

Are we witnessing the death of the Open Plan?

Steve Collinge

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Frank Lloyd Wright (June 8, 1867 to April 9, 1959) the American architect, designer, writer, and educator is credited as being the first to advocate open plan living within domestic homes. He believed in something he called 'Organic Architecture' designing living spaces which were in harmony with humanity and the environment.

During a creative period lasting almost 70 years he designed more than 1,000 structures and post WW1, his work became known to European architects, upon whom he had a profound influence. Many features of our modern homes date back to Wright: open plan living, slab-on-grade foundations, and simplified construction techniques that allowed more mechanisation and efficiency in building.

Wright had responded to the transformation of domestic life that occurred in the early 20th century, as servants became less prominent or completely absent from most American homes. By developing houses with progressively more open plan designs, Wright provided (in his words) the woman of the house with a 'workspace', as he often called the kitchen, where she could keep track of and be available for the children and/or guests in the dining room.



Wright was also responsible for the The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of modern and contemporary art in New York. Image courtesy of Shutterstock.

Pre-WWII almost all UK houses had a basic floor plan that consisted of a main hallway, from which individual rooms branched off that were dedicated to specific purposes: lounge, dining room, kitchen etc. The kitchen during this time was usually located at the back of the house because it was considered service space, a reference to the servants who had previously worked in the kitchens. Due to the very formal way of living and entertaining pre-1940, kitchens were certainly not for entertaining, a sharp contrast to the way we view this space today.

The open plan kitchen plan really took hold in the 1970's and 1980's as homeowners ripped down walls and built extensions, allowing them the flexibility to change the space to the needs of their families. During this period the role of the kitchen completely transformed into the control centre of the modern family, becoming one of the most important areas for modern living and casual entertaining.

In the 21st Century, we fell in love all over again with the new open layout as images of stunning open plan kitchens continued to inspire us to transform our living spaces.



Inspirational open plan living space – Neptune Home Showroom Chesham, October 2020.

We've almost all experienced the benefit of open plan living, how the space lends itself not only to entertaining but for everyday living. For young families the open plan allows for parents to prepare meals in the kitchen and still be able to watch their children playing in

the living area. Another clear benefit is the amount of natural light, having a single living space allows for natural light to penetrate into all the areas of the room.

Our love of the open plan dining and living room seemed unstoppable, with estimates stating that as many as **63%** of UK homes built since 2003 have open plan living room/dining spaces.

And then everything changed

And then of course in 2020 COVID-19 arrived, we moved into national lockdown and everything changed. Almost overnight, lockdown saw our homes take on completely new functions - workplaces, classrooms, gyms - meaning that finding the right space to concentrate on the task in hand was a real challenge, even before factoring in the difficulties of separating our home and work lives.

The disruption of the last few months has completely reshaped how we currently feel about how we live our lives, how we view our homes, what we value and where we spend our time and money.

Emma Barks of [Stacks Property Search](#) has suggested that homeowners should now be looking at short term ways of making their own space more attractive and appropriate to their current circumstances.

She says: “We don’t know what we’re in for this winter. We can hope for the best but should probably prepare for the worst. Consider what you can put in place quickly, without dramatic financial outlay, that is going to make your life significantly happier in the short term. Generally, we look at home improvements as a long term strategy, often as a way of increasing financial value. Now is the time to think of home improvements as a way of securing short term sanity”.

The kitchen table was ideal when one of us worked from home maybe one or two days per week, but now with a large proportion of people working from home full-time and the approaching risk of a second national or local lockdown, the open plan layout is becoming a distinct disadvantage.

Taking the Pulse of the Nation

During the Summer, Manchester-based PR agency Democracy produced a fascinating report entitled ‘Getting to the heart of the new home’. Their insights team took an in-depth look at the homes and interiors sector, commissioned exclusive research to take the pulse of the nation as to what their homes meant to them post lockdown. The report identified the key themes and trends that businesses need to address to get back on the front foot in talking to their customers.

In particular the report identified that:-

- Lockdown had prompted 40% of consumers to make changes to the interior of their homes, with bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens experiencing the most changes.

- The 16-24, 25-34 and 35-44 age groups admitted to making the most changes to their homes and London was the region where the most changes were made.
- A similar proportion of home-owners (38%) to renters (40%) made changes to the interior of their homes.

“The biggest casualty has been the immediate challenges presented by open plan living. Now, with nowhere to go to seek solitude, many families are regretting this choice” says the report.



[You can download the full report here.](#)

It doesn't seem long ago that we all craved for the open plan space, but now, with more people sharing the same space, walls are looking like a much more attractive option.

Flexible Living

Insight from a survey of 1,000 people published by John Lewis in September 2020 revealed that one in five of us have reconfigured an open plan space to accommodate multiple activities throughout the day; such as working, exercising and home-schooling.

Well over half (57%) expect to work from home in the future, and more than one third of those who took up a new hobby during lockdown have made space for it in their home, with a further fifth planning to make a permanent space to continue their new hobby. Three

quarters of those surveyed who said they were saving for their home during lockdown are now planning to spend up to £5,000 to make improvements.

[Download the John Lewis 'Flexible Living Report' here.](#)

The Room-Divider is back

To help consumers make the most of their existing space, Kingfisher has developed and launched a new range of room dividers. The Alara range can be customised to fit space and needs, with different panels and post extenders that can be used for different ceiling heights, while feature sections such as windows, shelving, and cork pin boards can also be included. The lightweight honeycomb design with wooden frame results in an easily installed panel which can even be painted to coordinate with the room.



The Alara room divider range from B&Q.

[There's more on the Alara range here.](#)

Conclusion

The open plan started as a revolutionary idea by early 20th century architects that became the new norm when designing a home or a new office space. It has impacted many of our lives from our homes to our places of work. It became the standard for interior designers when looking to make our spaces liveable or workable.

However, times have changed and whether this impact is short or long term, we're being forced to re-examine how we live our lives and the increasingly important role of our homes. This presents a significant opportunity for those suppliers and retailers who take the time to review the insights, understand how consumer needs have changed and who match their products and services to those needs.



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