



Maintaining a Sense of Privacy in a Home

Just a couple centuries ago, houses in the North Hills were built by the hands of their owner. To build a home for yourself is something very different than to buy a house built by someone else. Labor intensive, many began as one room houses. As time permitted, a second room was soon added to separate a private sleeping area from the original, more open gathering room.

As years passed by, prosperity brought more and more rooms to a house - a kitchen, bed chambers, eventually an indoor bathroom. Each improvement was done with careful consideration, as any construction took great effort. And with all of these elaborations, more changed than the structural use. Human nature factored into the equation, so functional measures soon gave way to social measures.

It wouldn't be enough to have an honest home filled with solid materials addressing common sense needs. Outward appearances became just as important, if not more. Flowered plantings soon trimmed white picket fences framing the home's best face forward, along with gingerbread carvings lining porches and gabled eaves. In this context, a front door demanded decoration to maintain its prominence as a focal point of entry. And, once through the threshold, expectations were elevated for an interior to satiate such prelude and anticipation.

Hence, the origin of a central entry hall - a front room from which all other formal receiving rooms could be found. However, this space has always seemed curious to me. Quite often anchored by a grand staircase with delicately turned spindles edging the steps, in a symmetrical or circular fashion in its most ornate configuration. But, what is the purpose of such a display?

I can only imagine the scene from *Gone with the Wind*, when Scarlett O'Hara would descend the grand staircase of her plantation estate, a staircase fit for the entry to an opera house, much less a residential setting. But, these moments are what we think of when our daughters dress in prom gowns, an entry staircase the perfect staging for presenting her to a date awaiting at the front door below.

For all the expense and effort to create these grand staircases, appreciation only comes on a handful of occasions. The arrival of dinner guests or maybe to receive a client entering a home-based business in the study. No matter the circumstance, the formal gesture seems to be contradictory - a staircase sweeping down toward the front door, as if to invite guests upstairs into the bedrooms.

But, I don't think homeowners see it this way when they set out to buy a home. Our perceptions are shaped by culture and the grand staircase is a staple for the entry hall, regardless if it seems strange to a foreigner of our western traditions. Yet, when designing a home, I try not to overlook such things. The placement of these elements in our home has real consequence on our daily lives, ultimately our memories. Our homes define us.

Maybe this is why so much importance is placed on their lavish display. We want our neighbors and colleagues to think of us in a certain way. And our house, just as the car we drive or the clothes we wear, becomes a statement to them as much as a place for us.

Is this the way it should be? Probably to some extent. There is no denying outward appearances are important. However, I would argue all this attention for someone else's benefit, too often takes away from our own possible enjoyment. Creating a home for those who will be living there is just as important. To do so, the arrangement of rooms and furnishings must be considered - with eyes cleared of cultured lenses.

For example, another fixture in the entry hall is a decorative chandelier, sometimes centered on a large picture window over the front door. For my clients' homes, I tend to bring this down closer to the floor, asymmetrically offset from the door, to give the space a human scale and a visual counterbalance. Handled carefully, the right lighting can take center stage, in a more fitting manner than strange staircase metaphors.

I also like to shift focus toward the living room, with maybe a framed window view of an ornamental tree or garden beyond. Vistas like these offer much more unexpected dramatics, pulling attention in through the house. In my own home, the front entry does this with a west facing circular window to cast setting sunlight across the floor during evening dinner parties. Flanked by a fireplace and cozy chairs, guests are drawn in by a warm and comfortable space.

In the end, guests to your home will be left with lasting impressions when their experiences are felt, not imposed. And a space that feels right requires consideration of each element in the home, how they engage you, what they imply. Differentiating the private rooms of your home from the more formal spaces, right from the start in the entry hall, will create less confusion for a guest, put them at ease and make their visit a treat.

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