

By Design

Defining Rooms in an Open Plan

by Alan Freysinger

Creating an open floor plan can be an effective way to give a spacious feel to a home with a relatively small footprint. To some extent, in fact, an open plan actually creates space, because less of the floor area is occupied by partition walls. It enables the cook to visit with family members and guests while working in the kitchen, giving the space a relaxed, casual feel that many of today's home buyers find appealing.

In reality, though, the term "open plan" is somewhat misleading. Any well-designed open plan actually consists of several distinct spaces, which can be defined in a variety of ways, depending on the degree

Original Open Plan

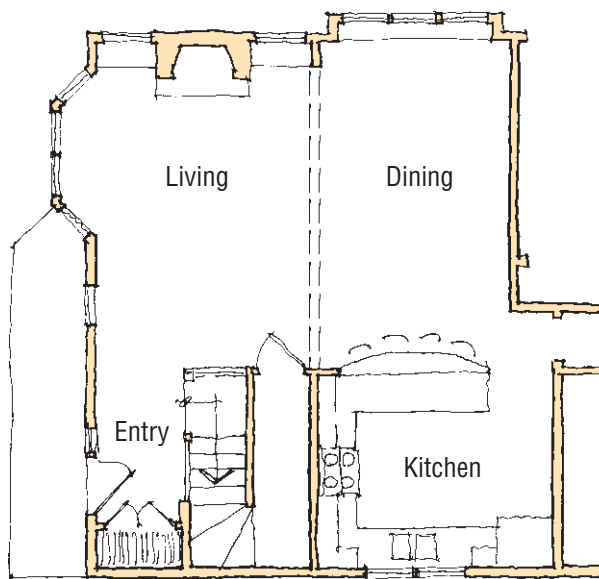


Figure 1. A successful open plan is more than a single undefined space. Soffits, built-ins, floor treatments, and trim can all be used to give adjoining areas their own identities while keeping a spacious, open feeling.

Three Ways to Define Space

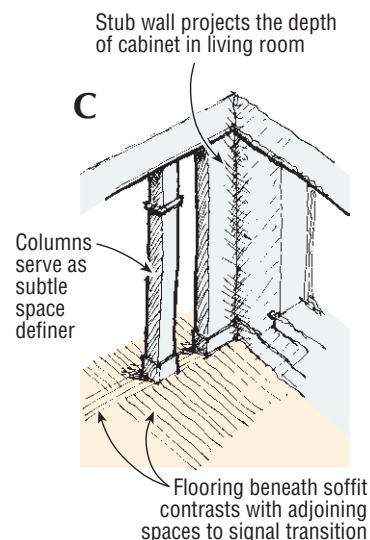
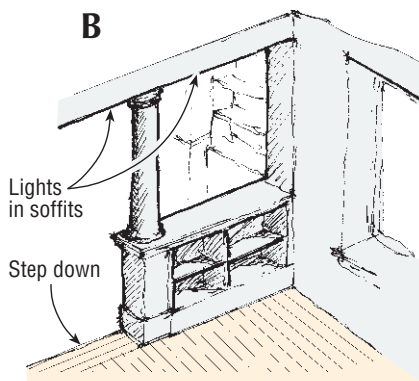
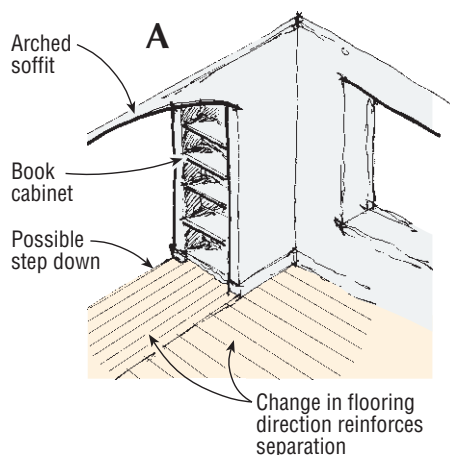


Figure 2. An arched soffit with built-in shelving or cabinets separates spaces strongly, especially if there's a change of floor level at the transition (A). A half-height divider and column — again with or without a change of level — provides a less formal division of space (B). The simple square columns and stub walls in C suggest the idea of separation but impose few restrictions on the traffic flow between dining and living areas.

Columns and Trim

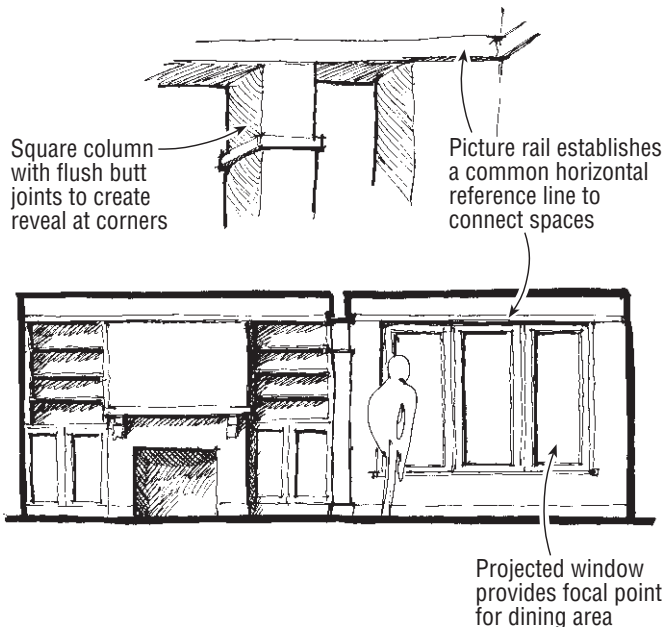


Figure 3. A band of picture mold subtly emphasizes the continuity of the spaces defined by the columns that flank the ends of the central soffit.

Breaking the Ceiling Plane

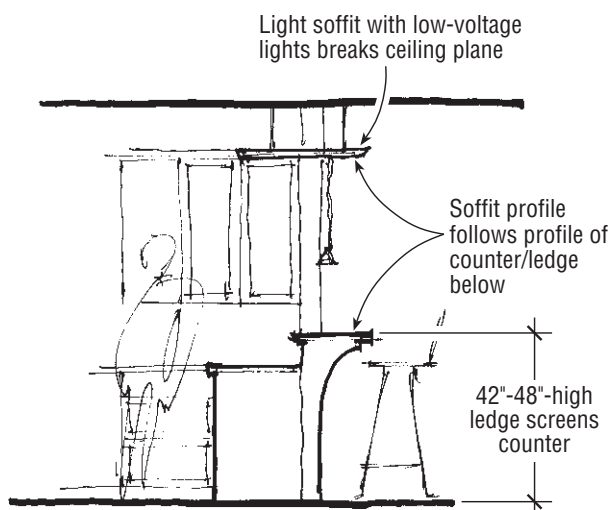


Figure 4. In addition to serving as a visual divider, the kitchen soffit is a convenient place to conceal low-voltage lighting. It's aligned with the raised counter below, which hides kitchen clutter from anyone in the dining area.

of openness desired. With the small-house floor plan in Figure 1 as a starting point, we can look at some specific examples of how that might work.

Three Degrees of Separation

At one end of the spectrum, a deep, arched soffit like the one in Figure 2A would strongly separate the adjoining entry-living and kitchen-dining spaces. A visitor passing through the well-defined transition area beneath the soffit, with its built-in shelves and lighting, would be left with a clear impression of leaving one space and entering another. But here, that much separation would be overkill: The resulting long, narrow spaces would feel uncomfortably cramped and awkward.

Defining space with columns. The alternative in Figure 2B, which uses half-height dividers and a narrower horizontal soffit supported by columns, strikes a better balance between defining the spaces and maintaining the visual flow between them. In the end, though, we chose to open things up even more. In Figure 2C, the built-in shelving has been replaced by a projected stub wall flanked by simple square columns.

Connecting Spaces With Trim

Depending on how they're used, interior trim, floor treatments, and even paint can emphasize the separation between adjoining spaces or create a visual connection between them. In this case, we ran a simple band of picture molding around both spaces at soffit level (Figure 3) to create a horizontal focus that helps tie the spaces together.

Defining the Kitchen

In general, kitchens are easily set off from other spaces in an open plan because their counters and cabinets make natural space dividers. That separation can be reinforced by a corresponding change in the ceiling plane (Figure 4). The space between counter and kitchen soffit provides a focal point that corresponds to the projected windows at the other end of the dining area, giving the space a pleasantly balanced feel.



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