



The Shifting Center of a Home

It was once said by a well-known architect, that the best buildings are made of a single space. Historically, there are many examples of these iconic architectural forms - a one room schoolhouse, a one room chapel, a one room log cabin, to name few. It seems a space that is open to the senses, where all can be taken in from a single sitting, provides a certain sense of awareness and comfort.

I believe this is part of the allure with the current trend for open floor plans. Houses without walls separating the kitchen and table from the living room feel as if daily life flows easily. However, this desire for a single open space, where the various activities in a house mix together, is not something new.

At the dawn of civilization, when early settlements started forming in regions suited for grain cultivation, the first houses were nothing more than shed roof structures for sleeping and storing goods circled around an open courtyard, where a fire was kept burning for cooking and staying warm at night. The classic singular space, internalized orientation, a defensible walled exterior. Multiples clustered together formed communities, nodes on the trade routes that stretched from Africa through Mesopotamia and into the Far East.

As populations migrated to colder northern climates, the open courtyard closed up with the central opening in the roof becoming smaller and smaller, to keep heat in. However, these thermal efficiencies trapped more smoke in the living space, combined with frequent fire accidents burning down houses and the result was the development of masonry structures to control the fire, a hearth and chimney.

Despite the hearth and chimney, people grew tired of the smoke and soot that still escaped this open fireplace, filling their living environment. In the late Middle Ages, the single room dwelling transformed into a multi-room house, when the open fireplace moved into its own room. The original one room house was lost and the kitchen was formed, a place dedicated solely for cooking. And, as communities experienced prosperity, the central living space further divided into additional rooms, a parlor, bed chambers, etc., as the advantages from separation of functions became apparent.

Changes to the house continued with an increasing pace and these changes could be measured by examining the improvements to this newly found kitchen. Industrialization of the nineteenth century brought about gas stoves and lighting, soon the study of noxious fumes became a building science, as off gases gained the reputation of an invisible killer. The industrial factories and mills also introduced the kitchen to workflow and time-motion studies, where each step in the cooking process was engineered to maximize efficiencies.

Then in 1926, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky designed the Frankfurt kitchen based on these American workforce principles and the desire for a lower cost kitchen with a smaller footprint to maximize the other living spaces. Brought on by the need for housing at the end of the World War, the Frankfurt kitchen standardized cabinets, workstations, and appliances, for ease of manufacturing and replacement - the advent of the modern kitchen.

As electricity became more commonplace in houses, the refrigerator and small electric appliances started springing up in kitchens. And, after the Second World War production home building revisited the notion of efficiencies and the *work triangle* was born between the stove, sink and refrigerator.

However, the greatest change to the kitchen was not some material improvement, but a shift in perception brought on by the rise in consumerism and big media. What was previously seen as solely a workplace for food preparation evolved into a greater social and cultural role, as gender politics entered the picture at the height of the woman's rights movement. Cooking was increasingly viewed as an art form, with the popularity of cooking shows appearing on the latest electronic device - the television set.

It wouldn't be long before the kitchen re-emerged back into the central living space, both figuratively and physically. Parents making dinner wanted to remain engaged with their children in the living room or at the dining room table doing homework. And, this became increasingly possible as advancements in exhaust hood technology enabled containment of smoke and grease vapors in an open floor plan.

So today we find ourselves in suburban houses that are returning to our ancestral roots of a singular open space. A variety of activities overlapping and multitasking, in a model based on our earliest evolution that I would argue, satisfies a family dynamic that has been missing and a longtime coming.

It is for these reasons the kitchen in my own house opens into the living space, with a large circular floor plan to accommodate family and friends that gravitate toward the aroma and conversation cooking up before dinner. The heart of the twenty-first century home has displaced from the central living room into the kitchen. But, by a return to our original home - a singular space via an open floor plan - we were also able to maintain a connection and vitality with the center we left.

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

Oct 30, 2015 03:04PM, Published by Matthew Schlueb, Categories: [Home+Garden](#), [Today](#)
<http://www.northhillsmoonthly.com/2015/10/30/91073/the-shifting-center-of-a-home>