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Extra roles for a dining room

Library, office, even art gallery

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Caption: Lisa Adams moved her dining-room table (above) into the library when her children were younger to give them space to play, and she kept it there. Bruce Wentworth (left), a designer, removed a wall that separated his kitchen and dining room to improve the flow of space in his Northwest Washington home. [2 Photos by Nancy Pastor/The Washington Times]

Bruce Wentworth combined his dining room and kitchen into a smooth-flowing open space. "That can be done tastefully in an old house, if you use the right moldings and have sense of definition and visual connection," he says. [Photo by Nancy Pastor/The Washington Times]

Lisa Adams' dining room is doing double duty. She has moved her dining-room table into the library, where it is surrounded by shelves of books. As president of Adams Design Inc. in Northwest, Ms. Adams helps many of her clients consider their own creative options for the dining room.

"I see the dining room as the most multipurpose room in the house," Ms. Adams says. "It's the least used room if it's just a dining room."

If people haven't eliminated a formal dining room from their homes, they usually are finding a way to use it for more than dining. The room is sometimes the library, the art gallery, the guest room and even the office.

"As people become more informal, they are not as rigid [about] what certain rooms have to function like," Ms. Adams says. "When they have young kids, space is at a premium, and [they] can't relegate one room for dinner parties."

Some clients opt to have a fold-up table against the wall that can be used whenever a large group gathers, she says. When the table isn't being used, the area can become a sitting room or family room.

"People have table space in the kitchen," Ms. Adams says. "If people eat in the kitchen, they don't need a dining room to eat in."

Eating in front of the television or at the kitchen counter has become a habit in many households, making the dining room even less popular, she says.

Homeowners who have a formal dining room usually have larger homes, Ms. Adams says. Those clients are often using benches instead of chairs at the table.

More people can fit on a bench, and benches can easily be pushed underneath the table when they aren't being used, she says. The formal nature of the dining room usually comes through ornamentation, like the tablecloths and silverware, instead of furniture.

Some families with formal dining rooms are opening up the wall between the dining room and the kitchen so one room flows into the other, says Bruce Wentworth, president of Wentworth Inc. in Chevy Chase.

About seven years ago, when his family moved into their 1923 Colonial revival home in Northwest, his wife didn't want the kitchen to be isolated from the dining room. Mr. Wentworth opened the wall between the rooms. He is an architect and licensed contractor.

"That can be done tastefully in an old house if you use the right moldings and have sense of definition and visual connection," Mr. Wentworth says.

Many clients with houses built in the 1950s and 1960s will suggest taking out all the walls surrounding the kitchen and dining room to make a great room, he says. Those homeowners define the space in their room with furniture.

In the past, architects hid the kitchen, Mr. Wentworth says. Nowadays, people spend so much money on their kitchen that they are not afraid to show it off.

"The kitchen is more formal and upscale," Mr. Wentworth says. "The dining room is more informal and downscale. Honestly, people just store stuff on the table. Kids do homework there. It doesn't get used like a dining room."

Often, art collectors are combining the dining room with an art gallery, says Dale Dulaney, president of Dulaney Design Inc. in Northwest.

"When you have a small amount of space, everything has to be multifaceted," Mr. Dulaney says. "Most spaces need to have dual personalities."

In the District, most diplomats have too many wonderful pieces of art for all of them to be displayed in the family room, he says.

One of his clients has an elaborate cable system with floating glass hanging above the dining-room table, Mr. Dulaney says. Special lighting can be used to display the art and create ambience during dinner.

"No matter how large or small a client's home, especially if they are avid collectors, they want to find tasteful ways to show their pieces," Mr. Dulaney says. "If an art gallery was a separate room, a lot of the time it becomes a dead zone. So if it's used as a dining room as well, it has activity."

Because people purchase every cubic foot of space in their homes, they

should be able to use all of it, says Michelle Houston, owner of Michelle Houston, ASID, in Bethesda. Ms. Adams, Mr. Wentworth, Mr. Dulaney and the other design professionals later quoted are also members of the American Society of Interior Designers Inc.

"It's ridiculous to have a formal dining room that's used four times a year on holidays," Ms. Houston says. "Dining rooms should be comfortable. It should be a room to be shared, not just a room for formality."

Some homeowners are swapping the kitchen and the dining room when remodeling, says Kristen Sheikh, owner of Bruit de la Mode Inc. Interior Design in College Park.

"I think people still like the idea of a dining room," Ms. Sheikh says. "They just want it moved to another space. They still want the option to have a large sit-down meal."

With one client, what was the formal living room is now the family room. The family room is now connected to the new kitchen. The new dining room is where the old portion of the eat-in kitchen was. The old family room is becoming a more intimate adult seating area and is connected to the new dining room.

Susan and Paul Ray of Alexandria wanted to maintain the formal dining room in their home even though it's not something they use every day, Mrs. Ray says. She is a client of Ms. Sheikh's.

The couple has a 1950s split-level home that had two full dining setups, one in the kitchen and one in the dining room. Ms. Sheikh helped the Rays design a plan to make the more formal dining room into a larger kitchen.

"If you have a large house, a more formal dining room might be a good use of your house," Mrs. Ray says. "I envision children doing homework there and having it be part of the household, but not as ultracasual as a kitchen table."

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