

BY LAURIE ERICKSON AND CHET ZEBROSKI

# Open an interior



Built-in columns do the work of walls without shutting out light and views

**R**emodeing and modernizing older houses, as we do frequently here in the San Francisco Bay area, holds many challenges. Sometimes our work involves undoing earlier “improvements”

made to the house for reasons unfathomable to its current owners. Other times, we’re called on to open or reconfigure a rigid, traditional floor plan that hasn’t been altered in 100 years.

In both cases, we’ve developed strategies to aid in our design work. And the engaged column—that is, a column attached to or sunk into a wall or partial wall—is one of our favorites.

Engaged columns, sometimes called attached or applied columns, had their heyday in the early part of this century and were frequently used in Arts & Crafts and Craftsman-style homes. But they can work in any interior, as long as the columns reflect the surrounding architectural style.

Engaged columns are often a good design solution because they provide many of the benefits of walls without the limitations. For example, they are the perfect solution to opening up a floor plan without losing the boundaries and focus of an individual room. By engaging the columns in cabinets or bookshelves, we’re able to retain some of the function of a wall without completely closing off one space from another. Also, like the placement of doorways in walls, the positioning of

engaged columns can direct the flow of traffic through a room while allowing light to pass through unrestricted.

We’ll show you three houses where we used engaged columns to connect rooms, create useful traffic patterns, and move light through the interior. If any of these challenges are present in your home, engaged columns may be a solution.

## Letting light shine through

The “transparent wall” created by engaged columns is a valuable strategy for bringing light into a home’s interior. San Francisco’s original urban planning created long, skinny lots that allowed light and views from only the front and back. In addition, many older houses had utility and service porches added to the rear of the house, further reducing the quality of light and weakening the connection of the living spaces to the exterior. A common request we hear today is to reconnect the house to the outside to enhance the light, views, and flow. We do this by reorganizing the layout of rooms or by opening up the rooms in the rear of the house—often by using columns.

One client who hired us to restore her San Francisco apartment after a fire asked if we could, at the same time, provide a stronger visual connection from the kitchen to the backyard. There was a utility porch between the kitchen and the rear deck that blocked most of the view and made the physical connection too remote.

# with columns



**LIGHT IN AND VIEW OUT** Engaged columns—those attached to walls or built-in furniture—offer some benefits of walls without closing off spaces from one another. They can also help light move through an interior, as in this San Francisco house, where replacing a back wall leaves the kitchen bathed in sunlight.

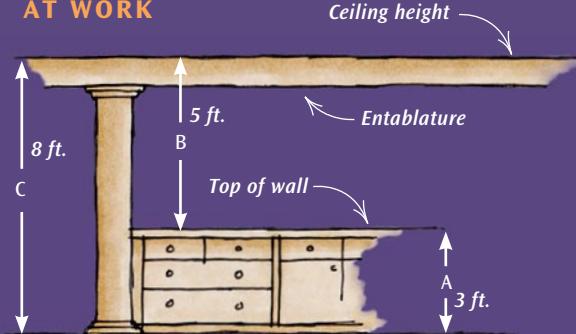
## CRAFTING THE COLUMN

When we incorporate an engaged column into one of our designs, we let the existing architecture of the space guide the shape and size of the column and how it attaches to the wall. For instance, in the Edwardian project pictured on page 40, the hefty proportions of the columns were taken from the existing stair rail and newel post—the only original details left. On the other hand, the bare 6x6 posts used in the contemporary home pictured on page 41 are an example of the narrowest dimension we would consider.

We typically use square columns because they engage smoothly with walls and cabinetry. And we find that columns look best when topped with an entablature, or beam, of some kind. Likewise, we use appearance and practicality rather than specific formulas to determine the height of the half-walls or cabinets with which we engage our columns. To arrive at the right height, we take into consideration existing detail, storage needs, features adjacent to the room, and furniture arrangement.

Working on this article, however, I found that the wall-height proportions used in all these projects closely reflect what mathematicians call the golden section. That means that the ratio of the half-wall's height (A) to the height of the opening above it (B) is roughly equal to the ratio of the opening (B) to the full height of the room (C). While I stress that we do not design using this or any specific formula, it is interesting that what looks good to the eye may just be a classical geometric property at work. —L.E.

### THE GOLDEN SECTION AT WORK



**DISSOLVING THE CORNER** A doorway from the kitchen to the dining area was replaced with three columns engaged in a half-wall. The result retains a visual connection between the rooms while allowing use of the corner for cabinets and countertop.

We removed the wall between the kitchen and the utility porch, replacing it with two columns, each engaged with a 42-inch-high wall (photo, p. 37). On the kitchen side, we placed an additional cabinet against each half-wall. On the utility room side, we tucked a front-loading washer and dryer beneath a counter on one side, and a desk on the other—both out of view beneath the half-walls. To maximize light, we replaced the exterior door with a single-light French door.

The result? What had been a bleak utility porch became a light-filled transition area with a strong connection to both the kitchen and the rear garden. With the desk and laundry in place but virtually out of sight, it still serves its practical purpose. The kitchen now has a wonderful balance of light, which radiates from both the utility area and a new skylight above the island. The columns allow an unobstructed view through the utility room to

Illustration: Martha Garstang Hill



**OPEN SPACES** Removing the wall between the kitchen and the family room in this 1890s San Francisco Victorian not only allows those in the kitchen to interact with those in the family room but also floods both rooms with additional light.

the garden, and they keep pass-through traffic in line with the new French door.

We also used columns on the opposite side of the kitchen, where a door connected the kitchen and dining room (photo, facing page). The space occupied by the doorway would be better used for additional countertop and cabinetry, but our client didn't want to lose the relationship between the two rooms. So to maintain this connection while also maximizing kitchen area, we closed the doorway and used a trio of columns set on a half-wall to dissolve that corner of the room. The light and openness from the kitchen now extends further into the house, without sacrificing valuable counter space in the kitchen.

### Opening up living spaces in an older home

We've all experienced the dinner party where everyone congregates in the kitchen because



**BUILT-IN USEFULNESS** Engaged columns provide a boundary for the kitchen, and offer additional storage for the family room.



**PULLING IT TOGETHER** Here, the column height is set by the existing picture molding, which in turn maintains a transition to the existing coved ceiling in the family room. The entablature over the column in this case covers a structural beam.



**GUIDING TRAFFIC** Previous owners had removed the wall that separated this living room and dining room, opening up both areas but at the same time losing the sense of two separate spaces as well as any cues to traffic flow. Adding columns and half walls separates the areas without closing them off, while the off-center pass-through keeps traffic to one side of the room.



**CONTINUITY OF DESIGN** Using similar details throughout the home pulls the design together. In this case, the architects carry the column design to the master bedroom, where it adorns a bookcase/doorway.



**RECONNECTED ENTRY** An isolated foyer is reconnected to the living spaces by a half-wall that ushers visitors in the right direction.

the adjacent living room is visually separate from the center of activity. Opening up the wall—or a portion of the wall—between two rooms creates a whole new dynamic. And doing this with engaged columns keeps the spaces separate while it also joins them.

Recently, a client hired us to remodel his 1890s Victorian in San Francisco. He wanted to modernize the home to make it more comfortable but at the same time retain the character of the original house in layout and detail. The home's kitchen was a dark internal room cut off from the rest of the living spaces. We suggested removing the wall between the kitchen and the adjacent family room to improve the lighting, increase the visual connection, and create a larger living space.

The owner was resistant to the idea because it was contrary to the traditional floor plan, although he could see the sense in opening up the common space. He initially allowed only a small pass-through between the rooms. But as the design developed, the opening grew, and during construction—when he could see the effect a wider opening had on the two spaces—he agreed to remove the whole wall. We replaced it with two 7-foot-tall square columns engaged with built-in cabinets (top photo, p. 39).

The engaged columns accomplished several things in this case. Primary was the improved circulation and connection between the kitchen and the family room. While still distinctly defined, the rooms are now visually and physically open to each other. A balance of light was also achieved, with each room receiving natural light from more than one direction. Finally, the shelves in the cabinets provide welcome storage space.

At the same time, the character of the individual spaces was maintained through the architecture. The structural beam that replaced the wall was positioned at the height of the existing picture molding, providing a cap for the columns and allowing the original cove ceilings to be maintained. The engaged columns thereby provide a boundary to each room, while preserving the home's vintage charm.



The “transparent wall” created by interior columns is a valuable strategy for bringing light into a home.

### Columns can keep traffic flowing

Opening up a traditional floor plan has its advantages, but removing walls and doorways produces another challenge: how to direct traffic efficiently and effectively through an interior. In this case, we find engaged columns a great tool to provide a focus and to direct people naturally from room to room.

We recently worked on an Edwardian house whose previous owner had stripped all detail from the interior in an apparent attempt at modernization, leaving rooms with no distinction or boundary. The living and dining rooms, for example, were one large space with no suggestion of where one area ended and the other began.

The goal was to restore some detail and create distinct living spaces but without losing the openness. Our solution was to install over-

size columns engaged with half walls between the living and dining rooms (top photo, facing page). Most important, we made the opening between the columns off-center, directing traffic flow to one side and providing more space for furniture. The overall effect was to keep the rooms usable and distinct without losing the connection between the two.

In this home, we also carried the column element upstairs, adding engaged columns to a bookcase flanking the entry to the master bathroom. The columns not only add interest to the bookcase and doorway but also tie the home together architecturally. □

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*For more information, see Resources, page 86.*



### A MORE CONTEMPORARY TWIST

*While most often associated with classical architecture, columns can be adapted to any home style.*