

Breaking Up Boxiness

by Duo Dickinson

Architects often learn how to design buildings in school by creating something called “bubble diagrams” — essentially little circles arranged to show which rooms should touch each other. In many cases, these crude scribbles are simply dressed up in the form of a floor plan and handed over to a client with little further ado.

That’s understandable, because most people can’t visualize a three-dimensional space from a floor plan. Too often, though, this approach results in a plan consisting of isolated “boxes of space” with no sense of flow between them — little more than a freight train of rooms bumped up against one another (see Figure 1).

Sight Lines in New Homes

To create that sense of flow, it’s essential to link separate spaces with a common visual pathway, or what architects refer to as an axis. The most straightforward of these axes involves hallways and

other circulation spaces. This is particularly effective because the connection is impossible to miss: You pass through it every time you move from one space to another. This is often evident in older homes, where hallways were celebrated. Second-floor halls, for example, were often wider than our code-mandated three feet and sometimes included windows, bookcases, and some nice trim.

Beginning, middle, and end. A design axis, like a good story, needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning — or “threshold,” in architectural parlance — should be an inviting space that draws the visitor in and provides a satisfying point of departure. The rooms or hallways should be coordinated by the axis, which connects them physically or at least visually.

Finally, a well-thought-out axis ends at a focal point that draws the viewer’s attention all along the path of the axis itself; like the threshold at the other end, it acts as a visual anchor. The focal

point can be a window, door, fireplace, a built-in of some sort, or almost anything that can hold the viewer’s attention (Figure 2).

Cross Axes

It’s often a good idea to enliven this dominant axis by creating a cross axis or two. A good example of this is the cross-shaped plan typical of many churches, where the long axis down the center aisle is counterpointed by a secondary axis near the altar.

In a home, cross axes can often be used to link spaces across the major axis. In the remodeled floor plan illustrated in Figure 3 (next page), the architectural threshold just inside the front door — the site of the preceding photo — is also the crossing point of a secondary axis extending to the left and right. This coordination creates a sense of order amid the visual stimuli of walking through a house with all of its furnishings and distractions.

Making Connections

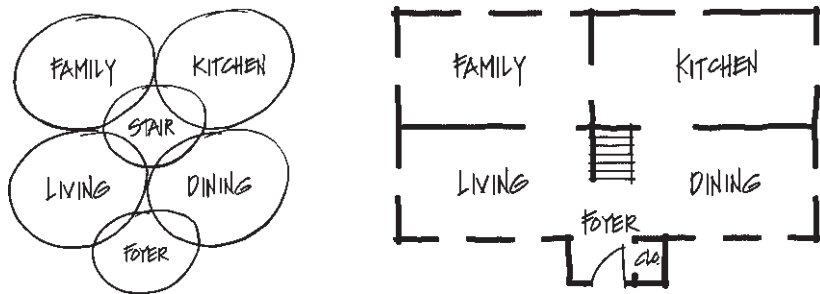


Figure 1. Architects often use “bubble diagrams” to identify how a series of rooms will connect with one another (left). Translating a bubble diagram directly into a floor plan, however, results in a series of isolated rooms that lack a natural sense of flow.



Figure 2. In this view of a well-thought-out design axis, as seen from just inside the front door, the focal point is the large, brightly lit window on the far wall.

Improving Sight Lines

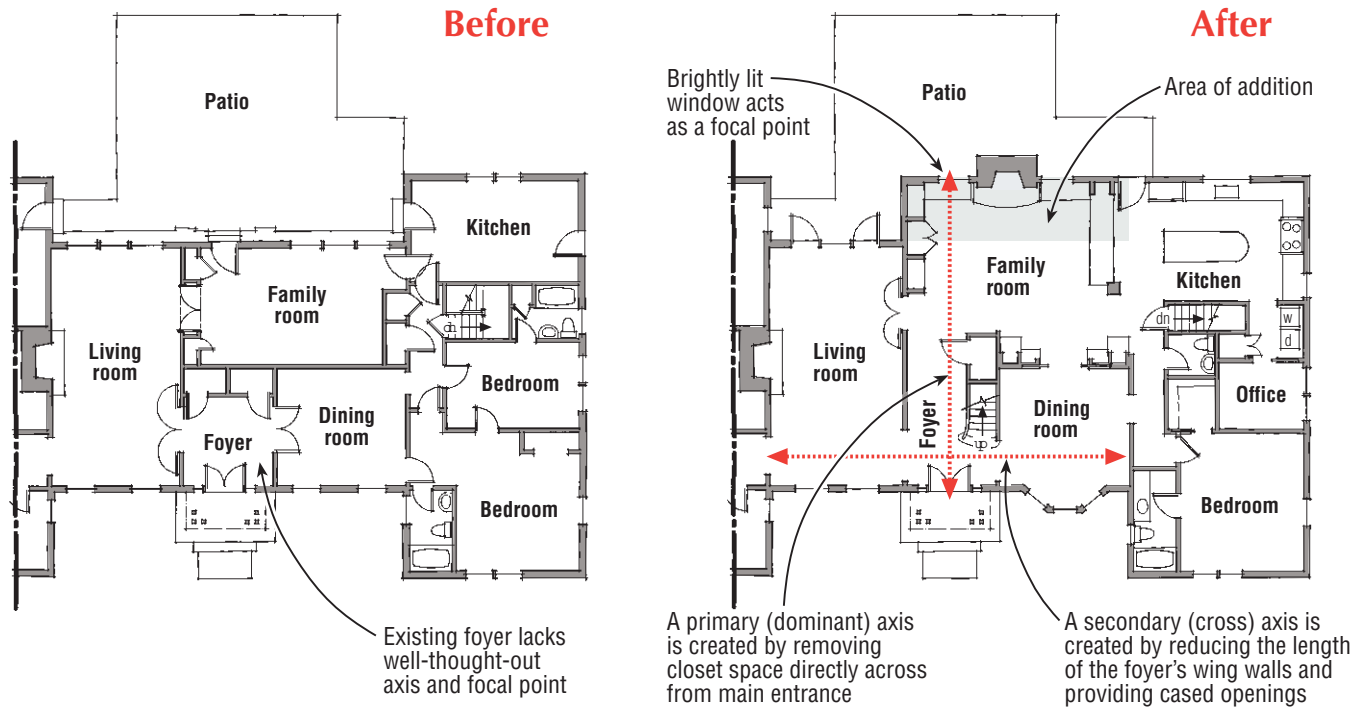


Figure 3. A major remodeling project can provide dramatically improved sight lines. In this revised floor plan, opening up the closet space to the left of the new stairs creates a primary axis from the front door to the window in the far wall of the family room. Aligning the doors in the walls at the sides of the foyer provides a cross axis connecting the living room, foyer, and dining room.



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Figure 4. In this view along the cross axis shown in the “after” floor plan above, the low-boy against the dining-room wall provides the focal point needed to visually anchor the end of the sight line.

Remodeled Sight Lines

In renovations and additions, there are obviously a lot more givens. The structural implications of ripping holes through walls to interconnect spaces have to be carefully investigated and the new resulting loads collected and relocated all the way down into the foundation. In fact, many “good ideas” — such as creating an axis through an existing wall-filled house — are so costly that they fall by the wayside. A useful alternative in this case is to create purely visual interconnections — for example, by using interior windows or views across the upper levels of double-height spaces such as stairways or indoor balconies. Built-ins, fireplaces, windows, doors, even art hanging on a wall, can create a sense of order that nonaligned elements simply can't create (Figure 4).



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