

A point of focus  
draws people in and adds  
character to a room

# The Center of Attention

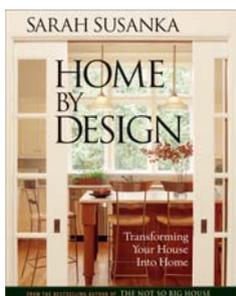
BY SARAH SUSANKA

**A**n unfocused room can be as disconcerting as a blurry photograph; your eye doesn't know where to look. My architectural colleagues and I know the value of having a point of focus in a room. It can be as simple as a favorite piece of art at the center of the main living space. Or it can be more elaborate, like an inglenook around a beautifully designed fireplace, or a composition of windows looking into the garden beyond. Although it's not crucial to have a point of focus in every space in the house, the introduction of one or two in key rooms can add a lot of character, draw you into the space, and give the area a center.

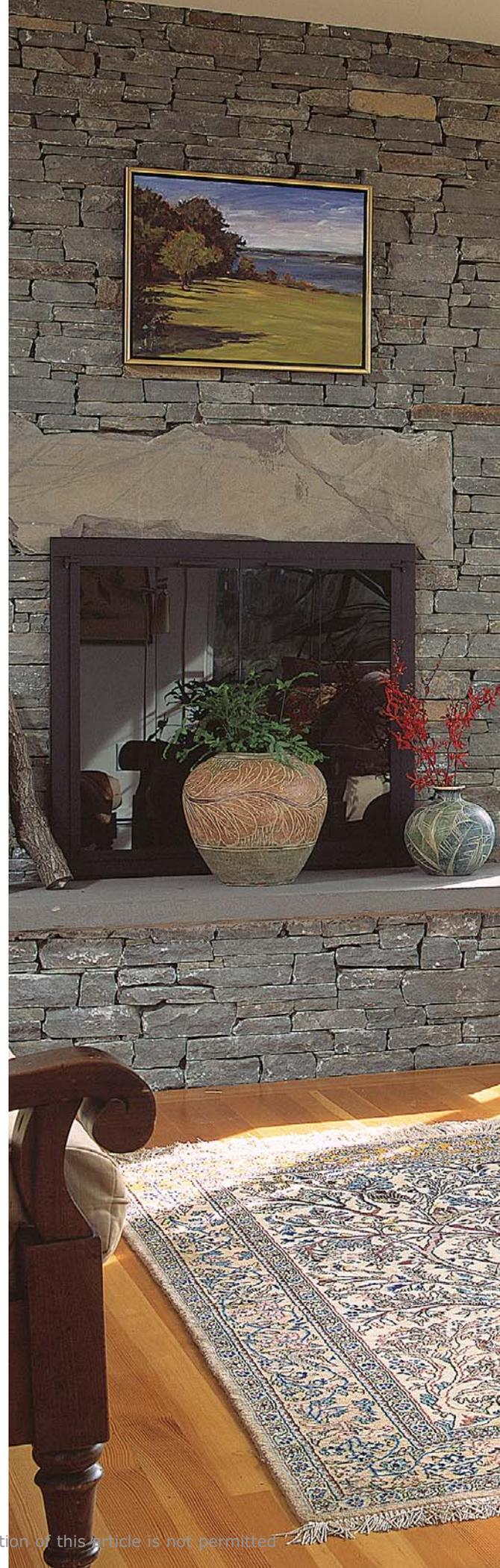
## Capture attention with craftsmanship

A dramatic way to create a point of focus is to make an unusual piece of craftsmanship the primary attention grabber for a room. The amazing stone chimney in a house on the coast of Maine (photo far right) and the Rhode Island flagstone fireplace (photo right) are wonderful examples of construction that transcends its normal utilitarian function. The chimney is not only the room's point of focus, it is perhaps the most memorable feature of the entire house.

An attention grabber doesn't have to be a visual feature. It



This article is adapted from Sarah Susanka's newest book, *Home by Design*, published by The Taunton Press.





Make an **unusual piece of craftsmanship** the primary attention grabber for a room.

**STONE HAS A  
COMMANDING PRESENCE**

*The fireplace (left) is the first thing you see when you enter this light-filled room. In another home, the artfully constructed chimney with its tiny built-in shelf is a memorable feature (below).*



**SOOTHING SOUNDS SET THE MOOD** Water from this concrete fountain sculpture descends to a shallow pool below floor level. The water's trickling sounds can be heard throughout the house.

can also be directed at a different sense, like the water feature in the entryway of a home (photo right) whose sound permeates both levels. No matter where you are in the house, you are drawn toward its calming brooklike sound, which gives the home a strong sense of "center" as well as a tranquility that would be absent if the water were gone. Although the surrounding architecture makes a strong statement, the water feature is the attention grabber.

### A point of focus can be simple and small

When you're remodeling a house and money is limited, one of my favorite character-adding strategies is to create a point of focus in the kitchen on the wall area between the range and the hood above. The hood is almost always located higher above the countertop than the adjacent cabinets, so it creates a natural focus in the backsplash area, even without further embellishment. But by filling this area with a tile design, you can simply and inexpensively add a point of focus that will be seen and enjoyed every day.

When remodeling my own home in North Carolina, I used a single feature tile at the center of the area above the cooktop and surrounded it with much less expensive tile (center photo, facing page). Because the range is located at the approximate center of the visual axis from the main living area to the kitchen, it is seen many times a day. The tiles add some personality to a space that would otherwise be unremarkable.

Create a **focal point** that defines a room's center and strongly **draws attention**.



**SHIFT THE CENTER FOR EFFECT**  
A fireplace, skylight, and wall hanging are all left of center on the back wall in the room at right, shifting the focal center of the room.

**ADD SOME PERSONALITY** Below, a single handmade tile captures attention above a cooktop.



### When the wall itself is worth looking at

In many rooms, there is an obvious wall surface to focus on. Usually it's focal because of one of the following: it is directly above a fireplace or built-in TV; it is bathed in light from a skylight or adjacent window, making it more noticeable; it is the tallest wall in the room, perhaps beneath the ridge of a cathedral ceiling; or it is at the far end of a strong visual axis through the house.

The wall in the photo above is the focus for all four of these reasons, making it even more of a point of focus than usual. The wall hanging has been placed directly above the fireplace and is washed with light from the large skylight above. The hanging could have been placed at the center of the wall, but since the fireplace is to the left of center, as is the skylight, this might have made the room appear lopsided. By hanging it on the same side of the wall as the fireplace and the skylight, it emphasizes that this side is the visual center of the room.

### **EVEN A DOOR CAN BE A POINT OF FOCUS**

*The dark-green door stands in contrast to the bright white of the interior trim. When it's open, it draws attention to the deck.*



**IN THE SPOTLIGHT**  
A composition of tall windows over an inviting window seat gives this room a hard-to-miss focal point. The effect is more subtle in a corner (below) where a “something place” lends a simple landing more importance.



### Designing a room around a single feature

Sometimes you'll want to create a focal point that defines a room's center and strongly draws attention in that direction. This can be done with a window composition or it can be something like a fireplace or a TV that commands attention because of its function.

Many of us spend large amounts of time staring at the television screen, yet the TV itself, and how we house it in the room, is seldom given much thought. Most often it is on a cart or low table that has little bearing on the design of the rest of the room. With a little forethought, the room can be crafted around the TV, making its setting a composition of beauty, even when the TV is not in use.

I employed this strategy when designing a home for a couple and their two children. They readily acknowledged that, though they loved the look of a fireplace, they seldom gathered around it; their primary social gathering place was in front of the TV screen. So we designed a set of cabinets around the television that made all the parts combine into an interesting visual composition (left photo, facing page).

### The eye travels to the end of an axis

The fireplace in that house was not forgotten, however. It was located off to one side, where it provides a point of focus at the end of the main walkway through the house—at the end of an axis.

In most houses there is usually at least one long visual axis through the space, and sometimes many more. By this, I mean that you can see through one space after another to a wall or window at the far end of the vista. When such a view exists, the end wall is given increased importance. It automatically becomes one of those places that cries out for a piece of artwork—or some other object or feature—that will provide a striking visual delight. Your attention is directed there anyway, so why not make the most of it?



A room can be crafted around a TV,  
making its setting **a composition of beauty.**



**DELIGHT AT THE END OF AN AXIS** In this family room (left), the fireplace is off to one side, but it's still a focal point because it sits at the end of an axis, the main walkway through the house. Like a beacon, the display shelf at the end of a long corridor (above) draws your eye.

### Create and accentuate a “something place”

One of my favorite techniques when designing a new home or remodeling is to include a few “something places.” These are natural points of focus that can be enhanced, either through special lighting or through sculpting of the available space, to showcase a piece of artwork or a special treasure.

In the house at left, there's a “something place” in one of the corners of the upstairs landing. Because this spot is passed every time someone heads from one of the bedrooms to the stairway, it has a natural importance.

This spot has been crafted to feature what it contains. The ceiling is lowered, providing a perfect place for a small recessed light to pinpoint the object below. At night the lamp's reflection off the sculpture illuminates the entire area, adding drama and character to the landing. Whether it's a small, special corner in the upstairs hall or a grand floor-to-ceiling fireplace, I've found that a point of focus not only gives people something pleasing to look at but also adds another dimension to the rooms I design. **h**

*Sarah Susanka is an architect and contributing editor.*