

# An open plan that works



**ANITA MURRAY** [More from Anita Murray](#)

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Plenty of glass in this Ottawa River home also connects inside and out in a more Mediterranean approach to living.



OTTAWA — The concept of open-space living may have become mainstream, but there are things to consider to make it work well, says architect Chris Simmonds.



In a rare public talk at Astro Design Centre Saturday, the veteran of contemporary architecture says it's key to focus on the quality of light, linking the indoors and outdoors, and following the principles of Feng Shui.



“What people are able to achieve now is a fabulous indoor-outdoor connection and instead of feeling like you’re in a room in a house looking at a garden, the house and the garden have become one.”

It’s a connection that’s key in the spaces he designs.

“It means some shifts in the way of thinking and living ... trying to integrate the house with the experience of nature.”

Simmonds offered examples from some of his firm’s award-winning projects, including the Zen Barn, which picked up multiple trophies at last fall’s Housing Design Awards.

“This is more the way people imagine things. It’s clusters of open spaces. Functional aspects are worked out very carefully.”

Properly clustering the “essential components” of the kitchen, dining area and living room creates a link. “If you’re in the kitchen, you can have a conversation with any of the people in any of those other spaces.”

Yet, while the kitchen has become the centre of an open plan, you don’t want to see its messy counters, so Simmonds likes to hide them while keeping sightlines open.

This comes from personal experience; as the chief dishwasher at home, he doesn’t usually get around to cleaning up until late at night.

And it’s important to design so that you can follow the rules of Feng Shui — the Chinese practice of creating harmonious surroundings that enhance the balance of yin and yang — like being able to position furniture so that you’re welcomed as you enter a room, not looking at the backs of heads.

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An open plan with lots of glazing to connect with nature is more of a Mediterranean approach to living, “despite the climate,” he says to chuckles from the audience, who braved a spring snowstorm to attend the event.

There are challenges to this approach, like giving up the formal dining room, but “you don’t have to give up the celebratory aspect of the dining space,” he says.

Then there’s the issue of having a space where you can go and shut the door. “There’s no place to hide in an open concept,” so the idea of an “away room”, introduced by Sarah Susanka in her book *The Not So Big House*, is really key, he says.

“If you’ve got a very small floor plan, you’re not able to get that on the ground floor, but you generally think of that room as an away room.”

Whether it’s called a library or media room or den, “you can furnish it in a way that’s got multiple purposes and good for two or three people to sit quietly away from the crowd.”

Pulling all the elements together in “an ordinary house” is possible, he says, pointing to his work with HN Homes, which was launched last year by one of the founding families of Urbandale Corporation. It’s the first time Simmonds has worked with a production builder, but the designs use the same principles he applies to custom homes.

The main living spaces are clustered, the furniture welcomes you in and there’s plenty of glazing that “works very well,” he says.