FOCUS

flexibility

"It is going to be the No. 1 trend in home design in the next decade."

By Camille McLaughlin

From laundry rooms that do more than clean clothes to walls that move to alter the size of a room, to dining spaces that convert from two to 20, homes are becoming quick-change artists as every age group from boomers to millennials expect their abodes to adapt to changing needs. This demand for flexibility might be a new attitude, but chances are it isn't going away any time soon.

"Flexibility is about using space wisely. It means a smaller home that does more things," says Wayne Visbeen, principal of Visbeen Architects in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "We think it is going to be the No. 1 trend in home design in the next decade."

Across the board, people expect to stay in their homes longer. In 2009, homebuyers polled by the National Association of Realtors said they planned to stay in their homes an average of 10 years. By 2013, they had upped that estimate to 15 years. Today, it stands at 17 years.

Changes in the economy and the amount of uncertainty most of us face today also add to a growing desire for flexibility. "Design almost never leads; design always responds, which means houses are going to be different than they ever were. This is probably the biggest single period of change I've experienced in my 40 years as an architect," observes Duo Dickinson, an architect in Madison, Connecticut. "Everything we propose (to clients) to do with the house is likely to be viewed in terms of what happens in 10 years when my kids go to college or when my mother comes back or when I get laid off or when my son moves back with two kids because he's been laid off. That level of uncertainty makes for designs that are less specific to present needs and more open ended."

"More clients are thinking ahead," says architect John DaSilva with Polhemus Savery DaSilva, a design build firm on Cape Cod, using the example of a young couple without children who requested a master suite with an alcove for a crib that could later be converted into work space. On the other hand, Visbeen finds older couples considering similar options to potentially accommodate caregivers should the need arise.

"People have different lifestyles at different times of their lives," says DaSilva. "A lot of our clients are recent retirees or are people near the end of their careers seeking homes designed with retirement in mind. They need homes that work for both a couple and an extended family. They might use the house the majority of the time as just the two of them, but they need to be able to accommodate children and grandchildren, sometimes in large numbers all at once. We have to be creative in designing floor plans that have both generous spaces that accommodate groups, and intimate spaces that feel right when it's just two people."

There are a number of ways to accomplish this objective, DaSilva explains. "There may be separate spaces that are just for two people that are a getaway from the larger house, or there may be subdivision of larger spaces that feel more intimate. There may be window seats, inglenooks at a fireplace, or ancillary spaces off the master suites. We help clients create a getaway space within their getaway house."

"We're even designing houses where sections can be opened up or closed down as people's needs change," shares Florida architect Phil Kean, whose design build firm was honored as the 2013 Custom Builder of the Year by the National Association of Homebuilders. These requests include the desire to close down an entire second floor when the space isn't needed.

The potential to use space in varied ways is boosting the desire for open floor plans. But making an open design function as more than just one huge room requires what DaSilva calls clever design thinking. "It's very important to subdivide the space with ceiling shapes and treatments, columns, half walls and screen walls that allow a scenario where you can have both social communication across the space, but also some sense of enclosure."

"Open plan kitchens, living and dining areas allow people to adapt the use of each room — a kitchen as a work surface, a place for a casual dinner, or for a quick homework lesson with the kids. Having well-connected spaces, both visually and physically, allows people to use their home with ease and experience spaciousness," explains Iwan Sunito, CEO of Crown Group, a leading developer in Sydney, Australia.

As formal spaces begin to disappear, those functions move into other spaces. Kean uses the example of dining rooms, which about half of his clients opt not to include. Still, he says, they want a wonderful dining space in the great room, a dining room outside and an intimate eating area in the kitchen, which he says "is the social hub of the house."

Butler's pantries continue to elevate kitchens beyond just a place to fix dinner or enjoy take-out, by capturing tasks such as storage or messy prep jobs. But in some instances, they are evolving to include other functions. "We're seeing the butler's pantry being expanded into to a combination pantry/bar with the addition of a bar sink, wine fridge and wine glass storage," says New Orleans designer Christina Graci, who, with her architect brother, owns Graci Interiors. The Gracis are considered up-and-coming millennial designers, and Christina Graci says, "A lot of people in our age group want more flexible spaces."

Formal dining rooms might be falling out of favor, but being able to accommodate 20 people at a single dining table on occasion isn't. "People definitely have that level of flexibility in mind and that's part of the design challenge they give us," says DaSilva. One typical solution is to have an option for a way to extend a table into another area such as a foyer or other room. In one instance, DaSilva says there was a dining space, but it wasn't huge. The solution was to design a large, cased opening so a table could extend into the living room. Furniture, of course, had to be moved around but all of a sudden, he says, you have dining for 20.

Visbeen has used a range of solutions, including a table that can be pulled out of an island to accommodate 20. For a Las Vegas home, he included a concealed dining table that slid out like a drawer to seat 12. Chicago architect and designer Elissa Morgante had clients who were passionate card players and also wanted to seat a large group for dinner parties. The solution was a dining table that could be used as one long table or separated into several tables for four.

Two sets of doors open the sitting room, center above, to both the master suite and the living room, allowing for multiple uses, including the potential to become a bedroom.

As living rooms continue to disappear, studies or libraries that can double as more formal areas to entertain are cropping up. Usually not as large as a living room, they conserve square footage and offer opportunities for varied uses. Often, they are beautifully outfitted and become an ideal place for cocktails or after-dinner drinks, while also remaining true to their original purpose.

People may have different lifestyles at different stages of their life, but the shift in almost every demographic calls for more informal rooms and open floor plans. "Preconceived notions about what is correct have been shaken and stirred, and the boundary between formal versus informal seems less important. I see a willingness to look beyond the traditional use of a particular piece of furniture or the expected functions of certain rooms," said Chad Graci of Graci Interiors.

"Not only are furnishings more casual, but people want the option to move them into other rooms. They don't want to be restricted to using one thing only in one room. They want the flexibility to move it around," says Christina Graci. "They might be keeping a few beautiful antiques, but they are also including a basic wood coffee table their kids can beat up, and that can be moved into another room."

Atlanta designer Lee Bryan suggests owners stay away from huge upholstered groupings and steer toward individual pieces that can be moved around, which gives the option of not only changing furnishings depending on the need, but also allows for regrouping or rearranging a space depending on the event.

At Veer Towers in Las Vegas, the casual but elegant furnishings in this great room can be easily rearranged to match the way owners want to use the space.

Every Square Foot

Today, owners scrutinize every square foot. "One of our goals is to make spaces do more things," says Visbeen, who cites the example of a sitting room positioned off a great room and also adjacent to a master bedroom. Two sets of doors allow it to be open to the living space or closed off to be a cozy sitting or sleeping area off the master. Flex rooms like these also make a master large enough for children and grandchildren to crowd in.

"People are building rooms that have more than one purpose," says Kean. For instance, media rooms in the last couple of years have become the home's newest flex area. "The room that is just devoted to watching movies has morphed into a room where people play games, they have a pool table and a little bar in it. Now televisions are so big you don't have to have a screen, which means you can open the room up and you can open the windows to a view. Some of that is technology-driven and some is that people are finding, 'I use my theater room once a month. I wish all that space was devoted to something else.'"

Technology is another catalyst driving the trend. For example, communications used to be heavily dependent on wiring. Now everything is wireless, which allows for a flexibility that didn't exist before. No longer tied to a desktop, people can work anywhere. Home offices have become as much a place to relax as they are places to work. More than ever, owners plan to use them also as an extra guest room. Desk space is small or nonexistent, and a Murphy bed is often the "go-to" alternative for sleeping. Many designers still call for a top-quality sleeper to do double duty. Bryan has designed a number of residences at the Veer Towers in Las Vegas. For the third bedroom he often uses a comfortable sleeper and a small desk area. A nice big TV also means the room can substitute as a media space as well.

No space has become more multifunctional than laundry rooms and mudrooms, which may contain a family organizational center, crafts corner, space dedicated to pets as well as corralling the chaos of kids' cleats, racquets, musical instruments, backpacks and projects.

Hidden Gems

In today's new value equation, unoccupied spaces that easily can be adapted to current or future needs might be hidden gold. "Space that is potentially inhabitable that can be brought into service is now viewed very positively," says Dickinson.

In many areas, finished basements are back as valued square footage, both for renovations and new construction. For a smaller cost-per-square-foot compared to the main floor, they can be adapted to a broad range of uses. "The level of fit and finish has gone up," says Visbeen. Add in new daylighting options, and suddenly this area is no longer "second best."

Bonus rooms, often unused space a builder would partially finish to sweeten the deal, which used to be "emergency guest rooms and sleepover rooms, are now viewed with this interesting mindset," says Dickinson. "Clients frequently ask, 'Can we take down that wall or is the room big enough so we can put a bathroom in that space, or if my mother comes back to move in with us, or can we make a closet in there?'"

The Road Ahead

"People at different stages of life will have different things that are important. And different parts of the country will have a differing collection of wants and needs. We try to approach design from the perspective of, 'What do you want out of your house? Where do you see yourself in five or 10 years?' What you love today, you might not love tomorrow," says Kean.

The fireplace, which can be viewed from all three parts of the great room, cozies up the living area. Columns and lighting further delineate separate areas.