DESIGN & DECORATING

Closing the Door on the Open Kitchen

Dirty-dish-leavers, rejoice: Designers are reinstating the wall between cooking zone and living room

BY DAVID SOKOL

WHEN JULIA CHILD was famously caught on camera exercising the five-second rule on a potato pancake that had flipped onto the stovetop, she quipped to her audience, "you can always pick it up if you're alone in the kitchen. Who is going to see?" Perhaps that was the case in 1963, but the open kitchen has become de rigueur in the time since, and rare is the wall between a cooking and living space.

The open kitchen didn't have a hard time gaining a following. Besides transforming the unappreciated host into the celebrity of family and social life, it helps maximize space, enhances daylight and creates far more visual interest than a wall. Yet not everybody wants their groceries and garbage disposals in plain sight. "As nice as it is to talk to someone making dinner, people are tired of looking at the dirty dishes," said New York-based architect Steven Harris.

With designers hearing that clients are ready to rope off food preparation from other household activities, alternatives to the ubiquitous open kitchen are emerging. The design firms Alexander Gorlin Architects and Mark Hampton, also in New York, are finalizing a 2,500-square-foot expansion of a 10,000-square-foot 1970s-era home in Coconut Grove, Fla., that sections off the kitchen from rooms meant for entertaining. Nearby, architect Allan Shulman's forthcoming Miami home for Bass Museum of Art president George Lindemann Jr. is making the kitchen visible only from an exterior courtyard, and employing a storage wall to divide the kitchen into scullery and dry zones.

Like parents limiting their kids' screen time, homeowners are walling off kitchens to enable more focused mealtime at home. "There's a return to ritualizing meals in general," Mr. Gorlin said. "There's something important about dining together as opposed to participating in something that's constantly in process."

> 'They want to isolate sounds and smells,' the architect said, 'and to create a bit of implied separation.'

Robert Duffy, the president of business for Marc Jacobs International, simply prefers processes such as cooking and cleaning to be out of sight. Over the course of several projects in New York and Cape Cod, Jaklitsch/Gardner Architects has accommodated Mr. Duffy's proclivities by concealing one kitchen behind a secret panel and distancing another from its adjacent dining room via a hallway.

While closing up the kitchen is currently an unusual choice, separate rooms were the standard throughout most of history. From medieval times onward, kitchens were commonly cordoned off from dining and living areas, according to Bill Bryson's 2010 history of Western residential design, "At Home." By the early 20th century, grand English homes contained vast service networks with hidden kitchens at their heart. In America, the upstairs/downstairs structure also prevailed, generally with smaller kitchens for smaller staffs.

Last year's Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Counter Space" identified Grete Schütte-Lihotzky's 1926 Frankfurt Kitchen—an efficient workspace that was incorporated into 10,000 new affordable housing units—as a launch point for the opening of the kitchen. There were early American efforts at the concept as well. Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, which were built nationwide in the 1930s, featured kitchens with multiple access points (and thus greater visibility). Yet the open kitchen really took off in the 1970s with the interest in SoHo loft living.

In addition to the attractiveness of space, open kitchens became popular for their implicit promise of conviviality. Culinary anthropologist Tori Avey said, "The kitchen is the place where we connect as a family; having an open kitchen encourages that connection."

In Washington, D.C., architect Robert Gurney has sought a middle ground by separating kitchens from living rooms via see-through glass panels that can pivot open. New York-based architect Deborah Berke erected an interior wall of partly obscured glass to enclose a kitchen within a 6,500-square-foot house in northwestern Connecticut. "They wanted to isolate sounds and smells," Ms. Berke said of her clients, "and to create a bit of implied separation."

There are other ways to take the "open" out of the kitchen besides building walls. For a small cabin in Muscoda, Wisc., Milwaukee-based studio Johnsen Schmaling Architects placed all kitchen functions along one wall, and then installed a curtain on a parallel hospital track that can reveal or hide the workspace from view.

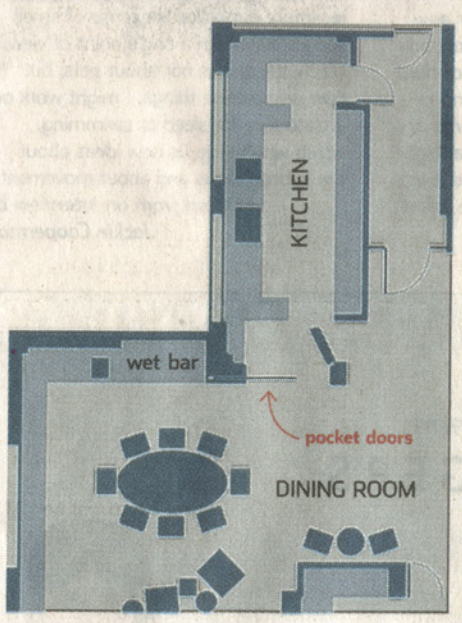
New York design studio workshop/apd may have devised the best compromise for the mass market. For homeowners who insist on open kitchens, the firm is developing sculptural islands that can hide mess. "Instead of treating an island like a horizontal plane, you should think of it as an element that defines space," said principal Andrew Kotchen.

Determining the best of these strategies requires a firm grasp of what's realistic. Architect Michael Haverland, whose clients include Calvin Klein and the artist David Salle, uses a questionnaire to pin down homeowners' entertaining and cooking habits. The result of one interrogation was a Manhattan duplex in which multiple pocket doors connect or conceal a galley kitchen and wet bar adjacent to the dining room—a setup that allows for formal (staff hidden) and informal (everyone visible) entertaining.

Ms. Berke, the architect behind the glass-enclosed Connecticut kitchen, advises against quitting openness cold turkey. In cases where she segments loft-like space into a separate kitchen and home office, Ms. Berke said she will still include a "vestigial command center" in the kitchen itself, since clients have grown used to charging cellphones and stacking mail there.

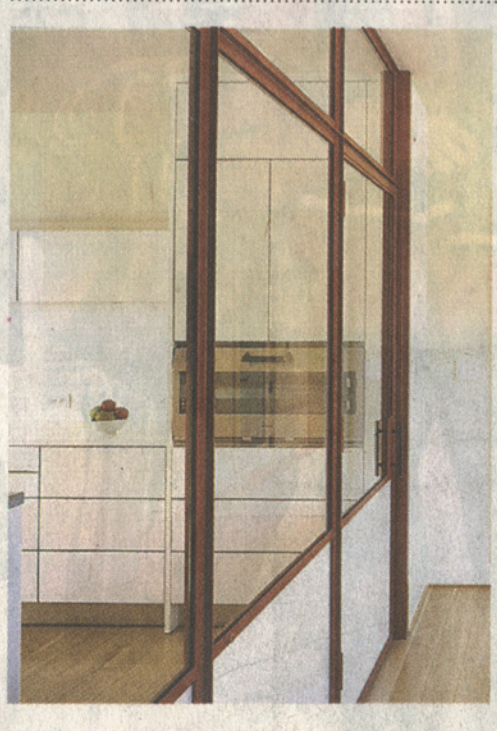
While one might think that open kitchens are the best setup for busy families with members who don't eat at the same time, the opposite could be a better fit. The New York architect Mr. Harris, for one, said that new parents might consider making the switch. "As you have children, you recognize why there was once a need for rooms. The idea of closing the door is desirable."

COZIER QUARTERS In renovating his Houston home, interior designer J. Randall Powers sealed doors that once connected the dining room and kitchen, replacing the threshold with a wall oven and floor-to-ceiling cabinets for additional storage.

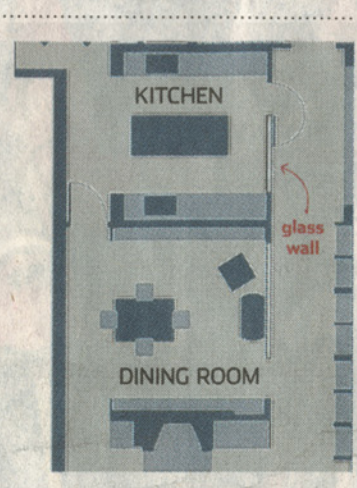


POCKET SOLUTION For this Manhattan apartment, architect Michael Haverland designed a galley kitchen with Corian counters and teak cabinets, and hid it from the dining room behind a series of pocket doors that also conceals a wet bar.

From top: Jack Thompson; Laurie Lambrecht; Catherine Tighe



SEMIPRIVATE Architect Deborah Berke erected an interior wall of partly obscured glass to enclose a kitchen situated between an eat-in porch and the formal dining room of a 6,500-square-foot house in Connecticut.



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