



Defining Spaces

Wall-free ways to delineate separate areas within your home

BY PATRICIA MUES

Ask people to describe their dream house and most will use words like “open and airy.” Then ask the same people to describe their favorite room, and they’ll say “cozy and comfortable.” How is it that so many of us love openness and yet share a deep-seated desire for shelter? And how can we reconcile the two?

There are many ways to define spaces within a home, including some creative strategies that don’t require solid floor-to-ceiling walls. You can create definition in new spaces in several ways, from using post-and-beam construction to designing variations in flooring and ceilings. Existing spaces can be given a feeling of enclosure by adding transoms, built-ins, and half walls.

Here are a few strategies for interior spaces that are as well designed as they are well defined.

Let the frame do the work

Post-and-beam construction can be used to create an expressed structure that defines rooms yet leaves them open to one another. In the large space above, massive posts combine to create a central core that separates the living area from the dining and cooking areas. “It’s like the main aisle in a church,” explains designer Fu Tung

Cheng. “It frames and defines everything else.” Cheng likes to extend the effect of the beams and trusses by giving the ceiling special treatment. “I chose wood to give the effect of board and batten,” says Cheng. “This creates a softer texture, which makes the room cozier.”

Timber posts and beams don’t have to make a home feel like a lodge. A colonnade of bleached wood divides light-filled spaces in the California home on the right. The kitchen, dining, and living areas are clearly defined by these verticals and horizontals, yet the views remain open. Exposed



GREAT ROOM REVISITED
A dramatic post-and-beam design is fused with Asian simplicity in this rural family home by architect Fu Tung Cheng. Flooring, well-positioned posts, and furniture placement all contribute to the definition and fluidity of a wide-open space.

A ROOM WITH TWO VIEWS
Beams and built-ins do the work of walls in this home. The posts’ gridlike pattern directs the eye toward two focal points—the range hood at one end, and brick fireplace at the other.



FLOOR SHOW
In a small space like this cabin, a change in flooring materials makes it clear where the living area ends and the dining area begins. The slate strip is wide enough to define the two "rooms," but not so wide that it overwhelms.



NO HALLWAY NECESSARY In contrast to the rich cherry flooring used throughout this home, a rough-hewn bluestone path continues from the outside in, in effect creating a foyer.

joists run the length of the space, guiding the eye toward leather chairs surrounding the dining table at one end and the fireplace at the other.

Create definition underfoot

Cheng also reinforced the division of space in his post-and-beam home by running an inset of wood the length of the room, within the poured concrete floors. This fir floor also adds another "warm" element to the home (top photo, p. 43).

A visual separation like the one created by Cheng's "boardwalk" can also be seen in the flooring variation in a small lakeside cabin by architect Rick Phillips (photo above).



WALLS ARE IMPLIED by this decorative open railing—more a lattice than a wall. Beyond the dining area, half walls and columns define spaces and traffic patterns without blocking light in this small farmhouse.

RAILROAD ROOMS ARE ENHANCED by two sets of wing walls hefty enough to create a sense of enclosure (while providing storage) in the cozy bungalow below.

"The change in materials has two purposes," says Phillips, "to serve as a hearth for the stove, both functionally and symbolically, and to divide the dining and living areas."

When a pathway leads from the outdoors in, then past a room, flooring can both blur and clarify the relationship between spaces. Architect Robert M. Gurney used flooring effectively in the modern, glass-walled farmhouse of his design on the left. Pennsylvania bluestone begins outside and comes in to create an implied hallway, while Brazilian cherry wood makes it clear where the living room begins. "We wanted to make a seamless transition from the exterior to the interior and define the circu-

lation area from the living space," says Gurney. "The wood brings a certain warmth and richness to the space."

Add shelter, keep the light

Both privacy and character can be added by using half-walls that allow views between areas yet provide shelter for someone seated in a space. Half-walls and an open railing separating the stairs and the dining room allow for unobstructed views in what might otherwise be a warren of small rooms in the farmhouse pictured above.

In the renovation of the Midwest bungalow at right, a foyer, study, and living room were



Photos: top, Grey Crawford; bottom, Rob Karosis

Photos: top left, Grey Crawford; bottom left, Ken Gutmaker

LET IN VALUABLE LIGHT A large built-in cabinet that looks like a sideboard conceals a messy kitchen from guests at the dining table—without blocking light. It also provides enclosure for diners.

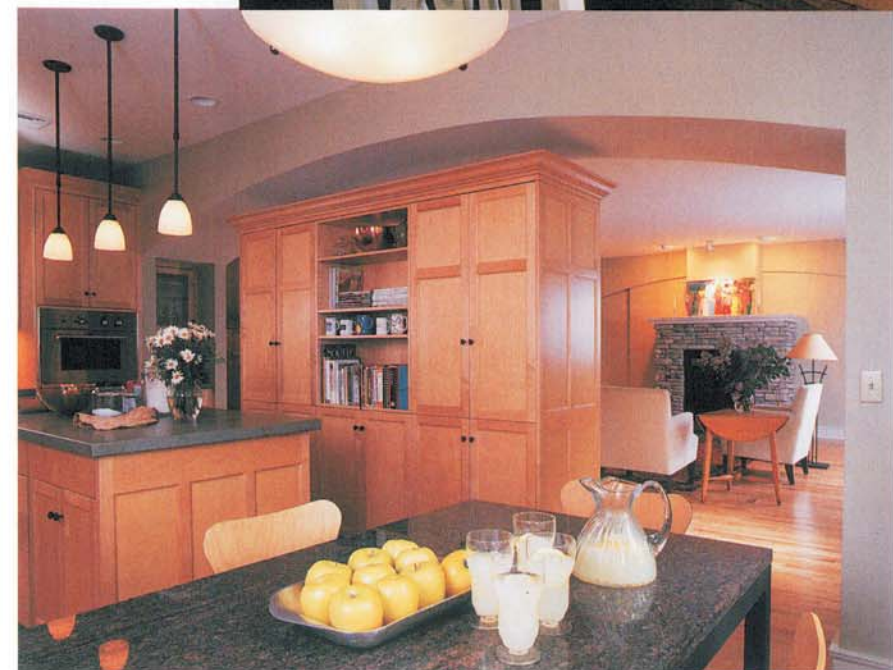
BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED CABINETS provide ample storage and more. This maple divider lends architectural definition to an open kitchen and living room.



A SENSE OF SHELTER A dropped hardwood lattice moves throughout this home designed by architect Sarah Susanka. It suggests rooms and clearly defines areas according to use.



GREAT DIVIDE Activities in a long and narrow vacation home are defined by drops in the ceiling that delineate the dining, living, and sleeping areas. They also provide upper tracks for sliding shoji screens that literally wall off the bedroom at night.



created by using two sets of wing walls. Each space is further defined by columns atop the walls, ending at dropped beams that create four interior windows.

Do double duty with built-ins

When added to a room that feels too open, built-ins can shape a space. The custom cabinet on the left designed by architect Robert Gerloff is an interesting example. Set into a large arched opening between a kitchen and living room, it separates the spaces and provides ample storage for both rooms. It also helps to make the kitchen feel cozy.

That same feeling of enclosure is evoked by the island in the Martha's Vineyard home above. Here, a hard-working built-in hides a lot of clutter while adding style to the room. "The

owners wanted a bit of formality," explains architect Mark Simon, "so the island was made to look like a sideboard."

Design great divides overhead

By changing the height, color, even the material from which a ceiling is made, you can delineate spaces below and provide enclosure. Dropped soffits in kitchens, lowered ceilings in alcoves and hallways, as well as wooden ceilings in open spaces all help to create "that sense of shelter that is fundamental to the feeling of home," explains *Inspired House* contributing editor Sarah Susanka.

For the open living and dining area above, Susanka designed a hardwood lattice that moves through paired posts to create a lower ceiling. "It provides a strong separation between the living and dining areas," says Susanka.

Variations in ceiling height can be especially effective in smaller homes, where space is at a premium. In areas where walls—even half-walls—would block light and views, different ceiling treatments do not. Susanka, who has long advocated smaller, more livable homes, understands the importance of balancing our need for both public and private spaces. In the simple and spare vacation home at right, dropped ceilings suggest separate rooms. As an added feature, shoji screens run on tracks along some of the dropped beams to transform the open space and enclose rooms for privacy at night. **H**

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