

Designing the Great Room

by Jamie Fisher

After the kitchen renovation and the master bedroom addition, the great room is probably the most frequent architectural request I get. Today's great room is a relatively large, open, multipurpose room containing the kitchen, family room, and informal dining; it supplements rather than replaces a traditional dining and living room.

The challenge with a great room is its complexity. Unlike the single-purpose living room and dining room, which have evolved into nostalgic relics, the great room reflects, for better or worse,

the way families live today. Folks want to do a lot of things simultaneously — including watch TV — and they want to be able to do them all in one room. A successful great room will support these multiple activities within distinct functional areas while maintaining a strong sense of the whole room.

Start by determining the overall plan of the great room, locating the primary functional areas within it. Your decisions will be driven by many factors, including the layout of the rest of the house, the site, and numerous environmental factors (view, solar orientation,

etc.). While every situation is unique, some general rules hold:

A complex plan often works better than a simple rectangle, because the various functional areas benefit from having their own spatial identities. This is easier to create if the spatial clarity of the overall room is weakened a bit. I have had good luck with L and T shapes.

In locating the functional areas, think kitchen first, the most functionally driven place in any house. The actual food prep area should be immediately adjacent to both the dining room and to the door through which groceries enter and garbage leaves. Informal dining, too, should be close at hand. Whether at a counter, a table in the kitchen proper (the “country kitchen”), or a booth or table in a discrete space (the “breakfast nook”), informal dining should be immediately adjacent to the food prep area.

In the plan shown here, designed for a recent client, the dining room and breakfast nook are located directly off the two ends of the L-shaped counter, as are the doors to the mudroom and to the deck. The stools along the counter are in easy reach. Notice how the person at the sink doesn't have his or her back to either the family room or the breakfast nook, and has only to turn slightly to talk with visitors.

Doors, Stairs, and Windows

Once the functional areas are defined, locate the doors and stairs. These will establish the circulation paths, which should further reinforce the functional zones by dividing them from one another. Don't use more circulation space than necessary; and don't let circulation cut

First-Floor Plan with Great Room



The great room area encompasses three distinct functional areas: the kitchen with eating bar, a breakfast nook, and a lounging/TV area.

through the primary program areas.

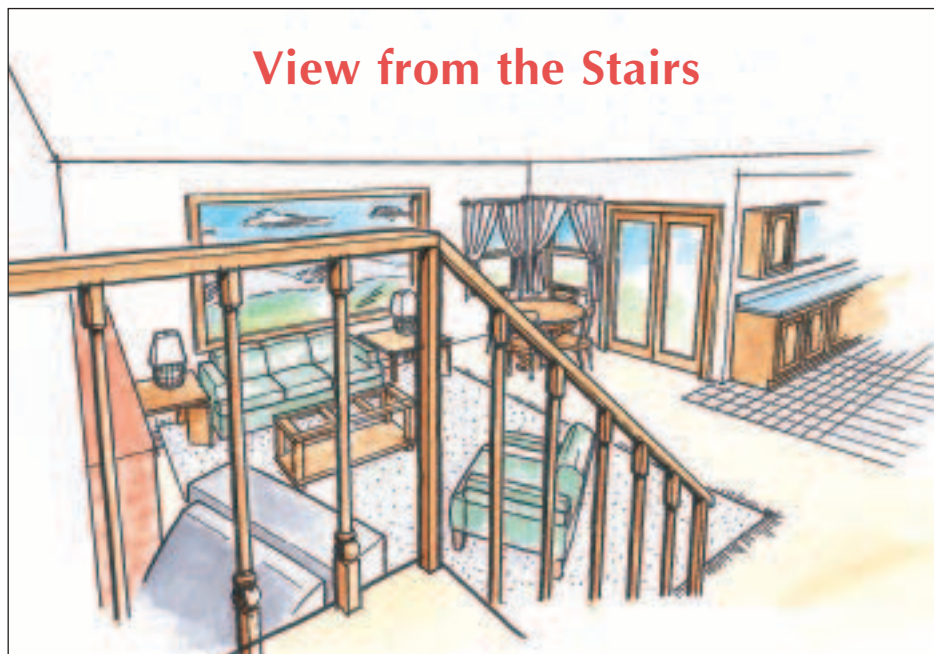
In the plan shown here, for instance, putting the French doors on the east wall rather than the north end of the family room not only makes serving the deck easier, but also makes the lounging area a cul-de-sac rather than a thoroughfare. The paths to the mudroom skirt but don't disrupt the main kitchen work area. The stairs flow into a central circulation knuckle without bisecting any functional areas. Where circulation does cut through a room, such as the living room, it just nicks the corner, leaving the core of the room intact.

After doors and stairs come windows, the placement of which should further anchor the functional areas. The kitchen is easy: The window goes over the sink, assuming the sink is on an outside wall. Other windows require more thought. The fireplace and the TV come into play, since both of these tend to organize a room. In this house, the owner felt that the fireplace belonged opposite the French doors. Flanking windows on either side of the fireplace would have set up too strong a symmetry, and would have left no place for the entertainment center.

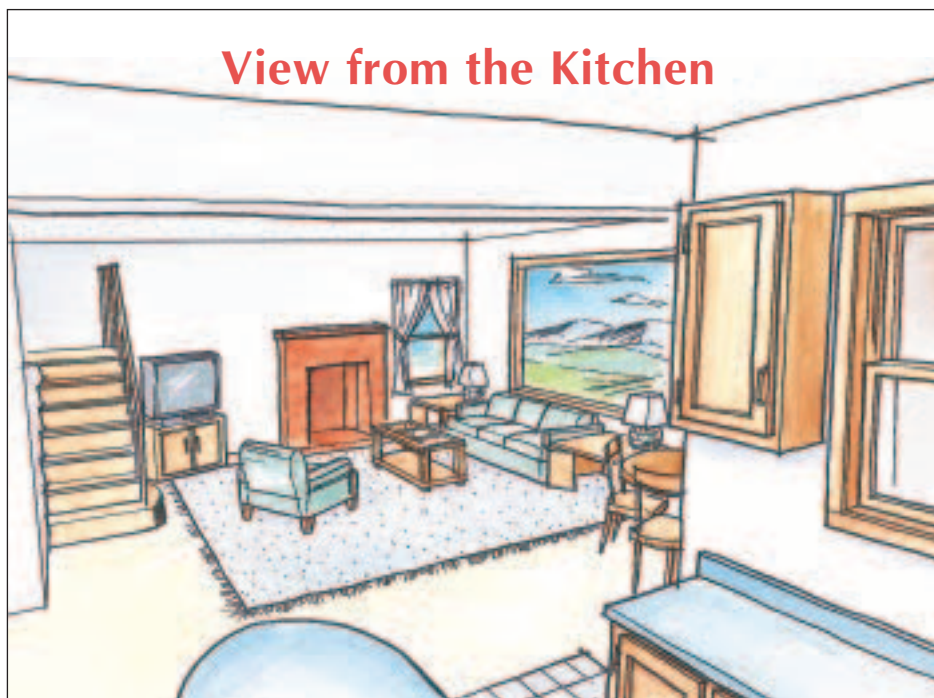
I proposed putting the TV to the left of the fireplace and putting corner windows of differing sizes at the outside corners of the projecting bay. This downplayed the symmetry of the fireplace and its flanking elements and gave each of the two corners an identity: one became the lounging/TV corner, the other the breakfast table corner. Finally, it provided a large expanse of blank wall against which to put the lounging furniture. It also kept the big-screen TV out of the northwest corner, where it would have been overly dominant.

Floors and Ceilings

I like a flat, undifferentiated ceiling plane in a great room because it allows the multiple readings of the space to coexist without favoring one over the others, as a vaulted ceiling might do. Same with the floor: Ideally, a single floor material would be used throughout. Some materials work well for the whole great room, such as hardwood, tile, or



The dramatic view of the great room from the stairs is not dominated by the large-screen TV, which is tucked into the corner below.



The L-shaped layout gives the kitchen its own separate space while still allowing the cook to be part of the activity in the lounging area.

polished concrete. But many people want function-specific floor coverings: carpet in the lounge area, a scrubbable floor in the kitchen, and so forth. The challenge is to give the different areas appropriate flooring without cutting up the space. My favorite trick here is to run one dominant field material and have it

switch to being a border in the areas where different flooring is wanted. The atypical flooring becomes an “area rug” of carpet, tile, or vinyl thrown over a floor of, say, hardwood.



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