Can the open-concept floor plan impact mental health? Why the home trend popularized by HGTV may be on the way out

When you picture peak American luxury, do you envision large, sprawling living spaces? For years the open-concept floor plan popularized by HGTV — which combines kitchen, dining and living spaces into one gigantic room — was considered the height of home decor fashion. But some say “the tides are turning.”

There’s a debate raging over “the open floor plan dilemma,” with some praising the layout's compatibility with family life, and others lamenting the overstimulation and noise that comes with having all of the activities of daily life taking place in one big room. So are open floor plans on their way out? Design experts share what they’re seeing — and how to alter your home accordingly.

The origins of open floors

Quaint one-room homes may seem as quintessentially American as apple pie; for much of the U.S.'s early history, the humble log cabin — where all living, sleeping and cooking took place in one or two rooms — was a common style of homes for everyday Americans, from homesteaders to Abraham Lincoln.

But modern open-concept floor plans became less about modest means and more about showcasing space around the time that midcentury modern became a popular design choice.

"Frank Lloyd Wright, Gropius, Le Corbusier — those architects were about open floor plans and communal living and having the marriage of function and form in a very utilitarian kind of way," Andrew Mellen, a professional organizer and author of Unstuff Your Life!: Kick the Clutter Habit and Completely Organize Your Life for Good, tells Yahoo Life.

While open floor plans came into fashion in the 1950s, Tanisha Lyons-Porter, a professional organizer and owner of Natural Born Organizers, tells Yahoo Life they really took off in the 1990s and early 2000s.

"These designs were intended to create a more fluid, casual living space by eliminating walls that traditionally separated rooms like the living room, dining room and kitchen," Lyons-Porter says. "The appeal was clear: Fewer barriers made homes feel larger, brighter and more inclusive, allowing for better flow between areas."

The open floor plan was then glorified by HGTV — which attracted more male viewership when they smashed down walls with sledgehammers.

But open floors were also versatile and multifunctional. They eliminated underutilized parts of the home (like formal living and dining rooms) that were starting to feel obsolete for modern families — without sacrificing square footage and space.

Is the open floor plan falling out of fashion? Here's what home experts are seeing.

A survey conducted by Rocket Homes in 2021 found that more than 51% of Americans preferred homes with an open layout, and nearly 49% preferred a traditional layout. While those stats suggest that Americans are about evenly split, Rocket Homes says they also indicate that open floors, which were once the clear favorite for most Americans, may be falling out of favor.

So what happened?

Carissa Aulich, a real estate agent with Redfin, tells Yahoo Life that while open-concept floor plans are still a popular choice, she has noticed a shift away from them ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, when people began spending more time at home and working there.

"This trend [away from open floor plans] is especially evident among families who want separate areas for work, school and relaxation — needs that became more obvious during the pandemic," Aulich observes. "Buyers are now tending to go toward more traditional floor plans because of reasons like privacy, sound control and the desire for designated areas."

But it's not just a symptom of the pandemic — Lyons-Porter says she has noticed that open floor plans may be less compatible with modern entertainment.

"In the era of streaming, families aren't gathered around one TV as they used to be," says Lyons-Porter. "Instead, everyone wants to watch their own shows or work on personal projects, which creates a need for quieter, more private spaces."

How Americans entertain now is also a factor. Rocket Homes observes that more Americans may be moving away from open-concept floor plans because the kitchen is no longer "the epicenter of the house party," with only 12.4% of respondents in the survey saying that they spent the majority of their time in the kitchen with guests. The most popular room for entertaining was the living room, with 44.2% of Americans saying that's where they spent the most time with visitors.

Charlie Murphy, the founder and chief executive officer of **Icon Building Group**, tells Yahoo Life he's still seeing homeowners expressing interest in the rear part of the home being open — meaning many people still want the family room, kitchen and casual dining room open to each other. However, he has noticed a trend in more homeowners wanting the ability to close off the casual dining space with doors or by having it more off to the side.

"The reason is to both minimize some of the sound created by having an open floor plan and to allow for a more intimate gathering for meals," Murphy explains.

Why the open floor plan works — and why it doesn't

Open-concept floor plans undoubtedly have both perks and downsides, with Lyons-Porter saying, "It's a mixed bag."

The good

Sarit Weiss, founder and lead organizer of Neat & Orderly, tells Yahoo Life she's seeing that many clients still find the open floor plan very appealing — especially young families. "A lot of parents like the open floor plan because it allows you, let's say, to watch your kid while you're in the kitchen and they're in the living room," Weiss says.

Lyons-Porter says people also appreciate the airy, spacious feeling of open floor plans and how they allow for seamless entertaining.

Open floor plans also create a sense of community and sharing of space that Mellen says can be missing in traditional siloed-off home designs.

The not-so-good

But Mellen also says that with open floor plans you lose "the simplicity of one room doing one thing, not multiple things." When multiple activities — from cooking to eating to hanging out — all take place in the same space, it can be overstimulating and overwhelming.

"Open spaces can amplify noise, making them challenging for families with children or those who work from home," Aulich says. "Additionally, without walls or clear divisions, some people find it difficult to create a sense of intimacy or to mentally 'unwind' —

again, the pandemic amplified all of this as families were home together working and going to school, so separation was needed but not available."

Lyons-Porter points out that some of that overstimulation likely stems from seeing too much "stuff" at one time, as open floor plans usually sacrifice cabinetry and storage spaces — creating more stressful clutter.

"Without walls or defined spaces to hide or organize belongings, visual clutter becomes overwhelming, creating a sense of overstimulation," Lyons-Porter says.

How to make your open floor home feel less open (if that's what you want!)

If you're ready to close the door on open floor plans — but not ready or able to completely abandon your current layout — experts say there are plenty of ways to make your home, feel more intimate.

Reduce "visual noise" by reducing clutter. "The first and most impactful step is to reduce the number of belongings in your home," Lyons-Porter says. "Visual clutter is one of the biggest sources of overstimulation in open floor spaces, so embracing decluttering can make a significant difference."

Use furniture to section off spaces. Aulich suggests using furniture to divvy up the room into designated areas, like a reading nook or conversation corner.

Get creative with room dividers. Section off areas of your home using bookshelves or cabinets; they can double as storage, which is often lacking in open floor plans. You can also try installing curtains or sliding panel doors or using freestanding screens and even toy cubes to create privacy when needed.

Add rugs. "Large area rugs help define spaces visually and can reduce noise," Aulich says. "They can also make a room feel more cozy."

Experiment with lighting and color. Aulich recommends using paint or wallpaper to visually section off parts of your home. You can also use light to differentiate areas. “Layered lighting, like pendant lamps over dining areas and floor lamps for reading nooks, can help define spaces and set different moods,” she says.

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