



(Franklin Park Log Cabin, built 1800. Photograph by Matthew Schlueb)

## The Shrinkage of Space

As we begin the third month of the winter season, many Pittsburghers are ready for Spring. The snow on the ground, ice on the walks, chill in the air are things only young children still appreciate after such a duration. My own sons wish the snow would last well into summer, so they can continue tunneling igloos into the piles plowed to the edges of our cul-de-sac. But with parents, after weeks of cabin fever cooped up inside, plans for the summer start to materialize into lists of things to improve around the house.

Several months of winter indoors quickly highlights the shrinkage of space, a family growing over the years in a house that has remained the same size since move-in day. Adding more space, quickly rises to the top of the list for many homeowners. For architects, this is the time of year calls start coming in. Requests to add another bedroom and bath, finish off the basement into a game room, or enlarge the kitchen.

Additional bedrooms is not surprising, as kids become teenagers and no longer want to share a room with a younger brother or sister. Everyone needs their own space, a place to retreat when the family seems to be on top of each other or as tempers flare - a common symptom of cabin fever.

And a basement game room is the perfect place to send stir crazy kids, on days of arctic temperatures or sleety rain. However, it is the kitchen that most intrigues me, as it relates to cabin fever and the shrinkage of space. As an architect, I must ask, "What is this phenomena we experience at this time every year and what is its connection to the kitchen?"

In 1800, the first log cabin was built in Franklin Park. A single room, fourteen by twenty feet, with a loft it housed a family of eight. The kitchen was no more than a corner table and a single fireplace performing double duty in winter months - warming the house and cooking a meal in a fireplace kettle.

In a nineteenth century log cabin, winter life was centered around the hearth, cooking, drying clothes, filling the room with light after the sun has gone down for the night. Space was alive, fueled by the flame, the origin of today's romance for a decorated fireplace in the center of our living rooms (even if they are no longer lit).

Over two hundred years later, the average suburban home off the same road that sprouted this cabin, houses a family half the size at over four times the square footage, resulting in eight times as much space per person. Clear evidence of prosperity in a growing community, but could this increase of space also be a response to that cabin fever, the feeling of walls closing in?

Today, we still desire one central space without walls, a kitchen open to the living room. As modern heating and the stove became a fixture after the turn of the century, the fireplace moved out of the kitchen and into the living room. Yet, the heart of the home remained in the kitchen, the place where family activity gravitates.

However, with the absence of a fireplace, the kitchen has symbolically changed, to a refrigerator. The arrangement of refrigerator magnets, artifacts from our lives, correspond directly to our house and family as a whole, a representative sampling.

And yet, the refrigerator is an appliance to chill, preserve, store. Something quite the opposite of a hearth. The space of a home has become a repository for leftovers, no longer active and consumed with the energy of a crackling fire. Although we have grown accustomed to more space over the centuries, something more fundamental has changed to the house. Our psychological needs seek shelter in our homes, in addition to the physical comforts for warmth during cold winter months.

Cabin fever may drive our compulsion for more space in the kitchen, where kids will play looking for the attention of parents preparing meals. But, is bigger always better or does the ever increasing pace of our daily lives simply need more organization? ...like the clutter of magnets on our refrigerator.

So, this last month of winter, as you may be dreaming of an addition to your home, to relieve some of the pressure building up inside, consider the forces at work. Sure, an extra bedroom or bath may be needed as the kids are getting older, and even aging cabinets and appliances may justify a kitchen makeover, but with the last few weeks we have spend up inside this winter, try a little experiment.

Return to the fireplace, light a fire, even if it is with artificial gas logs and an electric starter. Take in an evening of fireside conversation with the family and friends. You might find the log cabin romance, still longing in the minds of a twenty-first century household, may explain how a family of eight survived each other in a single room of fourteen by twenty. Maybe more space was never the solution in the first place. Just maybe, a moment to slow down, breathe, reconnect is done best in a cozy space, like the feeling of a warm hug.

***Matthew Schlueb is a registered architect and owner of SCHLUEBarchitecture. For questions or comments, contact Matthew at [nhm@finalmove.com](mailto:nhm@finalmove.com). This article is part of an ongoing series addressing architectural issues for homeowners.***