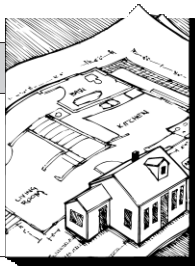


Fine-Tuning The Floor Plan

by Gordon Tully



The question “What makes a good floor plan?” turns out to be very hard to answer because many subjective and mysterious issues arise. Even so, there are objective rules you should consider when planning a house (which, like all rules, are meant to be thoughtfully broken). While important, these rules only get you to first base. A really good plan reflects an attitude about living, materials, space, the human condition — all issues for another column (or book).

Gather in the light. Make sure light is available where and when it is needed. In the Northeast, where I practice, spirits sag during the frequent cloudy days. South light is essential in this climate, with east light a close second. West light needs to be controlled in all climates because of afternoon overheating in the summer. Arrange rooms so that the ones which really need the light are on the sunny side.

Pay attention to climate. Utility spaces and garages should be placed to shield the house from cold winter winds. In snowy climates, put garage and house entries on a sunny exposure to help melt snow. In many U.S. climates, an inside corner facing southeast provides outdoor space sheltered from cold northwest winds. Put windbreaks between

the house and cold winds, and cut trees which block summer breezes and desirable sun.

Design the house into the grade. When the site is not flat, the house needs to respond to the grades. Sometimes bedrooms end up on the lower floor. The roof may cascade down the hill. A deck may project boldly into space. Don't simply design a flat-site house and jam it into a sloping site.

Integrate the automobile. Most houses pretend the car isn't there. The garage is glued onto the end of the house, with the front path and front door dead center, as if it were still 1760. A good plan responds to the actual way one arrives and leaves, usually by car. Even if the garage is hidden away below or to the side, the drive is the dominant element of the landscape, and no one ever uses the phony “front door.” Tie driveway, garage doors, and house entry together in a logical and handsome arrangement.

One entry should serve everyone. In most households, a separate formal entry is a holdover from the days of servants. People use the entry nearest the car, which usually means entering between the trash cans and cat box.

Instead, create a nicely decorated entry, located near the garage and convenient to guest parking (Figure 1). Guests enter through the front door, family through the garage — but all enter into the same handsome entry hall. Ideally, the mudroom, which holds all the paraphernalia of an entry — outdoor clothing, athletic equipment, muddy boots, etc. — should be a separate space adjacent to this entry hall. A further convenience is to open the back door and basement off the mudroom.

Doors should not interfere with each other. There are lots of ways to prevent doors from clashing, so there is no excuse for the problem, although some ingenuity is often called for. Figure 1 shows several ideas.

Each room should be furnishable, preferably in more than one way. This will often require that windows be located in ways which appear informal and asymmetrical on the outside, but don't let outside symmetry dictate how a room is furnished. In bedrooms, don't force the user to walk around the bed in order to get to the closet or the dresser.

Don't cut up rooms with through traffic. When you need to walk through one room to get to another, create a visual corridor on one side of the space, with an area of usable space next to the walking space. Don't run the traffic diagonally through a room.

Try to open all the rooms off a common hallway. A room that can be reached only through another room limits the use of both. Open all the rooms off a common hallway, but then connect the rooms with each other (Figure 2). This creates a circular traffic pattern, which is very useful when cleaning or entertaining.

Don't create a maze. This principle is hard to explain, and drifts into the subjective. Basically, when you have to walk around something, make the “something” a solid obstacle, rather than a meander of plaster walls. Typical solid obstacles are masonry walls, fireplaces, closets, bookcases, counters, changes of level, and staircases. Typical maze-creating elements are plaster walls, low space dividers, screens, and changes of floor materials.

Keep stairs open on one or more sides. Stairs jammed between walls feel uncomfortable and make furniture moving difficult. Leave one or more sides

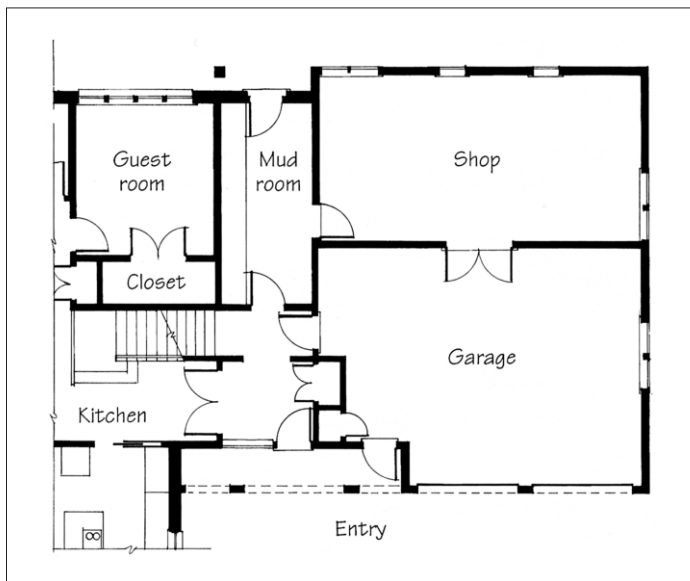
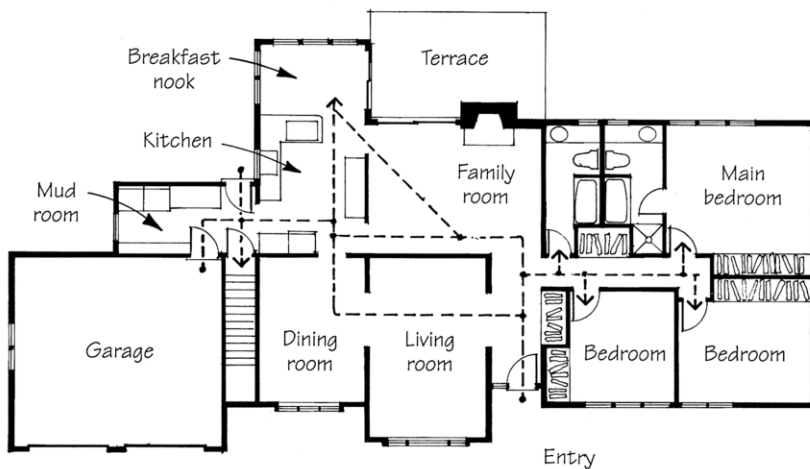


Figure 1. This floor plan integrates the garage into the design, and provides a single entry for occupants and visitors. Arches above the recessed porch and garage doors visually tie the entry area together. Inside, the entry hall opens into the main stair hall, the basement, the garage, and a large mudroom.

A.



B.

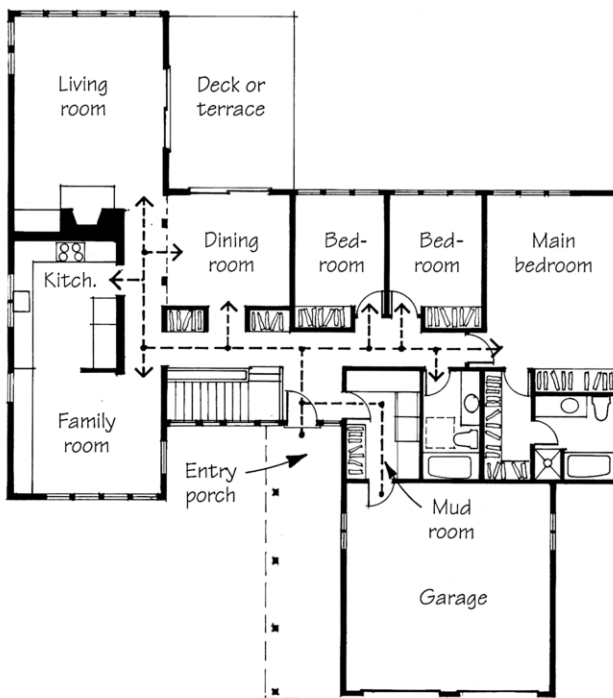


Figure 2. These two floor plans illustrate the difference between a mazelike design and one with clearly defined circulation paths around solid plan elements.

In Plan A, to get to the kitchen you have to walk through the center of the living room or skirt it by passing through the family room. The living room becomes an obstacle to travel. In fact, all three main rooms have paths through them.

By contrast, the T-shaped hall in Plan B gives the plan a structural core. All rooms off the hall are "cul-de-sacs," with no through traffic. Using the hallway seems natural because it is clearly defined.

open, so the stair becomes a sculptural and space-forming element.

Create acoustically separate living areas. Especially when houses get small, it is important for most users to create more than one completely separated space for listening to music or television. Otherwise, anyone who wants to get away from the general hubbub must head for a bedroom or bathroom.

Create long views. Always try to line windows up on doorways as

you enter a room, or arrange doors so that you can see a long way diagonally across a plan. This will help enlarge a small house.

Use the ceiling plane to create spatial extension. In small plans, it is often essential to break out of the pattern of continuous flat ceilings; this adds back the sense of spatial extension lost when the plan was condensed. Take advantage of breaks in the ceiling created by stairways and skylights. Drop the ceiling in strategic places, and use cathedral ceilings.

Avoid tunnel-like corridors.

Widen a central hall or stair landing, and add bookcases and a place to sit. Bring light into a corridor from above so that it works as a gallery. Run the stair alongside a corridor to create a more complex space with vertical extension. When possible, run the hall on an outside wall and put in windows or glazed doors. ■

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