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Inside The New American Home

By Bill Saporito/Dallas; Harriet Barovick, Lisa McLaughlin and Desha Philadelphia/New York, Jyl Benson/New Orleans, Leslie Everton Brice/Atlanta, Betsy Rubiner/Des Moines and Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles

I really love the idea of a beautiful foyer that opens all the way through to the back of the house," says James Atkins as he rhapsodizes about the 8,000-sq.-ft. home he is building in Folsom, La., an hour north of New Orleans. The foyer features a fountain at the center of an intricate spiral staircase. The house will have a media room, a wall-size aquarium, five bedrooms, plus all kinds of ideas that he has collected in 10 years of exploring the real estate landscape.

Atkins sounds like a decorator, but he resembles a doorway. He's 6 ft. 7 in., 350 lbs. and a veteran National Football League lineman who spent the past decade trying to keep other large, angry men from mangling his quarterback. Now, though, Atkins is like the rest of house-hunting, house-remodeling, house-rich and house-proud America. "I want my dream house to incorporate lots of features that reflect my interests," he says, "so my home will remain appealing and comfortable to me throughout my lifetime."

Home ownership has never been more pervasive across the U.S., and judging by the success of television's Trading Spaces and hgtv and the introduction of new shelter magazines such as Cachet, LivingRoom and Chic Simple, neither has home obsession. Low interest rates and an inhospitable stock market have redirected money and attention back to real estate. Home sales, although slowing a bit recently, should break a record, according to the National Association of Realtors. Rising home values also contribute to an increase in remodeling, as families find themselves priced out of the next step up. They add space by renovating, which can be half the price, per square foot, of building from the ground up. Restrictive zoning laws have had a similar effect. Owners can add space only by removing walls.

The national tragedy of 9/11 reinforced a trend that was already under way: the home is not just everyone's castle, it's becoming a resort, an island of comfort in an ocean of insecurity. It's command central for the modern family in all its configurations, the place to huddle, socialize and strategize in an increasingly complex world. Says Kacey Fitzpatrick, who heads Avalon Enterprises, a design and construction firm in Mountain View, Calif.: "The families I work with are trying to find a balance between comfortable refuge, multifunctioning utilitarian facility and showplace."

And that multidimensional role is changing what a house looks like inside. The compartmentalized shelter with separate rooms for preparing food, eating, entertaining and watching television has been steadily giving way to an abode made up of larger, flexible living areas. So something had to give, and it has: the formal living and dining rooms. "Formals are dead," says Michael Herzog, a regional vice president with Centex Corp., one of the nation's largest homebuilders. Centex is designing formal-free homes, something most builders wouldn't even consider a couple of years ago. "There's a whole different thought process going into the home today," says Stephen Peake, a Centex architect. Now "there's a lot of focus on flexible use of space." And it's not confined to fancy homes. Such features as media rooms and home offices can be found in many of the 209 homes ranging in price from \$130,000 to \$180,000 that Centex is building in the fast-growing Dallas suburb of McKinney. Another surprise: Centex's designs are feng shui friendly. The Oriental philosophy of maximizing the chi, or energy, of a building through its design is a must for Asian buyers, and it is crossing into the Western mainstream.

Simply put, we don't want our houses to suggest English cottages anymore. Interior walls are disappearing. Volume has replaced coziness, from double-height entryways to oversize garages. It's a concept embraced by urbanites who have abandoned their shoebox-size apartments for the wide-open spaces of lofts reclaimed from 100-year-old factory buildings. With the living room fading, the kitchen has become the family gathering place, and it's being packed with multiple sinks and Department of Defense--priced ovens. The kitchen can't be contained anymore, so it blends into that large live-eat-play space often called a great room, which connects through glass doors to the outside space, now being treated as an integral part of the design. The idea is to allow family togetherness and personal space at the same time, meaning never having to reach a consensus about what to do together.

Yet the same parents who are intent on creating common areas are just as determined to wall themselves off from their issue in master-bedroom suites the size of apartments. "I have to have this," a client recently told Los Angeles--area contractor Bill Simone. "I'll get a night job if I have to, but my bedroom has to be huge." Don't crowd Mom and Dad, kids, they're boomers. And guess what: the size of your bedrooms is being squeezed so they can have walk-in closets (one each), a bathroom with his-and-hers vanities and a shower cabinet with enough sidewall-to-ceiling showerheads to rinse an SUV.

These overachieving homes and the American lust for space have given sprawl a new interior dimension. Even in 2,000-sq.-ft. starter homes, says Peake, consumers are demanding a family room, a master suite and an upstairs game room--known locally as a Texas basement. On the upper end, McMansions built to the lot line and stuffed with media rooms, gyms, home offices and oversize three-car garages can distort the look of a neighborhood and result in exteriors that even their designers find distressing. "People don't seem to care," says New Orleans architect Mark Schroeder. "They want all the house they can possibly have."

In a sense, the open-plan design of today recalls a time three centuries ago when a house consisted of one room centered on a fireplace for cooking and warmth. Then prosperity and technology combined to change things over the years. Central heating decentralized living, making separate bedrooms for individual family

members more feasible. In the postwar housing boom, the classic three-bedroom ranch gave each component of the nuclear family a room (but what moron decided that one bathroom would suffice?). By the early '70s everyone was going his own way. Who needed a formal dining room when no one wanted to eat together anyway?

Today, the kitchen is the star again, family HQ, after having wandered around for two centuries like an unwanted boarder. At times it was a separate building, attached to the rear of the house or relegated to the basement. The small, utilitarian kitchen got back into the house in the early 20th century. "It's the meeting place, the eating place, the social gathering place, the communications exchange," says Fitzpatrick. "The new layouts reflect the inherent need of family members to be near the headquarters."

As any corporate boss can tell you, headquarters tends to get all the bells and whistles. In kitchen appliances, overkill isn't over. The trend toward commercial stoves and refrigerators, such as those by Viking and Wolf and Sub-Zero, has been reinforced by the shift of such traditional makers as Whirlpool, Maytag, GE and Amana into professional-quality gear and by a changed appearance in the everyday American kitchen. "Everyone is striving for a commercial look," says Tommy Genussa, president of TAG Homes Inc. in New Orleans. "That means stainless-steel appliances. Even in modest homes, the movement is toward as much stainless steel as possible."

The kitchen has become the home's ego, the place where owners choose to strut their stuff. "People treat their kitchens much differently than they did in the recent past," says Russell Morash, creator of the home-renovation television show *This Old House*. "We've moved away from well-mannered, out-of-the-way appliances to in-your-face kitchen as theater." Morash says the "\$100,000 kitchen" has replaced the killer bathroom at the top of the dream-house wish list.

Robert Bell, an architect based in Washington, says the metamorphosis of the kitchen also relates directly to our ability to afford leisure and space. "Over the years, the kitchen has been influenced by places like the beach house, where people go to play and relax, that have always used the big-room design," says Bell. "People say, 'I like that,' and so they just brought it into their own homes."

Bell worked with Karen and Jeff Berman, who recently spent close to a year remodeling their 1940s house in Larchmont, N.Y., knocking down walls to create a knockout kitchen that opens into large living and eating areas. The Bermans put their money where the activity is. "We devoted a lot of effort to planning and designing the kitchen because our family loves to cook, loves to eat and loves to entertain," says Karen, a serious cook.

The addition of big, shiny gadgets is also viewed as proof that guys are hanging around too. "Men have taken to cooking and made it into a hobby and a locus of consumption and gadgetry," says design critic Thomas Hine. That helps explain the increasing popularity of such accessories as wine coolers, warming drawers, pot fillers and built-in espresso machines the size of church organs. For the ultrachic kitchen that

has everything, the impulse is to buy things in pairs: two stoves and two dishwashers. You can throw the kitchen sink into the twofer department too.

Given its mission creep, the kitchen had to grow--so it ate the living room, walls and all. The 3-ft. by 10-ft. galley is now a massive 20 ft. by 20 ft., with a breakfast bar or dining nook. "If you have a party, everybody ends up hanging out in the kitchen. That's where you spend so much of your time, whether you're cooking, eating or sitting around and yakking," says Martha Stewart (no, not that one) of Ames, Iowa, who is finishing a major overhaul. "I want it to be a comfortable place where other people will enjoy spending time."

Veronica Fowler and her husband Giles just dismantled the living room in their 1930s Cape Cod--style home in Ames, tearing down two walls to add volume and connect it to the needs of the present. Says Veronica, a garden writer and renovation addict: "When you move into a house, you're moving into the lifestyle of that era. If it's a 1970s house, you will have to suffer the conversation pit. Our 1930s house was small. People's needs, desires and expectations were completely different than they are in 2002."

For today's time-stressed family--traditional or single parent, blended or extended--there's an obvious need and desire for togetherness. "People are really wanting the experience of the family operating in the same space. And maybe that has to do with the fact that people aren't home so much anymore," says Barbara Winslow, co-author of *Patterns of Home*, an architectural guide for home buyers that focuses on behavior as much as it does design.

There's a critical distinction in today's definition of family togetherness, though: it doesn't necessarily mean doing the same thing. And that difference is reflected in design. Says Hine, author of the forthcoming *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers*: "Now people have such different schedules; they eat different things; they have such diverse needs. So instead of the informality of the house being about family cohesion, it has to do with accommodating these different lifestyles." That's why the perfect great room, explains architect and *Patterns of Home* co-author Max Jacobson, has private edges like window seats, alcoves and nooks that allow family members to be near the group but by themselves.

Atlanta residential designer Stephen Fuller calls his take on this the "family studio." It might include a spot near the kitchen for dining, a space for a home office, a place for the kids to do homework or play, a music area and a media center. And the aesthetic doesn't suffer, says Fuller. "Because of improvements, inventive ideas, setting appliances into cabinetry, we can integrate all these activities into one continuing, flowing space that merges through to the kitchen." The disappearance of interior walls leaves you wondering just what's holding the house up (relax--new building materials have taken up the slack), but it's part of a bigger design trend to bring what is inevitably called a good "flow" to the house. It's all about how these satellite areas connect to one another and the rest of the floor plan.

And the flow doesn't stop at the back door. Patios and decks once performed like seasonal attractions that

closed up shop when the leaves fell. But there is now a desire to connect with the outside that is expressing itself in more conscious design for indoor-outdoor living. The deck becomes another room, one without walls, without a roof. So naturally it too needs to be part of the flow. And it has to be outfitted with a killer barbecue and outdoor fireplace. Even the bathroom is being extended via enclosed outdoor showers.

As any teenager will tell you, all this family togetherness has its limits--like, 15 minutes, O.K.? But their parents have discovered their own not-so-secret antidote in the luxurious master suite. It's well beyond a bedroom, with sitting areas, breakfast bars, exercise rooms, computer rooms and his-and-hers walk-in closets so customized they can alphabetize their socks.

The bathroom really isn't just one room anymore. The walk-in steam shower with water-gulping multiple showerheads--"a human car wash," one builder calls it--has supplanted whirlpool baths for hydro hedonism, although oversize tubs are still part of the picture. The toilet is also in separate quarters, as are the dual sinks and vanities, which can lead into the closets, which can have separate exits to the hallway so early risers can avoid disturbing a sleeping spouse. Now add chandeliers, imported European fixtures and enough Italian marble to make a bishop covetous, and you've got an idea of what "master bath" really means.

Which leads to the slightest bit of introspection about the master suite: Aren't we being a little too selfish? After all, most of this added space is coming out of children's bedrooms, which are being reduced to 11-ft. by 11-ft. cubicles, the idea being to flush Junior out into the open.

The answer, thank goodness, is no. The seemingly paradoxical combination of large informal areas and walled off, elaborate master suites makes perfect sense, says Bernard Beck, a sociologist at Northwestern University. As children have become more powerful and vocal, and present, adults have a greater need to pull back. "I love my children, and I spend enormous amounts of time with them--there is no escaping them," chuckles Veronica Fowler, a mother of three, who added a new master bedroom suite next to the expanded living room. "But there is [the idea of] creating a buffer zone. I desperately want a calm, clean, quiet place where I can go--maybe just for 15 minutes if I'm lucky--and read a book."

It's not as if the average couple is going to spend languorous hours in their suites--not so long as the home office has anything to say about it. Architects now take it for granted that they will have to include some sort of work space in home plans. Says Atlanta builder David Chatham: "It's really almost a must. It may have started out with people telecommuting, but at least in the Atlanta area, with all the traffic, a lot of people are aiming to miss the peak-traffic times." The newest trend, for people who can afford it, is for each adult to have his or her own home office. Ahron and Sheera Solomont of Brookline, Mass., are sales reps for the same company, yet they have separate home offices. Their computers are networked so they can share files. Ah, modern romance!

Yet home offices haven't really found a natural home. Remodelers have placed them in the attic and the

basement, in converted laundry rooms and maid's rooms, or in between, in computer nooks in hallways or bay windows. "The mom's office is usually very close to the hub of the house--breakfast rooms may have an office area for her. But office spaces are generally off the living area," says Peter Duxbury of Duxbury Architects in Los Altos, Calif.

That's true in the Berman house in Larchmont, N.Y., where Karen operates from a work space near the kitchen that matches its decor. For many families, this station is the household-management post, where bills are paid and report cards evaluated. Jeff Berman's office is an attic room that can double as a guest room. As technology has reduced the size of office equipment, many home offices have been getting distinctly homier and less spacious.

That is a good thing in an age in which television screens are getting wall size, and it's one reason media rooms have come into their own. "Everybody has to have their 50-inch plasma TV," says architect Matthew Gottsegen of New York City. The Solomont home has one such giant screen and four smaller ones. "On any given Sunday, we can have 10 to 30 people watching the games," says Sheera Solomont.

In media terms, that's a decidedly one-way experience. The PC and TV have not converged, not in the home office and not in the media room, where folks still prefer not to work. Heck, they don't even want to interact with the television. They're not ordering pizzas, they're not playing movie director and they certainly aren't going over last month's sales reports when the Patriots are playing. "The old idea was that computers and the Internet and phone and TV would all merge," says Adam Keiper, president of the Center for the Study of Technology and Society. "It's an assumption people aren't making anymore."

Instead, says Keiper, convergence is happening elsewhere, in the form of ubiquitous computing. Every appliance is loaded with chips, and each machine can be linked to a central controller. There is a revolution going on behind the walls and in the basement. A whole new style of bundled multipurpose wiring, called structured wiring, is worming its way through the walls, with the capacity to handle cable, audio, satellite, phone and computer traffic. In the basement, computer servers (think of them as home mainframes) are sharing space with furnaces, providing network hookups to every room. Says Gottsegen: "We've seen a huge trend in wiring up houses and apartments that's driven by the need not just for home offices but also for networked audio, video and voice data throughout the house."

All this stuff, plus the lighting, heating and cooling, security, sound system, curtains and window blinds, can be run through a computer controller. George Collins of Peterson & Collins, a high-end builder in Washington, has a client who has taken it to the limit. A computer runs everything from the snowmelt system in the driveway to the temperature of the fish tank to the alerting of the homeowner that someone is in the swimming pool.

Lighting too has "entered a whole new dimension," says Collins. Low-voltage dimming systems now allow users to program the lights in a room to suit a given function, mood or time of day. Even floor lamps are

programmable. It's environmental control in two ways: the home's infrastructure is more efficient, and the setting can be made more aesthetically pleasing.

Will our current obsession with shared open spaces and lush private ones look silly years from now? Will future owners rip out these projects, shaking their heads at our excess ("A second oven! What were these people thinking?")? Bet on it. Economic and demographic changes inevitably shape the way we live and the homes we live in. The rapidly increasing number of people age 60 and older, for instance, is already dictating changes in bathroom design and raising other livability issues.

Today we're busily grinding away in an economy that's going nowhere, and our homes are a reflection of that. Sociologist Beck says Americans are so severely deprived of time, particularly leisure and vacation time, that they are trying to make up for it in their living quarters--and are doing a bang-up job. The master suites, the bathroom spas, the game rooms, the professional kitchens and the lobby-like great rooms are our way of turning our once humble abodes into luxury hotels. Feel free to put some chocolate on your pillow.

--With reporting by Harriet Barovick, Lisa McLaughlin and Desa Philadelphia/New York, Jyl Benson/New Orleans, Leslie Everton Brice/Atlanta, Betsy Rubiner/Des Moines and Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles



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