The Decline of the Den as Social Commentary

This is something I posted on another forum some years back…

The topic of today's irrelevant verbose ramble is…

Whatever Happened To: Dens

For some odd reason, I was in the shower this morning when I had a flashback to the floorplan of aunt, uncle and cousin's house — that is, the way it used to be before they remodeled downstairs There's still a bathroom off to one side, but, years back, the remaining space was partitioned into what was the formal dining room… and a DEN. (It's now one big room, where the TV, couch and stereo live, and which now opens onto the deck.)

The DEN. THAT's a concept I haven't thought about in ages. Do houses even have dens anymore? If so, what makes them "denly," as opposed to a living room, family room, rumpus room, rec room or study?

According to [Webster's,](#) a den is "a comfortable usually secluded room." Theirs was certainly secluded, though more cramped than comfy. Still and all, it's the place where there was (I think) a beanbag (or some kind of puffy, comfy, overstuffed) chair, and the stereo (most fondly remembered for playings of the comedy of both Bill Cosby and George Carlin… and the various and many covers recorded by [Three Dog Night](#)).

For some reason, when I think of a den, I imagine a place where a guy, in Hef-esque robe and smoking a pipe, can sit in comfortable solitude while browsing the new issue of Playboy (what else?) enveloped by the soothing tones of some mellow jazz. There's a flask and snifter of cognac nearby, of course.

Maybe the Hefishness is really *The Thing* about dens: they're secluded, encouraging the gentleman's pursuits in matters suave, sophisticated… and, yes, somewhat sinful. (And gentlemen only, please, unless you're a Bunny, and probably not even then.) After all, one never hears about "lions' studies" or "family rooms of iniquity."

"Family Room," "Rec Room," and "Rumpus Room" all seem to imply some place "comfy" (if not downright untidy) where all are welcome, manners are discarded, and a rumpus may be raised. Many New England suburban homes boast a living room AND a family room. Usually the former is upstairs, with nice furnishings and decor, complete with coffee and end tables, and may (but may not) boast a TV and/or stereo. This is the place where Company is entertained whilst tea is served. The children may enter, but must display a modicum of decorum.

The latter, OTOH, is typically in the basement or lowest level of a home addition. Decor is minimal or non-existent, and the sofa is festooned with various and sundry stains. If there's only one TV in the house, it's probably here. There may also be other amenities, such as pool table, exercise equipment, or hobby area (plus plenty of kids' toys) — if it's more of a "rec room" then these things are definitely present (and the TV may be assigned the relative safety of upstairs).

[Aside: some old country guys manage to take the best of both worlds — they have a den, of sorts, in the basement. Men only, recreational amenities — pool/game/card tables, darts, … — and, sometimes, even a bar.]

Then again, these terms and their connotations may be peculiar to the Northeast: other parts of the country use "living room" to describe the informal place where the family gathers, and "parlor" for the formal sitting-and-entertaining-company room.

"Study," of course, implies someplace quiet (but not necessarily "comfy") and filled with books. There's probably a

desk and various implements for work (such as a PC). Not the same kind of place, at all.

So where have all the dens gone? Real estate agents will, of course, opt to calling what may be used as a den a "bedroom" if it meets the legal requirements for one (such as window size) — or sometimes even if it doesn't — if for no other reason than to increase the value of the house. But even in casual conversation, I hear little discussion anymore about dens, at least in the sense implied above. I suspect there's something more cultural going on (and submit my old country Italian/Portuguese friends' basements as evidence — their culture being somewhat removed from mainstream "Wonder Bread 'Merikun").

Another odd change has been the disappearance — and recent reemergence — of the pantry. Up till recently, a pantry is one of those things invoking a quaintness, as in "my grandmother's house had a pantry!" But WHY did granny have a pantry? Easy: they really cooked back then (and they didn't need Emeril to do so, either), and needed a place to store provisions, cooking implements, and, perhaps, serve as an additional prep area. The kitchen was a utility room then, like a laundry or woodworking shop, and typically the place into which were relegated the ladies to their labors. Still and all, we can't have the kitchen looking like a warehouse; hence the pantry.

Then a funny thing happened: people started relying more and more on "convenience" foods, dining out and "home meal replacement" (i.e. takeout), so the floorspace previously occupied by the pantry could be freed up for some other purpose (e.g. the den). Let's face it: this trend continued from the fifties right through to very recently (i.e. the Age of Emeril). Kitchens, generally, were built rather small for the simple, practical reason that not all that much was done in them. In many houses (including ours before the remodel — and yes, here be the plans, both [before] and [after]), the "breakfast nook" (kitchen table area) associated with the

kitchen was actually bigger than the kitchen (food prep) area proper: just right for chomping your Pop Tarts and coffee before heading out to the office (the TV dinners were, of course, consumed in the living room or family room or whatever).

Then there's the exception: entertaining. For most folks, this means the Family Gathering, or, given its typical composition and arrangement, the Eighth Grade Dance. Instead of all the boys on one side of the gym and the girls on the other, we have the men in the [whatever you call the room with the Tube] watching [fill-in-the-blank]ball and all the ladies — where else? — in the kitchen, conversing with and assisting the Lady of the House. (The kids are either outside getting into trouble, or down in the Rumpus Room, getting into trouble.)

Then along came [Julia Child,Graham Kerr,Jeff Smith,Emeril Lagasse,] …, and suddenly people took an interest in food, and its preparation, again. Kitchens became status symbols, something to show off, complete with [dual-compressor built-in fridges] and [48-inch six-burner-plus-griddle, two oven, dual-fuel ranges…] all in glittering stainless, of course. And a new trend emerged: recognizing that much of the at-home day is spent either at that little "breakfast nook" (kitchen table) or on the couch watching Tube, and coupled with the desire for openness and bigger spaces ("open floor plan"), a new room concept was born… the GREAT ROOM, an all-in-one kitchen, dining room, living room, and the focus of the home.

Thus and therefore, the kitchen moves from utility room to showpiece, festooned with [hanging pot racks] to show off the fancy [All Clad] cookware, [beautifully finished cabinetry] (as opposed to the [old whitewashed steel] of yesteryear), artfully designed lighting schemes, and more [stainless] than can be found in many a commercial establishment. It has been elevated to cultural status symbol, but something of a practical one, since the cooking bug has bitten so many people. This means there's a need for ever more prep and storage space (and a

place to stick the unsightly stuff). The solution? BINGO! The pantry returns!

The kitchen is, of course, becoming just as likely to be the guy's domain as the lady's — and even if it wasn't, it wouldn't matter, with the trend that, as a room, it's giving the ol' living room/family room a run for its money as the focal point of life in the house. So what do kitchens, open floor plans, great rooms, …, have to do with the demise of the den?

Maybe nothing. Then again, maybe we're seeing an indicator of a cultural trend whereby the den and what it represents — an almost sinful seclusion, apart from the rest of the family and almost, if not entirely, for the glorious pursuit of Hefish leisure, as opposed to any sort of productive activity — is about as socially acceptable today as a club that only allows men to join. (And FWIW, back when the ladies had a "place," it should be noted that it tended to be one of productive toil: the kitchen, laundry, sewing room, garden, …)

But can there be such a thing as too much togetherness, too much openness amongst family members? Is it healthy to go from member-of-office-pack right to member-of-family-pack, with no chance for solitary decompression save commuting (which, contrarily, tends to compress something like a few thousand feet of seawater)? After all, kids — from about the time they can walk, on — covet and cherish the privacy that comes from My Own Bedroom. Am I on to something here?

Since both men and women are likely to be employed out of the house, perhaps the old-style "men's den" is dated; however, maybe the concept of private (non-productive, un-judged, leisure-oriented) spaces needs to be revisited. Who knows? Maybe the return of the den — or dens — will be the next New Thing.