

The Kitchen/ Family Room Relationship

Unless you live in an old house that hasn't been remodeled, it's easy to forget that kitchens used to be isolated workspaces, closed off from the rest of the house. This was largely because, before the invention of good extractor fans, food preparation was smelly. It just wasn't good taste to let these odors pervade the house. In addition, the mess generated from meal preparation was something to be kept hidden from the more formal civility of the living room.

Today, with the advent of the two-income family and the related reduction in shared family time, meal preparation has turned into family social hour as well. The kitchen is the common ground in the house. Everyone ends up there, and as a consequence, kitchens have expanded to provide more space for this socializing. The result is the kitchen/family room combination. What most people haven't considered, however, is



The undifferentiated great-room space.

This plan, which gained popularity in the mid-1980s, offers little in the way of retreat from kitchen-related activity. When combined with a vaulted ceiling, the clatter of kitchen utensils becomes a serious annoyance.

just how much the connection between these two rooms affects the livability of the home. For the majority of families and couples today, the isolated kitchen is a serious inconvenience. But kitchens that are completely open to the family room can also be a problem. The ideal for most households lies somewhere in between.

Managing the mess

A common concern about the kitchen is that if it is too much a part of the family room, the mess of pots, pans, plates, and potato peelings will color the experience of the entire family area. This is a frequent complaint that my clients have about homes with one large, undifferentiated great-room space, such as the one shown in the drawing on p. 39. Although it was a popular plan in the 1980s, people quickly discovered some inherent shortcomings to the big, dramatic space. Even though this organization does not physically impede family socializing, acoustically and visually, it takes over. Especially when such a room is built with a tall ceiling, as many were, just the normal clatter of dishes and pans can reverberate through the space, causing low-level irritation and making such activities as TV watching difficult.

So when I am designing a new home or remodeling an existing one, I try to give the



Screen the mess with a raised counter.

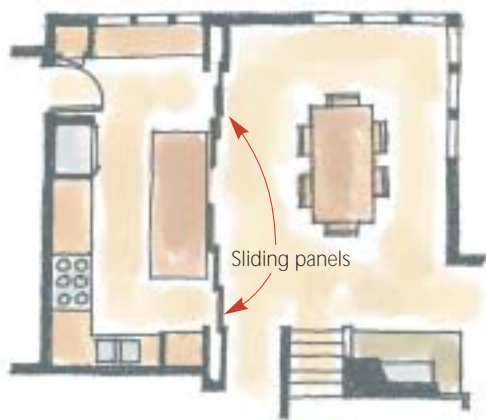
A 6-in.-high ledge above the standard-height kitchen counter obscures the kitchen from view. In a dead-end kitchen, such as this one, escaping from this spot during parties becomes a problem.

kitchen some “psychological” distance from the family room, without separating the two. In this way, whoever is engaged in meal preparation can still participate in family interaction while keeping the acoustical and visual disruptions to a minimum. The following generic solutions work well to accomplish this separation:

1. **A raised counter acts as a screen.** Raising the height of the counter separating kitchen from family room creates a bar for guests and family to sit at while food is being prepared (drawing above). Once the meal is served and everyone is seated at the table, the raised counter obscures the view of dirty dishes and meal-prep

mess from the diners' view. For cooks who are embarrassed about the disorder left in their wake, this solution works well. Its drawbacks are that for families with small children, the countertop seating (bar stools) is generally too high for small children to hoist themselves up comfortably. And the raised counter works best as a screening device when it's part of a peninsula, rather than an island. Be aware also that a peninsula kitchen can be a problem during parties, when everyone congregates in there leaving no escape route.

2. **A partitioned alcove hides everything.** Some homeowners recognize the ambivalence they feel toward the kitchen. They realize that despite their best efforts at



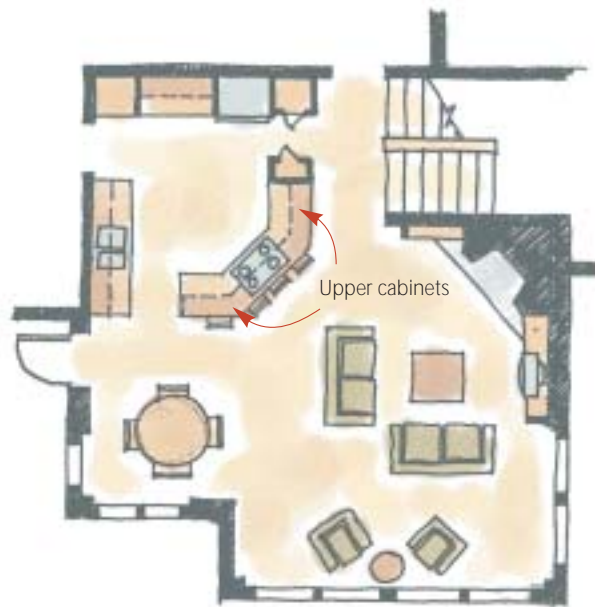
keeping the kitchen sights and sounds away from their guests, the guests seem to gravitate to the more informal parts of the house, most particularly to the kitchen. There is something reassuring—and more real—about the kitchen than almost any other part of the house. Perhaps it is that we can be assured of finding some sort of activity here.

By locating the kitchen in an alcove that can be partitioned off with sliding panels, the informal parts of the house can also be used for entertaining without having the kitchen mess on display while we're eating and socializing after a meal (drawing below).

3. **Counters, islands, and upper cabinets used as partial screens.** When total screening of the kitchen from the dining area isn't an issue, I prefer to use an island or peninsula at the same height as the rest of the countertop to create psychological separation (drawing on p. 42). An island provides a center for the kitchen and something for noncooks to lean on or sit at while food is being pre-

The disappearing kitchen.

A kitchen in an alcove can be screened from view with sliding panels. The panels are concealed in wall pockets when not in use.



Island living with upper cabinets.

Standard-height counters, along with a row of upper cabinets, give a sense of separation between the kitchen and the dining area. The bottom of the upper cabinets should be even with the eye level of the tallest occupant.

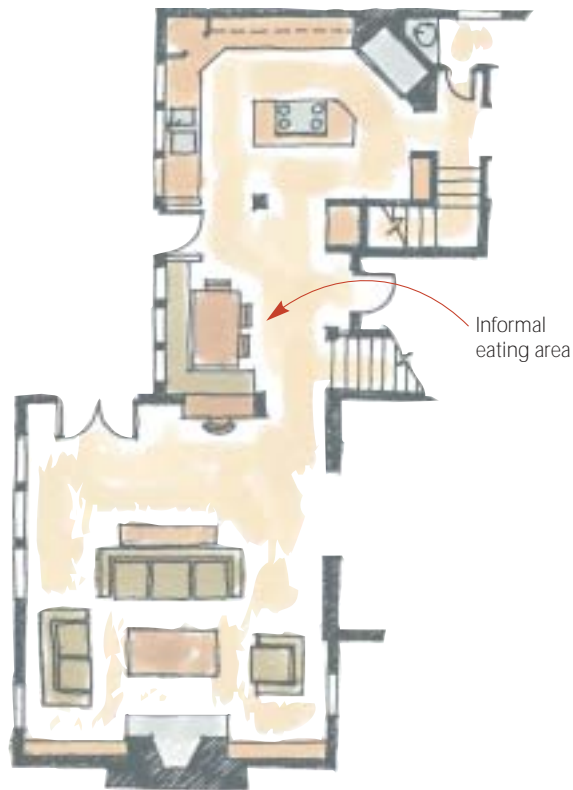
With the advent of the two-income family and the related reduction in shared family time, meal preparation has turned into family social hour as well. The kitchen is the common ground in the house.

pared, without getting in the way. With the counter surface at the regular 3-ft. height, bar stools are at a child-friendly height. It is also easier at this height to have others help out with chopping, stirring, or tasting. A taller counter section makes it a lot more difficult for volunteer cooks to help with the cooking. Try carving a Thanksgiving turkey on a 42-in.-high surface, and you'll see what I mean.

Upper cabinets can also accentuate a sense of separation without obstructing the view. The height of the bottom of the upper cabinet, however, is important to making this work (drawing left). I usually take the eye height of the tallest person in the house and make that the height of the upper-cabinet base.

Most people are familiar with houses from the 1950s and 1960s, where upper cabinets were brought down to within 15 in. of the peninsula or island countertop. There are few things more irritating than having to bend over every time you want to talk to someone on the other side of the counter.

4. **An informal nook can be a buffer zone.** Another way to create more psychological separation between the kitchen and the family room, without closing them off, is to place an informal eating area between the two (drawing facing page). Someone working in the kitchen is not isolated, but kitchen and family room are more clearly separate rooms.



Buffer zone between the kitchen and the family room.

Placing an informal eating area between the two rooms creates a lively spot that shares in the activity of both spaces.

This is one of my favorite solutions, and it seems to satisfy the concerns of many couples regarding the level of connection between the two. From the family room, it feels as though the kitchen were more tucked away, while from the kitchen you can participate in the conversation taking place in the family room. With this arrangement, the eating area also tends to get heavily used, both for eating and for

socializing, precisely because it is close to the kitchen.

So when you are planning to remodel or build new, start by thinking about the connection you desire between the kitchen and family room. Your answer, as you can see, will dramatically affect how the house works for everyday living.