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What's in a Den?

The Path to a Multi-purpose Room

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"The great room seems new, but it's the latest development in a hundred-year-long experiment in which American culture has gradually shed traditional manners and mores to become informal and open while the home dropped walls and doors to the same end." -Winifred Gallagher, author of House Thinking: A Room by Room Look at How We Live (2006, p. 116).

When one thinks about a den, what image does it conjure up? Does one envision a large room that is cluttered with books in every corner and has dark leather armchairs strategically placed in front of a wood-burning fireplace? Or is a den a spacious, well-lit room that has a warm feeling due to oversized windows casting a warm glow on the numerous books, movies, and games that a family has to offer?

To answer this is no easy task because a den is a colloquial term that has many meanings to different segments of the American population. Its evolution from a single purpose room from the Victorian era to a multiple purpose room of today has convoluted what this term truly means. In fact, what appears to be a den to one family may be referred by another name like a library, a don't-say-no-space, a multi-purpose room, or even a family room. To this end, this brief will explore the possible origins of the den, and how it changed through the ages to reflect the social and economic transformation of the American home.

A Den's Definition

What is a den? The Merriam Webster (2018) dictionary defines it as "a comfortable usually secluded room." In another source, the Cambridge Dictionary (2018), defines a den as "a room in a home that is used esp. for reading and watching television." Although these dictionaries provide a description of this room, they are nonetheless vague. What kind of secluded room allows it to be called a den? Why does having a TV in a room make it a den? Isn't that what Americans call a living room?

These questions are crucial to ask because a dictionary definition does not always reflect how Americans see a den. That definition can shift over time as our culture and the norm in American house design change. Sometimes dens are not even present in contemporary houses and that greatly effects the perception of what a den is, and what it is used for. If this is so, then where did this particular room come from?

The Dawn of Dens

Uncovering this mysterious origin story of the den may begin in Victorian times with wealthy landowners. During the 1800s wealthy Victorian homes were typically large and consisted of numerous rooms. These rooms were specialized in their function to such an extent that scholars have labeled them as single-purpose rooms. Historian Gwendolyn Wright notes that many of the specialized rooms that characterized these houses included the pantry, the sewing room, the library, the bedroom, and so on. The names of each of those rooms reflected this idea of what the specific purpose was for that space.

These task specific rooms also reflect the wealth and the life of luxury of the upper class. Foy and Schlereth suggest that multiple single-purpose rooms in a Victorian home were a common occurrence during this time period, but only for the

Fig. 2: This image reveals what a nineteenth-century library looked like in a wealthy family home.

wealthy. Again, these rooms served a specific function for the family, but how does this explain the room, the den? If using the Merriam Webster definition, seeing the den as a secluded room, then the Victorian library fits this description well. Typically, Victorian libraries held a mixture of objects such as scholarly books, exotic plants, pictures, busts of historical figures, and even souvenirs from past travels. The distinctive characteristic of this specific room was dark and rustic based on the wood paneling that engulfed the space. In many instances the paneling would begin at the floor and go as high as the ceiling due to the built-in bookcases. These books, souvenirs, and armchairs were meant to be appreciated by the men of the family. It may be suggested that they used this room as a means to escape the bustle of the outside world. In other words, the library was primarily utilized by males who occupied the space to "seclude" themselves away from the noise of the outside world.

Take Figure 3 for example. In this lithograph, President James Garfield and his family sit posed in the White House library. As one can see the room is not of wood paneling, but instead a floral wallpaper design. Located to the left of the President is a woman tending to the exotic plants that are situated in the room. To the back of the President is a case filled to the brim with books and two busts of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, which are located on top of the case staring out across the library. Another interesting feature of this lithograph is the tell-tale signs of what this room would become in the twenty-first century, and that is a multi-purpose room. The traditional role of this room is for reading, which the majority of the men are doing but there is this one small child in the right hand corner that is playing with a set of blocks. Although this is not a

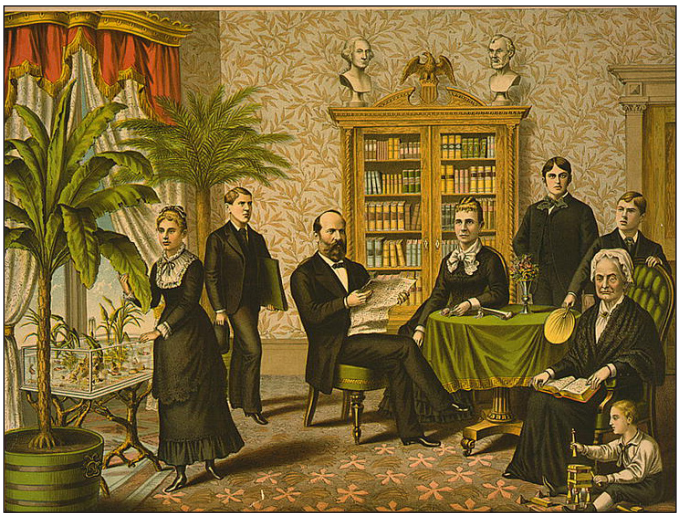

Fig. 3: Pictured in this lithograph is President James Garfield and his family in the White House library in 1882.

true indication of whether or not this child plays in the library all the time, it nonetheless foreshadows what is to come later on in the American home.

The Transition from Victorian to Modern

Victorian houses were different from modern ones due to their ability to house so many single purpose rooms, but also because Victorian homes lacked modern technological advances. For wealthy nineteenth-century houses, Wright suggests that amenities such as plumbing, electricity, heating, and air conditioning were not present. In fact, they were not even planned for in these architectural designs. Figure 4 exemplifies this because all that this book provides is the floor plan of this beautiful structure and a description of what it contains — which is not these extra amenities.

However, why would there be these modern conveniences that Americans have become so accustomed too? As Foy, Schlereth, and Wright all suggest in their works, the 1800s were a different time; the lifestyle, the culture, and even the structures were designed differently. With that said, Victorian structures had ample space to accommodate these different rooms if the family had the economic means to do so. Also, architects did not need to plan for plumbing, electricity, air ducts, and other materials in the walls because they did not exist. Therefore, there was additional space to have these single purpose rooms in a Victorian home if a family could afford it.

The Restructuring of American Life

By the twentieth century, these modern conveniences that were absent in the 1800s would become standard in American home building. This change caused a drastic reduction in the square footage of the home. The consequence of implementing these necessary amenities in the architectural frame of a house was losing that extra needed space to accommodate a variety of single-purpose

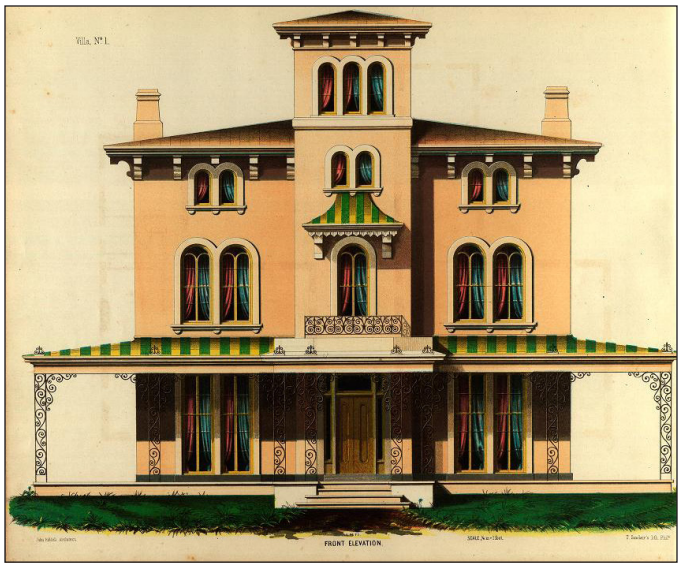

Fig. 4: This 1861 lithograph illustrates the type of nineteenth-century structure that has multiple single purpose rooms, including a library.

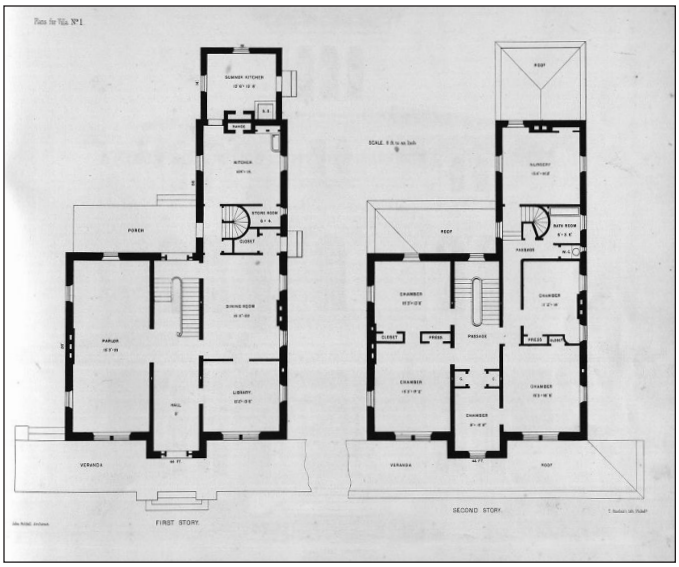

Fig. 5: Depicted above is the floor plan the house seen in Fig. 4. Note the numerous rooms and the library space off of the dining room.

rooms whether large or small in size. The reason for this change was the social and economic transformation of the American society.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States faced major conflicts. The Spanish American War (1898) and World War I are two examples that greatly pushed the U.S. out of its isolationism and ultimately caused it to become a world power. With that power came a social and economic change for the upper and middle classes. This change came in the form of the Industrial Revolution. Once this occurred, the United States was no longer an agrarian society, but an industrial one that employed both men and women in factories.

The industrial economy altered the nineteenth-century American lifestyle because the Industrial Revolution introduced factory jobs, which employed both men and women in the work force. Due to this, a proliferation of the middle-class occurred. The growth of this particular work force is critical to understanding the den because originally a Victorian family would employ the use of servants, typically immigrants, who used many of the single-purpose rooms in accordance with their occupations. However, with the growth of factory jobs, this specific work force dwindled. With fewer servants to take care of the wealthier houses these single-purpose rooms were no longer needed, or they simply became a burden to the wealthy landowner. In a sense, "a less formal lifestyle became the norm" (Foy and Schlereth, p. 27). Hence this push towards simplified structures that excluded extraneous rooms such as libraries, sitting rooms, conservatories, and many more. Instead, these new simplified houses condensed their spaces to bedrooms, bathrooms, a breakfast nook, a sleeping porch, and even a family room, or what is also referred to as a den in architectural drawings.

The Emergence of Twentieth-Century Dens

It is important to understand that this transition of ridding houses of these extra spaces was not a quick endeavor. Rather, it was a gradual process because many wealthier homes still contained remnants of once thriving single-purpose rooms. Stevenson and Jandl present the Magnolia house from the Sears, Roebuck & CO., as an example of this. Constructed between 1910 and 1930 Americans could order a prefabricated house from a mail order catalog from this company. Arriving by railcar, this home was featured in the Modern Homes catalog and described it as "the grandest house Sears ever offered" (Stevenson and Jandl, p. 24).

Combining nineteenth and twentieth-century designs, the Magnolia was a captivating structure for $5,140—now $91,415. Separated by two floors this house consisted of many of the traditional rooms like that of the service stairs, butler's pantry, main stair hall, and a rear hall. What the Magnolia also contained as Foy and Schlereth (1992) state were the new twentieth century amenities that Americans were actively seeking for in their homes. For the Magnolia, this included the modern conveniences of plumbing, electricity, and heating. It also included two bathrooms, a lavatory on the first floor, a sun room instead of a conservatory, a breakfast nook, and, most importantly, a den.

The den for the Magnolia house was located on the first floor pushed back to the rear of the house next to the lavatory. Spatially speaking, it was behind the living room and nook area, which was separated by a fireplace. What is interesting about the Magnolia and other houses from the 1900s is that architects referred to this specific space with more than one name. on the Magnolia house architectural plans it is referred to as a

Fig. 6: A group of women sitting in the Carnegie Library at the State Normal and Industrial School in 1913.

den. However, in many instances, mail order catalogs of this time period referred to this small room as either a den, a library, or a study in their architectural drawings.

Sadly, unlike Victorian era libraries, the den and its synonymous names are largely undocumented or have been lost to history. What does remain of these early twentieth century "dens" are rare glimpses into the past. Figure 6 is a great example of this. In the 1913 photograph, women at the State Normal and Industrial College, now known as the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, are sitting at a table in the Carnegie Library. Although not a traditional library in the sense that it is in a public institution, it is nonetheless a rare example of this topic. As one can see it consists of the same characteristics of Victorian libraries. It has dark wooden bookshelves spanning the lower half of the wall, paintings hung above the books, and reading materials are also present. Overall, the room has that feel of a secluded and comfortable space in comparison to the outside world.

What is important to understand from these images and source materials is the fact that what does remain of these libraries or dens are usually illustrating the upper class. So far, the middle-class home has not been present, which causes this skewed idea of what a den is in this type of home. This is certainly not to say that examining the Victorian library was incorrect because what is mostly known of the 1800s and 1900s is from the homes of wealthy landowners. However, this change appears to occur when the home becomes smaller and more and more blue-collar families are able to afford houses. Once this shift occurs, a new transformation of the library/den takes place and a growth of resources becomes available.

Fig. 7: The Alumnae House in 1937 at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. Note the floor to ceiling wood-paneling and the built-in bookshelves.

The Middle-Class Den

Like all upper-class homes in the twentieth century, amenities were being added to the architectural design of the middle-class house as well. Electrical wires were being threaded through the beams, plumbing and heating were being added all throughout the house, and many other necessary living improvements were included as well.

Other factors that contributed to the smallness of the middle-class home was the act of consumerism. As Wright (1981) suggests, this economic factor revolutionized the way in which families lived their lives. Before, space was important because a family also needed ample room to store food and clothing, and also house the number of children in a family. By the twentieth century, this was changing because of factory jobs. Women were now working outside of the home and because of this, they sought to have a house that was easy to maintain while working.

This was especially true by the 1940s and 1950s. The need to have additional space for food and clothing was no longer sought after because these items were readably available now in the department store located close by. Plus, the number of children decreased during this time period as well, which was due to economic constraints of providing for them. This meant that the number of bedrooms needed was reduced to fit the need of the family as well.

Another important influence that affected the middle-class home was World War II. Six million men and women were discharged from the military and another twenty million women were relieved of their jobs after the wars end in the mid-1940s. Now searching for affordable homes, these blue-collared families inadvertently caused a housing boom in America. With this boom came with it stipulations from the dominant middle-class. This class demanded that the house be affordable and designed in accordance with the new

Fig. 8: A North Carolina family opens holiday gifts in their family room in 2017.

lifestyles of both men and women — which meant that it needed to be easy to maintain.

The Family Room

As a result of the new social and economic factors of the 1900s, the American house had to be re-imagined. From the elitist perspective many single-purpose rooms disappeared and new spaces emerged to take their place. For middle-class homes, Rogers states that a similar process occurred. The architectural firm, the architectural style of the house, and what the family could buy determined what spaces were included in the design. Wright contributes to this by stating that the most common layout of these mid-twentieth century homes included a master bedroom, two children's bedrooms, and two new rooms: the utility room and the family room.

These housing configurations were most likely found in the new popular ranch houses and even in split-level houses of the 1940s and 1950s. Gottfield and Jennings take note that the ranch house especially had this arrangement because it allowed the space to be easily maintained. Not only was this crucial for the family, but the spaces in the ranch house had flexibility to it that the family could use it however they saw fit. Out of the flexibility of these houses, came the family room, which was a multi-purpose room that housed books, games, and other activities for the family or individual. In other words, this single room's purpose was to house the different activity spaces that no longer could be included in a home without having additional money and land space.

Then again, what becomes apparent in the 1940s and 1950s is that the use of the word "den" still prevails as an interchangeable term for this particular space on many architectural plans that can be found in the 1949 *Magazine of Building*, a housing guide for families.

Fig.9: A mother and child playing in their den during Christmas time in Greensboro, NC, in 2017.

The Don't-Say-No-Space

Another name that stands out to Americans when using the word "den," is the phrase don't-say-no-space of the 1940s and 1950s. Described in many different ways, this particular name stood for a multi-purpose space that could hold a variety of activities without having the various Victorian single-purpose rooms. Architects primarily designed this space with the mother and her children in mind. The reason was because walls meant separation and if the mother was cooking in the kitchen, as was her role during this time period, then her children would be out of sight. Thus, a special room was created by architects so that it could be in close proximity to the mother in order for her to keep an eye on her children. Because of this, Wright calls this room the don't-say-no-space or, alternatively, the multi-purpose room. It was located directly off the kitchen and was connected to the backyard by a sliding glass door. Although Wright is not clear as to why this particular name was chosen, she does indicate the purposes of this room, such as having the ability to watch the children and also having a room that contains the many different hobbies of the parents and kids. Board games, books, and the newly invented TV set could have been found in this particular space. To this extent, Rogers goes as far as to say that this room "… makes possible the segregation of active and passive activities in different areas" (p. 143) without the need of walls to separate it. What this suggests is that walls dominated the home and made clear the purpose of each room. Now, walls were no longer needed to separate a space, the activities that each family member did accomplished that.

Fig. 10: A split-level house in St. Louis, Missouri.

Fig. 11: This interior image of the split level in Fig. 10 shows a great room that is utilized by the family as an office space, a hang-out space, and a "man's cave."

"We Just Want the Great Room!"

As one can see, a den can be called by many names depending on the architect, the homeowner, and even the scholar for that matter. One can even say that with each new decade a new name would appear to describe this special room of the upper and middle-classes, and the twenty-first century is no exception. As Winifred Gallagher states, this new room, the great room, is a room for "24/7 electronic communications and casual, catch-as-catch-can meals" (p. 116). What this statement reveals is that technology is present once again and is affecting this room's transition. Where the 1950s saw the TV as a new device placed in the don't-say-no-space, contemporary families have other devices such as laptops, phones, printers and other electronic equipment defining this area.

What is important to note about this evolution is that previous scholars who have studied this transformation have all referred to the same social and economic changes in American society. Gallagher restates what Gottfield and Jandl and Wright suggested about ranch houses and split-levels, that they mark the advent of what Gallagher sees as the great room and not the don't-say-no-space or den. This, however, does not change the fact that den or any of these words are still predominately used by Americans today. In 2014, the webpage for EH Staff, a realtor company, uses many of the names that were introduced in this brief and have been used since the nineteenth century, which are the family room, den, and, now, a great room or rec room. What this great room can be today is practically anything the family decides. In the newly renovated split-level house in St. Louis Missouri in Figures 10 and 11, this family's great room houses a TV, sports memorabilia, recliners, office space, and possibly even a "man's cave."

Conclusion

To conclude, no matter what room one may use whether it is a small room with bookshelves and a fireplace or a large spacious well-lit room with a variety of activities and technological devices, it can always be referred to as a "den." It is true that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this specific room evolved in conjunction with the changes in the economic and social factors of American society. This can even be seen today in how real estate agents describe what the space is primarily used for — since there is no agreement on what to call it. This brief has shown that even scholars have referred to this space by multiple names including the den. The reason for using all these names at the same time may be due to regional, geographical, and possibly cultural reasons. Not every American has this type of space in their home, which may have influenced the perception of what this space is used for and what it is called. Nevertheless, no matter how the room is used the term "den" will always come up as a synonymous name for decades to come.

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Figure 2: Rockwood, G.G., photographer. Library. Broadway New York, None. [Between 1860 and 1930] [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www. loc.gov/item/2017660841/2017660845

Figure 3: Kurz & Allison. (ca. 1882) James Garfield and family in library?. , ca. 1882. [Photograph] Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,[reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-90145] Retrieved from the Library of Congress https://www.loc.gov item/91795007/

Figures 4 & 5: Riddell, John and T. Sinclair's Lith., Architectural Designs for Model Country Residences. Smithsonian Libraries. Retrieved from https://library.si.edu/digital-library/author/t-sinclairs-lith-0

Figure 6: (1913). [Students in Carnegie Library]. Greensboro, N.C.: Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, UNCG University Libraries.

Figure 7: (1937). [Interior of Alumnae's House Library]. Greensboro, N.C.: Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, UNCG University Libraries

Figures 8-10: A special thanks goes to the Kravish and Johnson families who provided interior photographs of their homes as well as to Caitlin Johnson and friends.

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