

DINING

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to the big piece: the dining table.

“Every room is different,” acknowledged Mark Stocker of Mark Stocker Design. “Some spaces only allow for a round table, just for ease of movement. We determine what shape and size a table should be based on space, of course, but also how many people our clients would like to seat.

“We try to maximize it as much as possible, but we try to leave anywhere from 24 to 30 inches per seat. We used to do 24 inches as a standard, but the chairs keep getting larger scale. You want to have room to easily pull them in and out and you want to have room should you seat a lefty and righty next to each other.”

Keep in mind that along with seat space, you also need to have room enough for people to move around the table, ideally 36 inches from the table to the back of the wall or the other furniture in a great room. If you entertain a lot of people frequently, you may want even more space so your guests can congregate near the table and still allow for good circulation.

For spaces large enough for a long table, you’ll want to choose between a rectangular table with squared-off edges, or an oval.

“Ovals tend to work better because the rounded edges are softer and you can get around them a bit more easily,” Taylor said.

Some tables, of course, come with leaves that allow you to keep a smaller profile on a daily basis but can seat more people for parties and holiday gatherings. But, noted Stocker, they tend to be more limited in terms of design. And consider where you’ll store the leaves when they’re not in use and what you’ll do for additional chairs when you need them.

Stocker is a fan of a beautiful or interesting pedestal for a table. For that reason, he often only places chairs on the sides to keep the pedestal visible. Another benefit of a pedestal base instead of multiple table legs is the ease of placing chairs, which can get tangled up as they’re pulled out and pushed back in.

And, speaking of chairs, don’t buy a complete dining set. We don’t do matchy-matchy today. Instead, find chairs that complement the table. You could even select upholstery in different colors — just keep the fabric the same. Have kids or pets around? Make sure you choose fabrics that can be spot cleaned. And if you plan on having large gatherings, order additional chairs that you can place in other rooms or elsewhere in a great room. Also remember that benches, while handy for small kids, aren’t a favorite of adults — especially those who end up sitting in the middle. They’re hard to get in and out of and have no back support.

If your dining space is in your kitchen and requires a small table, consider a square table but angle it perpendicular to the corner for a more interesting look, as Taylor has done for clients. And, of course, there are always banquettes.

Another approach is to attach or just align a table perpendicular to your kitchen island. That leaves the space on the island free for prepping a meal or holding platters of food as well as drinks for a party. It also means that instead of everyone facing one way while eating a meal at the island, you can more easily converse around a table.

Carmen Coutts, senior design director at Tracy Lynn Studio, described another option that was created for a client. They installed a banquette and instead of a single round table, they placed two smaller cafe tables.

“Our client wanted it super approachable, more of like a social scene like what you would see at a bar or restaurant,” Coutts explained. “She loves to have her girlfriends over and makes their cocktails, and they sit here and socialize or can play games. It’s a completely different approach to a dining space. It’s more of an approachable lounge.”



Knowing that his clients loved plaid, Mark Stocker found a simple solution in his search for a dining room rug that would also follow the shape of the bay window. Instead of finding a loose rug, he had a broadloom carpet cut to shape and added a serged edge. **DOUGLAS FREEDMAN**



Seating in this dining room by Mark Stocker Design shows the impact of choosing chairs that complement rather than match the table. **BRADY ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

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The designers, of course, create storage in the banquettes seating — considering it a good place for placemats, tablecloths and napkins or serving pieces you don’t often use. Or, instead of creating a latch top for the seat, you could have a drawer built into the ends so you can more easily access items you use more frequently.

A SPACE WITH MULTIPLE USES

If you have a more formal dining space, it doesn’t have to remain off-limits to regular use. Coutts also designed an elegant dining room for a client who works from home. The client has a home office but Coutts explained that she didn’t want to be cooped up in a room, preferring to work in an open space. The dining room table was perfect for her, but she and her husband socialize a lot.



In this design by Tracy Lynn Studio, the dining room doubles as work space. Cabinets on one side hold dinnerware, with office equipment and supplies on the other. **RYAN GARVIN**

So, Coutts had cabinetry built that served multiple purposes. In the middle is a bar with glasses and bottles sitting on open glass shelves. Below are refrigerator and freezer drawers. To one side of the bar is closed storage for glassware and other items. The other side also has closed storage, but this holds the client’s office supplies and a printer.

But let’s say your budget is more modest and you don’t have a choice between a dining space and work space. Turns out, you can have both in one piece of furniture. Coutts showed

me photos she found on Pinterest of convertible dining tables offered by a company called Transformer Table (transformer-table.com). On the surface, they look like regular tables, but the tabletops are hinged and can lift up to reveal a desk with room for supplies and a keyboard. Some are designed to sit in the middle of a room. Others can be pushed against a wall. You can even attach a computer monitor to the underside of the tabletop.

Or, simply mash up the dining and office experience, as Traci Taylor did for

“The room doesn’t really allow for a rectangle or square rug and the clients love plaid.”

— **MARK STOCKER**, Mark Stocker Design

a single mom with teenagers. She placed a long wood table alongside the kitchen and on the other side, against the wall, built an office/homework station with plenty of storage, both hidden and on shelves and with room on the desk to spread out.

FLOOR COVERING

A common theme in dining spaces is the area rug. Some people love them; others — perhaps those with young children who drop food on the floor or older people who worry about tripping — aren’t as keen. Area rugs can pull a space together in terms of color, pattern and shape.

“We like to use rugs in the dining room on spaces that are open, so it defines the space,” said Stocker. “In a great room, we make sure all the furniture is unified in some way or another. Rugs can help clarify that one part is the living room and another is for dining. Even though it’s all in one space, it gives an area for each different activity that goes on within that larger great room.”

You don’t have to be limited what are sold as area rugs. Stocker had clients who had an existing table that came with the home when they purchased it. The kitchen is next to a bay window and the round table complements its curve.

“The room doesn’t really

allow for a rectangle or square rug, and the clients love plaid,” Stocker said. So he found the perfect plaid broadloom carpet and had it cut to shape for the table and serged the carpet edge, a finish of colored yard sewn around the edge to prevent fraying and provide a clean appearance. Stocker said it’s inexpensive to do. So, if you can’t find the rug you love, look at carpeting and create your own.

STORAGE

These days younger people are more minimal and don’t seem to be collecting as much china and dining accessories as their parents and grandparents. So they don’t need or want the large breakfronts or other cabinets to store or display their items.

But if you do need some storage, modular credenzas can do the job elegantly. Stocker incorporated credenzas in a brilliantly pink dining area, part of a large great room, and has one piece at the end angled away from the wall toward the table in almost a hug — along with the green area rug — to define the space.

ILLUMINATION AND ATTENTION

Lighting is like the jewelry of a dining area. Stocker suggested placing lighting above the table on dimmers and making sure the lighting fixture is low enough. He explained that people tend to go higher than they should, and the fixture should be low enough to tie it into the dining space instead of feeling apart.

Be sure your fixture doesn’t compete with another dramatic one nearby, like at a foyer entrance. In that case, recessed lighting should be used. And consider whether you’re going to be moving the table. Again, recessed lighting is your best option, so you don’t have a chandelier in a room with the table several feet away. It’s awkward looking and people may walk into it.

Assuming you have walls or even just one wall by your dining area, make the most of them. Use mirrors to reflect daylight or table light. You can even create a gallery of smaller framed mirrors or go dramatic with a large floor mirror. Place artwork on walls. Set up a bar cart or go big with a wet bar. Install wallpaper in panels or paint one wall or wallpaper one wall with a dramatic color or print. You can do that as well if you have a fireplace on one wall. Or, said, Taylor, paint the ceiling.

The bottom line is that you don’t want a room that’s just sterile, said Taylor.

“You want to display things that have personality in them, so you can create good conversation,” she said.