

A Room For All Seasons

Multipurpose rooms reap immediate--and future—design rewards

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When I first traveled in Japan, I was impressed by the ease with which my hosts would transform what appeared to be only a living space into a sleeping space at night. Futons, rolled up and stowed nearby, would be rolled out and bedding laid out. When I ventured more extensively into remote Southeast Asian villages, I was equally amazed by large families occupying a single room where they cooked, ate and socialized. Among the most interesting dwellings were the Longhouses of Borneo. Family units lined one side of a single long corridor. An open common area ran the entire length of the other side, where many villagers worked during the day and socialized in both small and large groups in the evening.

While western living arrangements are very different, we are now finding ourselves having to design rooms for multiple uses. Our homes with their functional emphasis have not usually supported diverse needs. I have stayed at more than one home where the guestroom was a family room through which other occupants had to pass en route to their own rooms. On the brighter side, I remember a former client's poolroom at his ski chalet in Whistler, Canada. At night, several beds would fold down from the walls, sleeping several guests at once.

It is a sign of our times that more homes are requiring multi-purpose rooms. Current lifestyles and the uncertainty of the future necessitate rooms that meet multiple needs yet remain flexible and adaptable. For example, the kitchen now often fulfills the role of the family hearth. With both parents working outside the home and kids with active schedules, when families are home it is important that they be together. Large kitchens are usually the rooms where people gather and primary social interaction takes place. This influences kitchen design in many ways. More people participating in meal preparation may require multiple work areas. This may include an extra sink or oven or even a separate work counter. It may be better to locate the cooktop on an island where it can face the center of the room. Make sure the cooktop has ample counter space on both sides and the placement of the island allows good circulation around it. If the kitchen serves as the major social center, you may wish to include comfortable seating to one side. Consider dishwasher and refrigerator models with extra sound isolation. For families with young children I often place a children's play area nearby. It serves the dual purpose of allowing better supervision and allows the children to feel part of the action. It doesn't need to be large and can easily be converted to a social corner or a computer center when the children get older. Busy adults sometimes wish to have a small TV in the kitchen so they can catch up on the news or other information programs while preparing meals.

One of the most important components of a multi-purpose kitchen, in my opinion, is what I call the Communication Center. This is a place where the telephone is located. It may contain a mini-office with a computer and/or fax machine and a desk to sort mail,

make lists, post messages, charge cell phone batteries and organize information and activities.

There is also an increase in the popularity of dedicated media rooms or home theatres. These changes often mean the living or great room has less importance in day-to-day living or is also multi-purpose. For example, it may incorporate a small computer workstation in one corner or a window seat and reading area. As socializing takes place in more rooms traditional features such as the fireplace may need to be orientated to face multiple rooms or be two- or three-sided.

The home office, another growing trend, may demand multi-purpose planning. The first thing to consider is whether it is dedicated or non-dedicated space. A full-time office will likely require a separate room with its own unique features, while an office that is used only at certain times or days, may also need to serve other purposes. In smaller homes it may be incorporated with a den or bedroom or studio. A full-time office may need to be located far from the primary family areas not only to reduce sound transmission, but also to reduce the temptation of interruptions. If you are going to receive clients and visitors, it may have to be located off the main entrance or require a separate entrance. Even a part-time office needs to be a pleasant place to work. Ensure there is natural light and a degree of comfort. Be aware of your technological needs and how technological changes may affect your work environment. For example, consider installing a cable/modem line or ISDN line.

I look at multi-purpose rooms in two ways. One, is where several different functions have to take place within the same space, either at the same time or at different

times. An example may be a den, which may function as a home office during the day, a sitting room at night and as a guestroom at other times. The second is where the needs of a space may change over time. An example may be a bedroom or an entire unfinished basement. As families grow needs change and rooms may have new purposes.

Whether designing rooms to fulfill more than one purpose or rooms whose needs may change over time, there are several design elements that should be looked at. The first is the interplay between the public and private use. Will the room serve a family or group function, for example, socializing; or will it have a more private orientation such as a bedroom or private office? Perhaps a den off a great room can have double French doors that can be opened for entertaining but closed for more private activities. You may wish to furnish it so that it can be transformed from a sitting area into a workspace or sleeping area? Pullout sofas, futon couches and office chairs with armrests can play double roles. If sound isolation is necessary, use a solid-core door and construct the partitions in such a way as to reduce sound transmission. It will help keep sound out or in, depending on the use. Does the circulation move through or near it? How do the functions relate to rest of the house? Is it in a noisier public part of the house or near the end of a hallway?

Then consider how the space is divided. Can parts of the room serve a specific function? For example, can a one corner be used for an activity without negatively influencing the rest of the room? How can storage needs be accommodated? Instead of a closet consider an armoire that can be relocated if needs change. As a rule, it is better to provide more storage than less. If it works with the overall design, keep the window sill at

least three feet off the floor to allow furniture such as a desk, sofa or bed to be placed beneath it.

Lighting should be adaptable to different tasks and locations. Lamps offer more flexible lighting than fixed recessed downlights. There should be plenty of electrical receptacles. And there may need to be more than one telephone or cable or other communications outlet. In general, use classic accessories and neutral colors that will stand over time. For example, wooden blinds will not only support changing furnishings but also retain a classic elegance. Custom colors can provide impact though may need to be repainted if uses change. There is no simple rule on floor coverings. If you are considering hardwood, it is easier to install carpet over hardwood later than the other way around. Take a moment to project forward and envision what your needs may be five and ten years from now. Remember flexibility is the key.