

# Great Rooms *for* Living



*Some local professionals provide great tips and advice about getting the maximum out of the most multifunctional room of the house.*

*Story by Kimberly Kaido-Alvarez*



Plastic runners were somewhat common in homes during my childhood years. The noise they made when one walked upon them was a little odd but actually kind of fun—for kids anyway. We used to make up games that involved staying in or out of the plastic boundaries—that is, until we reached the end of the road where the living room began.

At this point we came to a screeching halt, as there may as well have been a “Do Not Enter” sign across the threshold. The purpose of the synthetic walkway was a maternal attempt to save the carpet that led the way to a room that was kept in perfect order for visitors.

“Living rooms traditionally were formal sitting areas that were nice and kept very clean,” said Sebastopol architect Marilyn Standley. A spinoff of the formal parlor, the living room was a place where adults met with other adults, historically for formal entertaining or to talk business, maybe over a martini.

The family room was also a group meeting spot, but for more casual purposes. As culture changed and formal meetings began to move to the office or public locations, floor plans followed suit; the idea of a separate living room seemed unnecessary and was considered by many to be wasted space. Standley notes that the concept of the family room and the living room began to merge at some point in the late 1980s, and the terms ‘living room’ and ‘family room’ were frequently interchangeable.

The two rooms eventually became one in most housing designs of the 1990s; today, most new homes have what is now referred to as a ‘great room.’ Great rooms combine both living and family rooms into one, many times with the kitchen opening onto it. It’s a spot where different kinds of living take place: listening to music, entertaining guests, watching a movie, reading, playing a board game, doing a little business on the laptop, and even housing an overnight visitor. And although this one, centrally located room has been the norm in European and Japanese homes for centuries, it’s new to Americans who have grown accustomed to having separate spaces for specific functions.

“The challenge is sometimes these multipurpose rooms can look not so presentable,” said Standley.” This is especially true if the room is small—just a few items out of place and it looks messy—so organization and smart storage ideas are key, along with the art of hiding things and discerning what is needed and what is not. “People want handy storage areas and fold-up desks,” said Standley, who also suggests designing closets or a shelf for books in locations that save space, like at the bottom of a stairway.

[ This Page ] The great room of Fred and Mary Bieber's home combines space for dining, cooking, entertaining and relaxing.

[Page 14] An open-plan, multifunctional great room, photo by Treve Johnson for Leff construction

[ Page 18 ] Sonoma Woodcraft's fold-out bed stows away in a storage cabinet.



When people are adding on to create their multipurpose room, they're doing it in a smaller way, either for financial reasons or because they feel it's more sustainable, said Standley who embraces the idea. "We've been building things oversized for a long time and now new projects are coming up, like smaller homes for seniors and people just starting out," said Standley.

To address the challenges of a smaller-scale great room (or other rooms in the house, for that matter), there are several approaches to consider that will increase actual or perceived space.

Jake Pettengill of Sonoma Woodcraft makes high quality multifunctional furniture from cherry, alder, maple, oak or bamboo in his workshop that is connected to a showroom in Sebastopol. Pettengill's craftsman-style pieces are designed with

more than one purpose in mind and they fold and tuck away neatly when not in use, freeing up valuable floor space. "Smart furniture," is what he calls his creations that fold up in ways that are nothing short of genius. Picture for example, a solid wood bookcase or cabinet with shaker style doors that houses a compact bed that folds out from the wall.

While this bed is terrific in the great room for the occasional visitor, Pettengill says that "It's [also] perfect for when the kids go off to college and you do something else with their room, but still want to have a bed for them when they come home." Other pieces include fold-out table options and vertical designs with a slim, 18-inch depth.

Interior designer Megan O'Laughlin of Healdsburg also agrees that furniture is

key. Picking furniture that is the right scale for your great room is especially important. "Be sure to measure your space then map out how much room the pieces that you are going to purchase take up. If you have low ceilings, watch out for pieces that are on the high side, so it doesn't feel like they are too large for your room," said O'Laughlin.

In a smaller great room, accent tables that are fun and interesting can double as art and a table, she said. Ottomans are also particularly useful pieces that can be side tables or provide additional seating and storage. "If an ottoman is upholstered, put a tray on top to use it as a table," suggests O'Laughlin.

For the lovers of wide open spaces, an indoor-outdoor connection can provide a solution to rooms of limited size. Patios and porches that open up from the great



room create an expansive feeling and could be well worth the renovation. Even a simple view to the outside can have a profound effect. Installing a window where there's a wall or hanging a French door with glass panels can do wonders for a confined space.

If construction is not in the cards, then accessories like art and mirrors can help define and open up a room. "Using mirrors is another way to make a small room feel larger, and reflecting the outdoors is a great way to bring the outside in," said O'Laughlin. Creating a focal point in a room with art displayed in a carefully chosen spot, like above a fireplace can call attention to the room's main or most desirable feature.

Painting a room in lighter shades can also make it seem larger. "If you have enough natural light in your space then you can go a little darker in hue, but keep it light enough that the room doesn't feel too enclosed. If you want to do an accent wall, be sure to do it on the wall that is the focal point of the room, like the wall with a fireplace, or a bank of windows that has a nice view," said O'Laughlin.

Before designing an addition or a remodel, Standley usually quizzes clients about what they want and why. "We think

we need all these extra spaces for things," said Standley who often has clients who want a private space for peace and quiet or another bathroom because they have a teenager. "In the old days, a family would just come up with a schedule and work it out instead of adding on," said Standley.

Making structural changes to a home can have long-lasting benefits if they're the right changes, so taking the time to think about one's lifestyle is an important part of the planning process. A lot of real estate agents have told homeowners what they need to do in order to increase a property value, but when clients find out how much

things cost, especially in this economy, they tend to back down and rethink in more practical terms, said Standley, who added, "What people want is changing."

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## [ Resources ]

### Making Room

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