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COVER STORY

Building space to roam

Builders and architects are meeting homeowners' demands for openness while using columns and steps to create different spaces. **G4**

Making open plans work

Open floor plans are still in vogue as homeowners and buyers search for layouts that fit today's lifestyles. Some homebuyers cringe at places where walls and doors make them feel closed off from family or guests. People expect to be able to watch the flat-screen TV when cooking dinner, or to oversee the kids doing homework while putting away the groceries or cleaning the living room.

By Lori Johnston For the AJC

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Years ago, homeowners sought separate, compartmentalized rooms, said Judy Mozen, president of Roswell-based Handcrafted Homes and treasurer of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. Now they want to feel close to one another, although they may be doing separate activities, such as playing a video game, bringing up a recipe on an iPad, working on a laptop or watching TV.

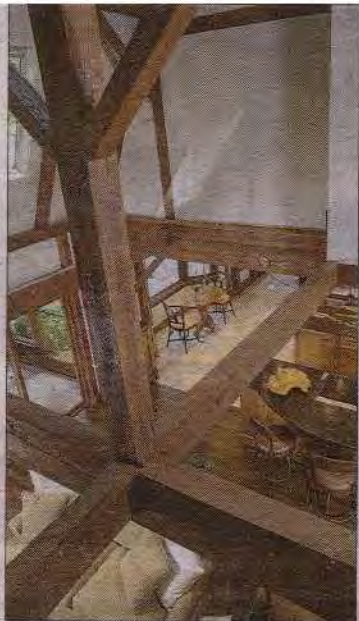
Openness can have its drawbacks, though. While kitchens, living rooms, dining rooms and breakfast rooms “flow” into one another, homeowners may wonder just where to position the couch, dining table or other furniture, as well as artwork, lamps and rugs.

If you fail to define the spaces, the home could feel like it’s a big gymnasium, said Evan Bourff, architectural designer for Epic Development, an Atlanta-based contractor that offers design/build services.

“We don’t want a buyer to walk into the house and not know which room they’re standing in,” he said. “We want each room to feel like it has a proper function and proper use.”

Builders and architects are meeting homeowners’ demand for openness, while using columns, ceiling details, steps and other architectural elements to create a distinction between the spaces. Then interior designers and homeowners are able to bring in color palettes and decor to give each space its own identity, but with a seamless transition between rooms that embraces the open floor plan.

“Having a feel of different spaces gives you the separation,” Mozen said. “You’re not right on top of each other sitting on the same couch, but



Handcrafted Homes’ placement of beams in this Sandy Springs home signals where one room begins and another ends. CONTRIBUTED BY JOHN UMBERGER

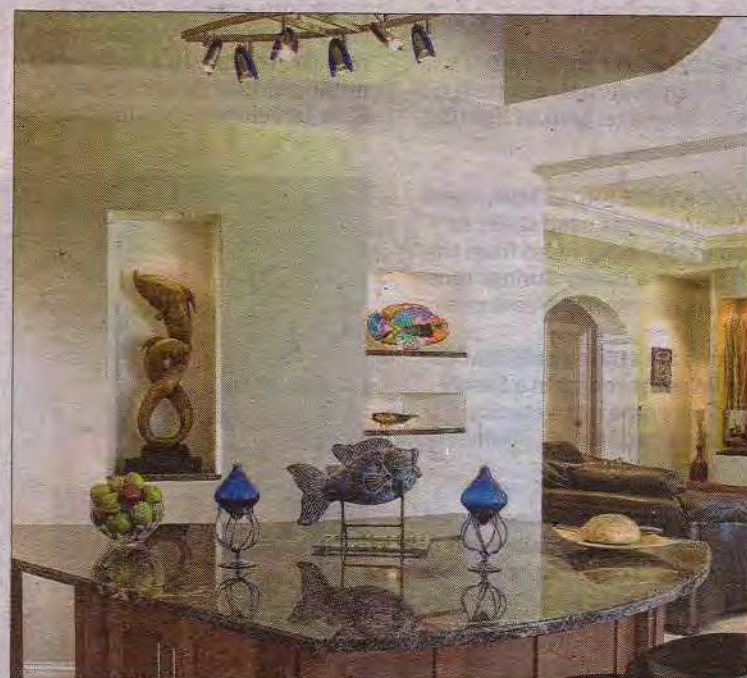
ic Development used drop-down beams to define the living room in an Old Fourth Ward home, priced in the low \$400,000s.

A beamed ceiling made the difference in a home on the Chattahoochee River in Sandy Springs renovated in 2012 by Handcrafted Homes. The firm removed walls and columns that closed off the space and installed less-intrusive wood columns and beams. The placement of the beams, about halfway up in the open ceiling, distinguishes the living room, breakfast bar and kitchen. The changes also made it possible to fit in a living room couch facing a stacked stone fireplace.

A new Vinings home designed by Clark & Zook Architects incorporated an old wood beam to divide the kitchen and family room. If you’re using multiple beams, they could be placed in dif-



A triangle wall and open stairwell allow residents and guests to see multiple rooms in a Sandy Springs home. CONTRIBUTED BY ED WOLKIS



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Architects.

Give the walls attention

Adding texture to walls, such as wood paneling, can signal where one room stops and another begins. In Zook's west Buckhead home, a wall with wood paneling separates one room from another, even though the walls are painted the same color. At first, she painted the wall an accent color, but the result was horrible. "I felt like I needed to keep the same color to keep flow going, but wanted to change the texture," Zook said.

A curved wall in the terrace level of a Lake Lanier home moves the flow from the kitchen to the breakfast room to the media room. The ceiling detail mimics the shape of the island. In the adjacent media room, Handcrafted Homes used a tray ceiling with rope lighting and arches wrapped with columns. Columns can break up the spaces and provide an important structural role, Bourff said.

Position the lighting

A simple step to define spaces is the placement of lighting,

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

The placement of lighting, beams and a column mark the entrance from one room into another in an Old Fourth Ward home.

such as recessed lights, pendants and chandeliers.

In a Brookhaven home in the low \$500,000s, Epic Development positioned can lights that lead from the foyer into the dining room, and the ceiling fan centers that space.

In another Old Fourth Ward home by Epic, priced in the low \$400,000s, three can lights help divide the breakfast nook from the living room, which has a built-in entertainment center next to the fireplace. "You can walk in and really get a sense of place," Bourff said. "The living room is still open, but it's defined."

Add steps and stairs

Stepping down from one room into another creates a cozy feel, even if you can see into the rooms. In a renovated million-dollar Atlanta home, Epic Development added an

open railing to the half level where the dining room table is located.

In a modern Sandy Springs home, a solid wall originally closed off the dining room. Handcrafted Homes created a triangle-shaped wall to make the dining room accessible from the entryway and kitchen. "If you're having a party now, the dining room has become part of the open flow. The dining room isn't a wasted room," Mozen said.

Flooring also changes from hardwood to tile in a whimsical pattern, marking where one room turns into another. Traditionally the same floor materials are used in open floor plans, but stone and wood also work well together, Zook said.

A sculptural stairwell acts as a separation between rooms but allows people to see through to other rooms. Mozen also added three steps leading down from the kitchen to the living room where a handrail originally limited access to the room. "You can be in there cooking and talking with a group of people and other people are in the living room, but they're still near you," Mozen said.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Handcrafted Homes used stairs to separate a living room from the kitchen in a Sandy Springs renovation. CONTRIBUTED BY ED WOLKIS

Beams are strategically placed to delineate rooms in a Sandy Springs home renovated by Handcrafted Homes. CONTRIBUTED BY JOHN UMBERGER

A beam and wood-paneled wall in a Vinings home make each room stand out in an open floor plan. CONTRIBUTED BY CLARK & ZOOK ARCHITECTS

