

Perspective

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The Case for Rooms

It's time to end the tyranny of open-concept interior design.

By Kate Wagner

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If someone asked me five years ago whether or not I thought the open floor plan would still be popular, I would have said no. Domestic architecture seemed to be taking a turn toward the rustic. Today, “Farmhouse” and “Craftsman” modern designs, harkening back to the American vernacular tradition (complete with shiplap walls), are a tour-de-force.

But I would have been wrong. Although these houses bring all the exterior trappings of beloved vernacular houses of the past, they do not extend that to the interior plans. In fact, the open concepts from the oversized houses of the pre-recession era have only gotten *more* open.

Much has been written about the open floor plan: how it came to be, why it is bad (or good), whether it should or shouldn't be applied to existing housing. The open floor plan as we currently understand it—an entry-kitchen-dining-living combination that avoids any kind of structural separation between uses—is only a few decades old. Prior to the last 25 years, an “open floor plan” meant a living configuration without *doors*; now the term has come to mean a living configuration without *walls*. I will refer to the latter from now on as an “open concept,” in order to differentiate it from a traditional open floor plan.



An open-concept house in Massachusetts in 2005. *Photographer: Michael Dwyer/AP*

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The interior-wall-free open concept became popular starting in the 1970s, evolving from the cedar contemporary homes known for their tall ceilings and windows, and from [styled ranches](#) whose steeper rooflines allowed for newly in-vogue cathedral ceilings. Overall, the open concept was a reaction against years of small, low-ceilinged living, which felt restricting and stuffy to a new generation of homebuyers.

In a recent [essay](#) in *The Atlantic*, Ian Bogost described a new luxury concept called the “mess kitchen”—a second kitchen out of sight from the main kitchen and the rest of the open plan. He cited it to demonstrate why the open floor plan and its rhetoric around “entertaining” have reached new levels of absurdity. However, to me, the mess kitchen offers hope for a transitional period where open spaces may become closed again.

That this would start with the kitchen is not surprising. Historically, the kitchen was the last room to be integrated into the open concept. Living and dining rooms began to converge as early as the beginning of the 1900s, when changes in architectural taste and the development of mass-industrialized housing production favored a more compact home design than the rambling, formal “hall-and-parlor” layout of Victorian times.

The conventional narrative is that, historically, houses had floor plans that were closed, and then they began opening up. But it is important to understand that this argument centers on the homes of the affluent classes.



Meeting of aristocratic families in the living room. Colored engraving by George Scott, 1892. *Source: Ipsumpix/Corbis via Getty Images*

Wealthy families in the 18th and 19th centuries had homes with several rooms for specific purposes, such as parlors, libraries, drawing rooms, smoking rooms, and servants’ quarters. Then, new building materials and construction technologies led to shifts in architectural taste that favored more continuous interior spaces: First came the Arts & Crafts movement, then Modernism.

Social changes that arose with modern industrial capitalism, such as the transition away from live-in servants to commuting wage-workers, also reduced the number of rooms in upper-class houses.

However, in the homes of the working and lower-middle classes, these same factors of social change and modernization created an opposite progression. The story of common houses is a story of walls.

The number of rooms in working-class homes increased with the number of products and amenities that became readily affordable through industrialization, modernization, and mass production. The common house, as well as working-class living environments such as dwelling houses and tenements, only had one to three rooms: a kitchen space and a living and/or sleeping space, which were multipurpose, used for working as well as living.

The ranch and the split-level are often cited as the spark that lit the fire of the open concept.

Beginning in the 1860s, work increasingly took place outside of the home, and the application of mass production to housing reduced building costs. During this period, the average number of rooms increased, to three to five: a kitchen, a living room, and one or two bedrooms. Common vernacular examples of this period (1860-1900) include the [worker's cottage](#), [the shotgun house](#), the [Temple-and-Wing](#) house, and early examples of the four-box and [Foursquare](#). In these early industrial-era homes, the threshold between working-class and middle-class was determined by amenities like a dining room or a front porch.

By the 1900s and 1910s, mass single-family housing shipped to the site by rail and truck had come into its own. Now sizes and types of wood, nails, and other construction materials had become widely standardized across the building industry. During the second half of the 19th century, a key development—[balloon framing](#)—allowed for more inexpensive construction, since the cheap materials (nails, studs, and 2x4s) were readily available and did not require skilled labor to assemble, unlike timber framing. Long, lightweight studs and [the clever, basket-like technique](#) of assembly enabled taller and longer homes to be built by as few as two people and with relatively little waste.

Two of the most common and recognizable types of vernacular American housing—the bungalow and the Foursquare—became massively popular during this time. The average number of rooms per house increased once again. Working-class homes now had three to five rooms; middle-class homes, six to eight. Whether or not a home was determined to be working- or middle-class depended on whether it had indoor plumbing (bathrooms!) or electricity, both of which had become increasingly available.

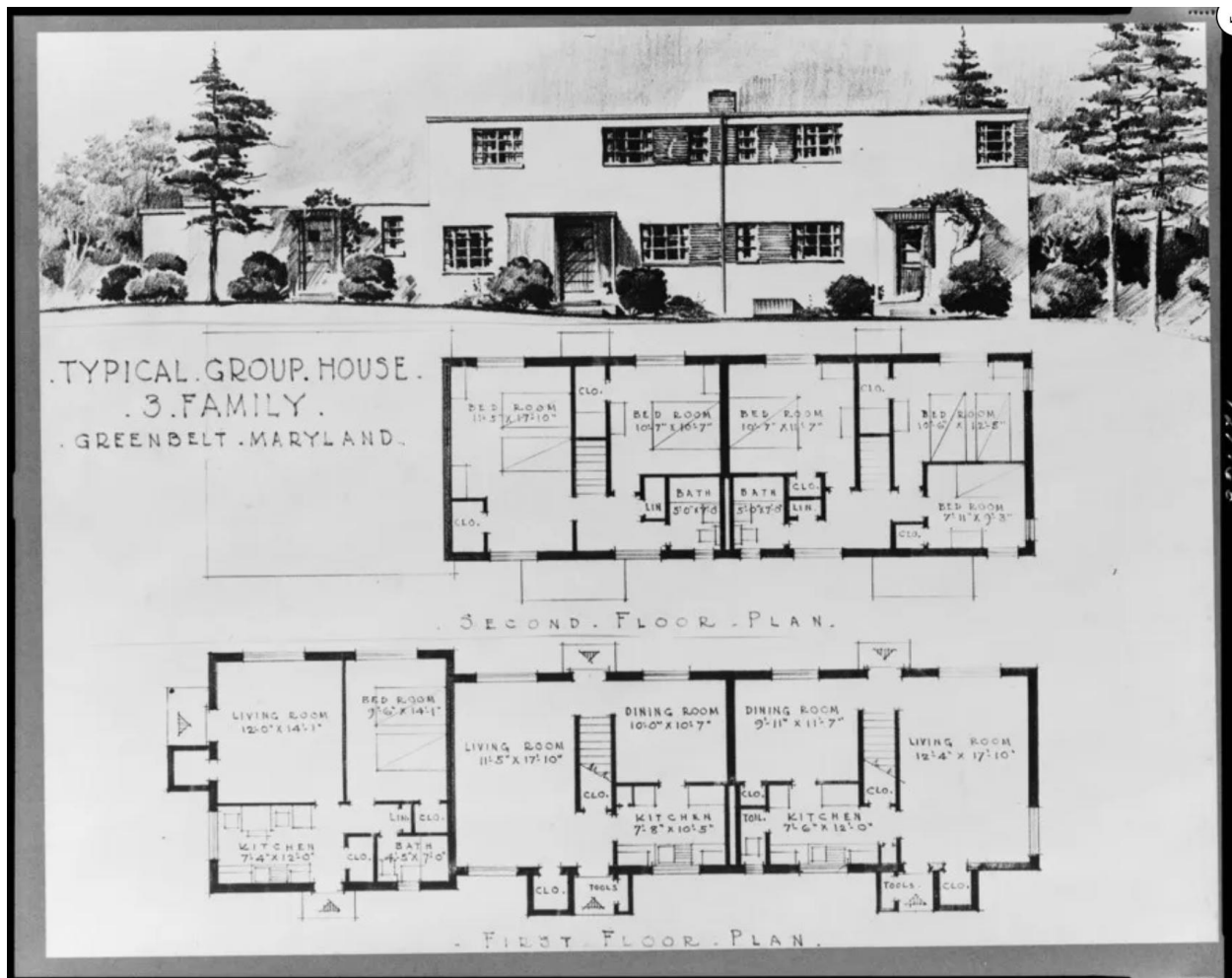


Duplex bungalow built c. 1905 for cigar-factory workers in Tampa's Ybor City. Source: *Library of Congress*

Architectural historians place a great deal of emphasis on the bungalow, often citing it as the beginning of the “open” floor plan, since many bungalows omitted the closed wall between the living and dining areas. However, these historians focus on high-style Arts & Crafts bungalows, which featured more inventive architecture, and ignore the fact that in working-and-middle class bungalows, the average number of individual (closed) rooms increased as a whole.

Only in more elaborate middle-class bungalows is the wall between the living and dining room separated by a partial wall or colonnade. This feature was more expensive to construct, because it required structural loads to be redistributed to other walls or fixtures. Structural reasons in general were why, in common houses, open spaces would not become more widespread until changes in construction made them more affordable.

Even as plans in elite houses continued to open up throughout the 1920s, the common house retained its interior walls. Why? In many respects, closed rooms existed to maintain a semblance of privacy. Homes were smaller, but families were bigger than they are now: The average number of people in an American household was five in 1880 and 4.3 in 1920; today, it's 2.5. The reason why the first door to be omitted was frequently that between the living and dining rooms was because those rooms were considered “public” spaces, a holdover from the hall-and-parlor Victorian times.



Homes in Greenbelt, Maryland—a town built by the federal government for lower-income families in the 1930s—had separate kitchens, dining rooms, and living rooms, and many had three bedrooms, a luxury at the time. *Source: Library of Congress*

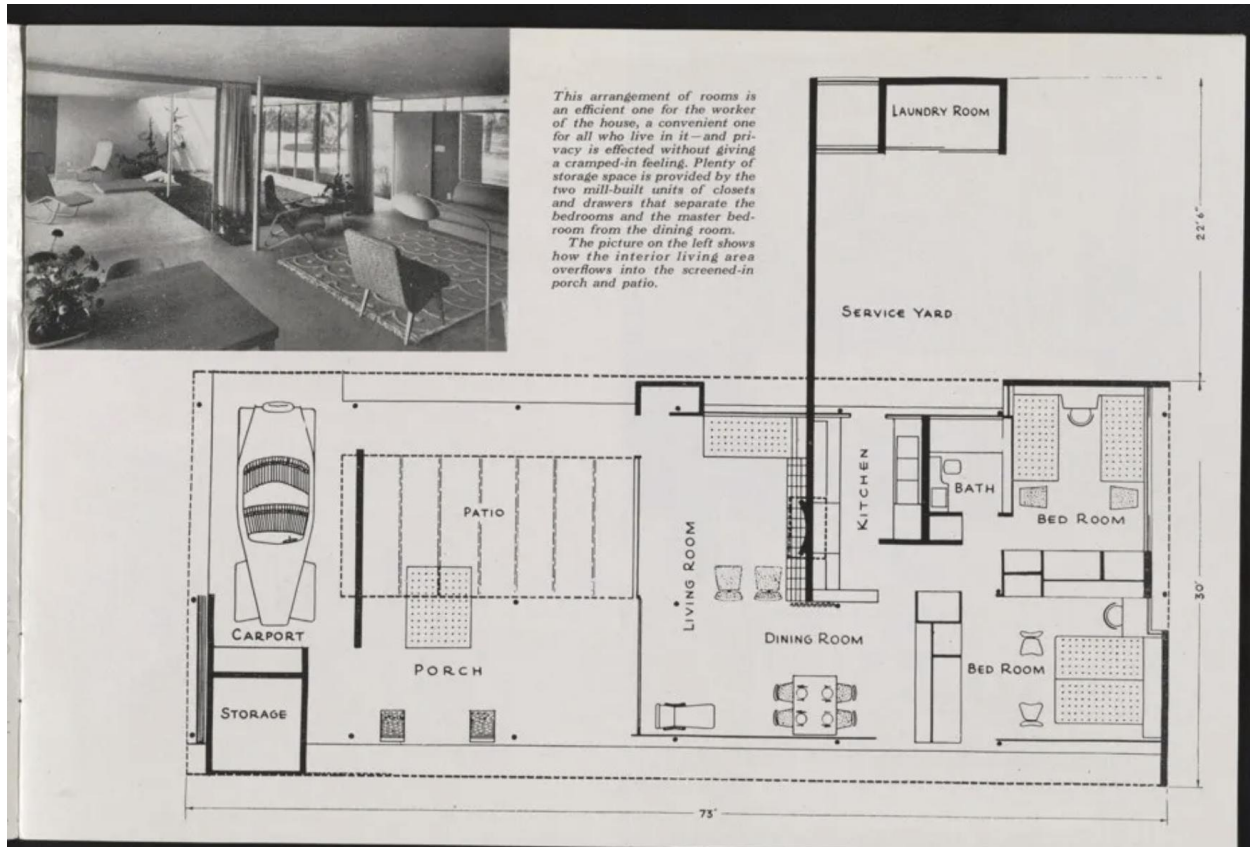
Work areas, such as the kitchen, and private spaces, like bedrooms and bathrooms, were always closed off to avoid guests seeing the mess of meal-making or, heaven forbid, the “unmentionable room” (the bathroom).

By the end of the 1920s, the large, old-growth trees that produced the long studs central to the technique of balloon framing became scarce, leading to new techniques that could be completed with smaller spans of wood. Today’s style of framing, platform framing, enabled more flexible room shapes and sizes.

The small [minimal traditional houses](#) of the 1930s through early ‘50s employed this new framing technique on a mass, federally-subsidized scale. These small homes relied on interior walls to ensure spatial privacy (not to mention aural, olfactory, and visual privacy) in cramped situations. The closed floor plan also represented security, isolation, and control, concepts that were important in a moment that emerged from the Depression and then World War II, and deepened through a period of intense racial tension and Cold War paranoia.

The ranch and the split-level, both of which originated in the mid-1940s, drastically changed patterns of dwelling in the American home. This is often cited as the spark that lit the fire of the open concept. The reorientation of the ideal American home, from vertical, two-story Cape Cod to

horizontal, one-story ranch, certainly did open up floor plans. By this point, a continuous living and dining space was commonplace.



The innovative 1948 Revere Quality House in Sarasota, Florida, designed by Ralph Twitchell and Paul Rudolph, had an L-shaped combination living/dining space; the kitchen was separated from the dining area by a partition. *Library of Congress*

However, one room remained stubbornly closed for at least another decade: the kitchen.

Kitchens have been closed for most of the history of common housing. In elite houses, kitchens were places of work, where servants were kept out of sight of residents and guests, often relegated to the cellar or guesthouse. This functional separation was continued in middle-class houses, even as live-in servants became a feature of the past. Most kitchens are placed in the rear of the house. Access to a rear kitchen door allowed for faster disposal of waste and easy ventilation; also, deliveries could be made directly to the kitchen to save labor.

Kitchens began to open up and become public spaces in the home because of cultural shifts regarding consumption. Domestic theorist Christine Frederick's term "creative waste" sums up this new mentality: It was the moral obligation of the 1920s housewife to buy and discard products, one that elevated the concept of waste as being positive, indulgent, and stimulating to the economy.

Designing homes around "entertaining" that happens only a handful of times a year is a wasteful yet mindbogglingly popular practice.

This attitude merged with new technological advances. When inventions such as central air conditioning and improved fire suppression became commonplace, the kitchen, no longer a place of shame and no longer reliant upon the ventilation provided by the kitchen door, began to shift to

different parts of the home. The attached garage often replaced the backyard as the common point of entry into the kitchen.

Room layout, which more often than not had its roots in social and practical constraints, became liberated due to these new cultures of consumption and technologies of comfort. Without these developments, the open concept would have never been possible in the first place.

If closed floor plans are considered such a nuisance these days, why did they prevail for almost 100 years in single-family working- and middle-class suburban housing? The answer: closed floor plans make a lot of sense, from both an environmental and a living perspective.



A 1950s model kitchen, with sink and stove a few steps apart. *Photographer: Bettmann/Getty Images*

We are going to need to consume a lot less energy if we want to stem the tide of global climate change. The good news is, humans survived for thousands of years without air conditioning and cars, and thus can learn some lessons from the past. The closed floor plan, especially the closed kitchen, can help save energy by the simple principle of not heating and cooling rooms that are not currently in use, as well as by isolating rooms we want to keep warm or cool.

As cultures of consumption change and people become more environmentally conscious, homes must change to reflect this. Designing homes around “entertaining” that happens only a handful of times a year is a wasteful, yet still mindbogglingly popular practice. When people come to visit, they are there to see you, not your open concept.

It may not be as glamorous, but the closed kitchen is actually more efficient for cooking than the sprawling, open “chef’s kitchens” that are so popular. It enables whoever does the cooking to take fewer steps to perform tasks. The chef’s kitchen follows the wasteful logic of the 1920s: Instead of moving the sink closer to the stove, builders install a pot filler or a second sink in a center island. Instead of closing in the main kitchen to isolate the disorder of food preparation, developers are building “mess kitchens” for this purpose.

Not separating cooking, living, and dining is an acoustical nightmare, especially in today’s style of interior design.

The “labor-saving” elements of open floor plans are in some ways labor-creating. A large, single, continuous space is harder to get and keep clean. Messes and smells are no longer isolated, but can be easily tracked throughout the entire first floor of a large home. Less house in general means less house to clean.

Not separating cooking, living, and dining is also an acoustical nightmare, especially in today’s style of interior design, which avoids carpet, curtains, and other soft goods that absorb sound. This is especially true of homes that do not have separate formal living and dining spaces but one single continuous space. Nothing is more maddening than trying to read or watch television in the tall-ceilinged living room with someone banging pots and pans or using the food processor 10 feet away in the open kitchen.

The best thing about the closed floor plan? It offers what it has always offered: aural, olfactory, and spatial privacy. Humans have always needed the sense of comfort and refuge that defined rooms provide. That may explain the rise of “man caves” and “[she sheds](#)”—closed spaces that rebel against the open concept.

Instead of these—space-wasting, specialized rooms that are used relatively sparingly—why not just build common rooms with walls and doors? If you want to escape something unpleasant, you can do so without feeling banished or isolating yourself from everyone else. Sometimes, true freedom means putting up a few barriers.