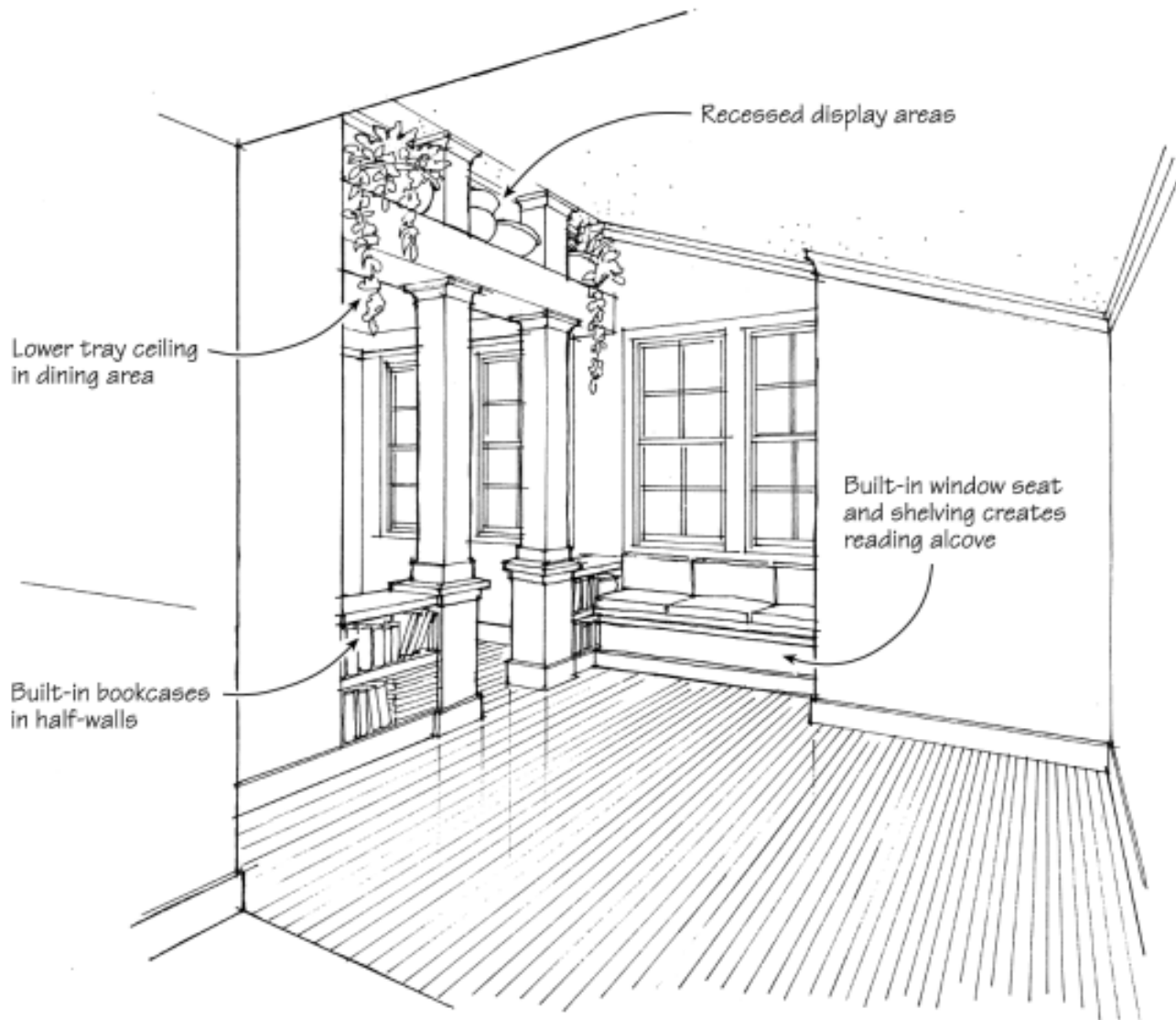


Before



After

# Defining a Contemporary Great Room



Adding a half-wall with columns between the living and dining areas of this spacious contemporary great room greatly improves livability while maintaining the open feel. The half-wall provides bookshelves and also creates an alcove that can be turned into a reading nook with the addition of built-in seating. A tray ceiling in the dining room creates intimacy in that area (see floor plans, opposite).

create an airy, informal space that is conducive to a more casual and varied lifestyle, similar to an urban loft. But the lack of walls and soaring ceilings can have negative effects, too. Often, the large-scale, nondescript space that results leaves the homeowner feeling cold and lost, and with the nearly impossible task of furnishing to create coziness.

With columns and half-walls, we can provide a visual sense of enclosure within the larger space (see illustrations, above and opposite page). Instead of having one huge room with few walls and the furniture swimming in the middle, smaller groupings become possible.

The space becomes more ordered as specific areas are designated for purposes like eating, playing, or reading. Small alcoves help recapture a feeling of intimacy without sacrificing the overall openness.

## Selecting Columns

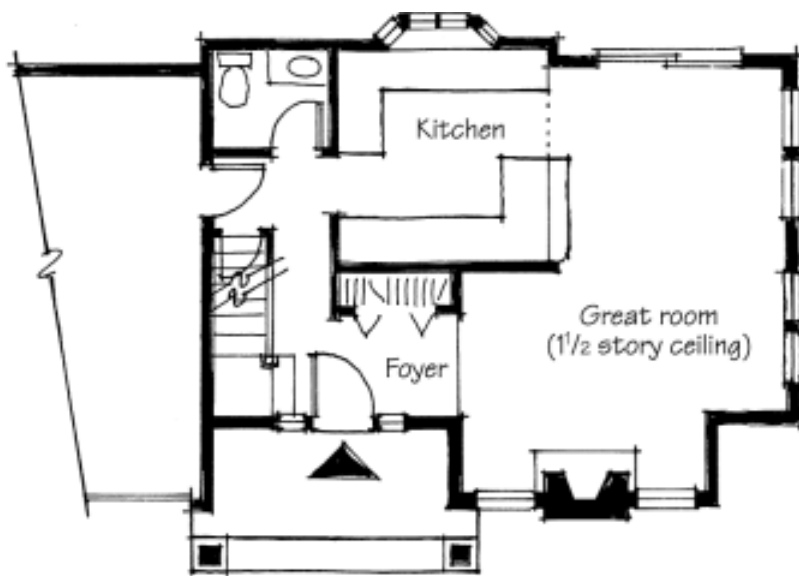
Because they come from classical architecture, round columns lend themselves to colonial architectural styles, and create a formal appearance. In general, square columns feel more “contemporary,” though they can be dressed up to mimic classical round columns. Contemporary homes may call for a

square column with a more monolithic (simplified and oversized) shape, with no fussy trim details.

The main criterion for choosing a column is to pick up cues from the rest of the house. If an Ionic column is used on the entry, you may want to use something similar inside. You may have to do some research, and perhaps search architectural salvage warehouses.

## Sizing Guidelines

The height of the ceiling should dictate the girth of the column, regardless of whether it is structural or just decorative. If your ceiling height is 10 feet, 6-



Before



After

inch-diameter columns will look spindly. Always use something that looks like it could actually support the span, even if it is nonstructural. For a 10-foot ceiling you may need a 10-inch or even a 12-inch column.

There is no golden rule for sizing columns. I recommend drawing a scaled elevation of the opening and trying

columns of different sizes to find the right one for the height and span. Keep in mind that a column that begins on top of a half-wall or high base can be more slender than one that stands from floor to ceiling.



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