

Designing Dining Spaces

Formal or not, comfortable, thought-out dining spaces add to the pleasure of a good meal

BY ROBERT ORR

"Company's coming. Everyone out of the dining room—now!" What child hasn't heard similar words? More than any other room in the house, the dining room is harnessed with an age-old solemnity that even children seem to respect ... with a little urging. Most of us, however, take our meals in a more informal setting. This place might be an eat-in kitchen, or a nook located between a kitchen and a dining room. But even in those in-

formal spaces, the social aspect of dining hangs on. Meals are an opportunity to stop the hectic pace of the day and to catch up on each other's lives. No matter what the setting, comfortable dining spaces call for good layout. Here are some guidelines.

Robert Orr is an architect in New Haven, Connecticut. Photos by Andy Engel, except where noted.



Dining rooms are a bastion of formality. Often the most elegantly trimmed room in the house, a dining room can emphasize the importance of shared family occasions

Size formal dining rooms for furniture and family

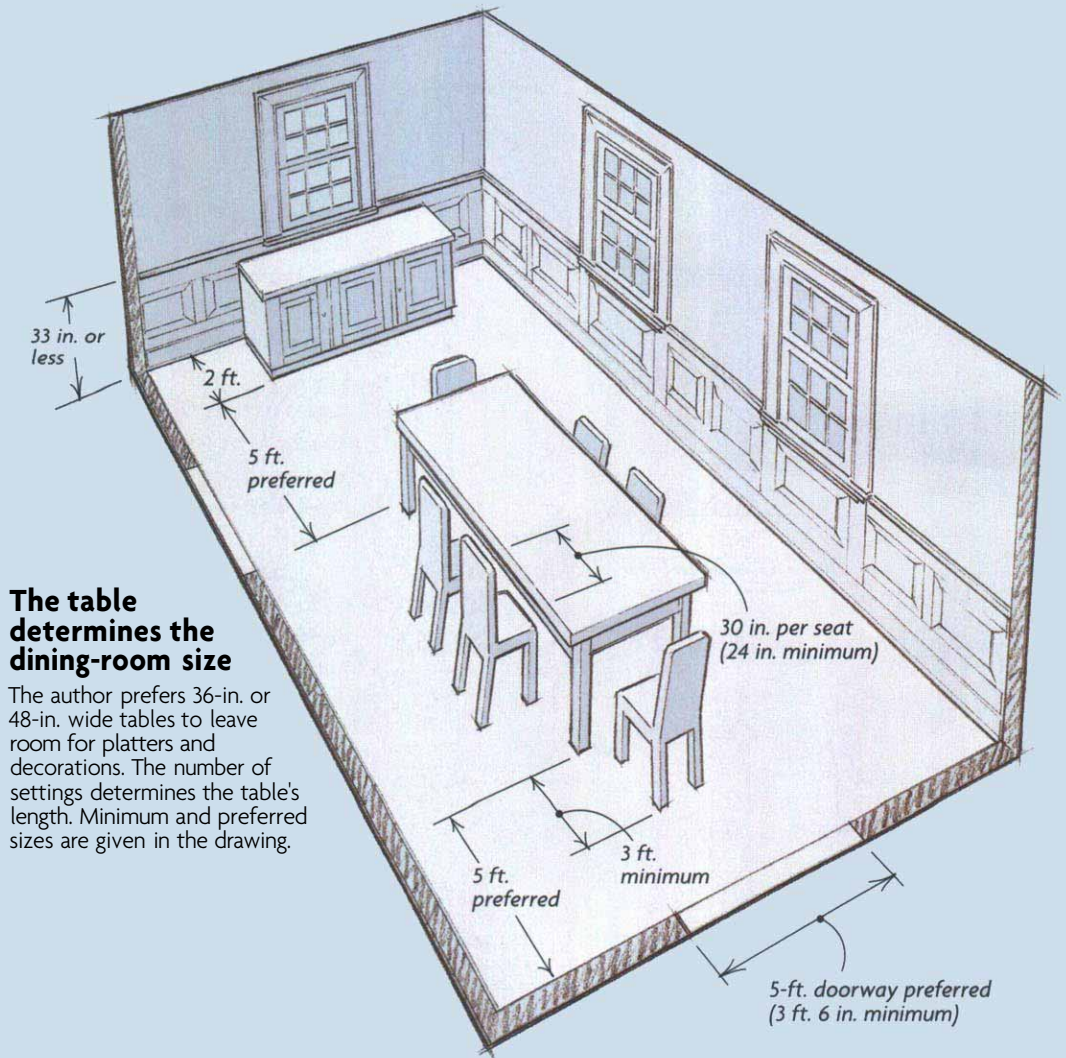
Many clients insist on formal dining rooms (photo facing page), anomalies in otherwise informal plans. I think that the dining room remains formal because it symbolizes tradition. From Christmas to Thanksgiving, birthdays to bar mitzvahs, the dining room is where families gather, year after year.

I give careful thought to this important room. I like to size dining rooms to accommodate the maximum number of people that might be expected to come to dinner. Clearly, though, this plan may not make sense for a couple who entertain large groups only occasionally.

Formal dining seems to take place after dark, so windows provide decoration rather than views. Therefore, high windows above the floor work well. High windows open wall space below for furniture. I've taken the opposite tack as well, by framing a lighted landscape with lower windows.

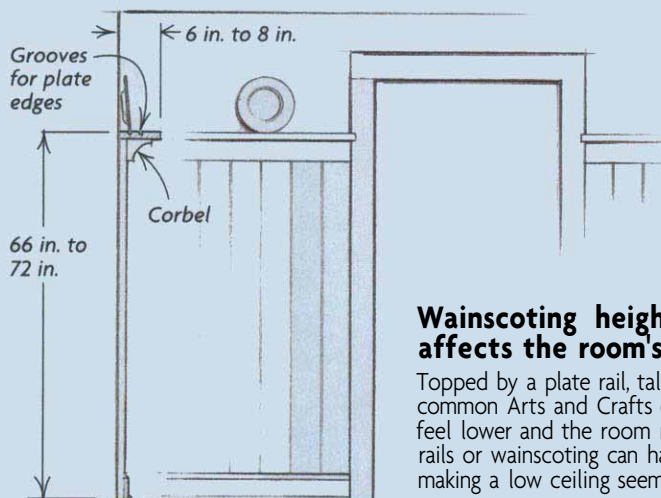
Upper walls are best finished plainly so that they won't distract from artwork. I limit embellishments to casings, base molding, crown and, frequently, a chair rail. I like the top of chair rails to be low, never higher than 33 in., and placing them lower can make the ceiling seem higher.

Raised-panel wainscoting below the chair rail is an ele-



The table determines the dining-room size

The author prefers 36-in. or 48-in. wide tables to leave room for platters and decorations. The number of settings determines the table's length. Minimum and preferred sizes are given in the drawing.



Wainscoting height affects the room's feel

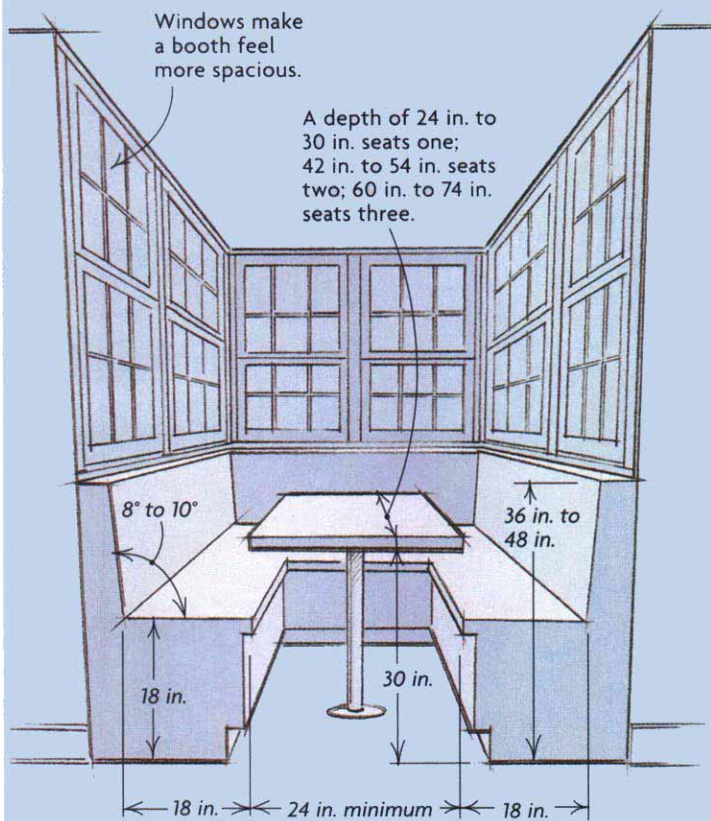
Topped by a plate rail, taller wainscoting is a common Arts and Crafts detail. It makes the ceiling feel lower and the room more intimate. Low chair rails or wainscoting can have the opposite effect, making a low ceiling seem higher.

gant touch. In Italian Renaissance architecture, from where much of the detail we use today is derived, wainscoting symbolized a garden wall. This is why the space above is classically painted

with a landscape, as might be seen over a garden wall.

Differing in effect from chair rails is a high wood-wainscoted wall surmounted by a plate rail. Wood trim can add intimacy and

warmth to a room, and this detail is common to Arts and Crafts-style homes. The wall above the plate rail is often painted as an extension of the ceiling or used to show off wallpaper or a mural.



Booths make good use of space

Probably the most efficient and comfortable dining arrangement is the booth (photo below). I've noticed restaurants that offer a choice between booths and tables usually fill up the booths first. People like the protected feeling of being nestled in the back corner of a booth.

A compact unit that can be tucked almost anywhere, a booth may be ideal for smaller homes (drawings left). Because all service takes place at one end, there is no need for space behind the other three sides. Even an alcove off a busy corridor can become a

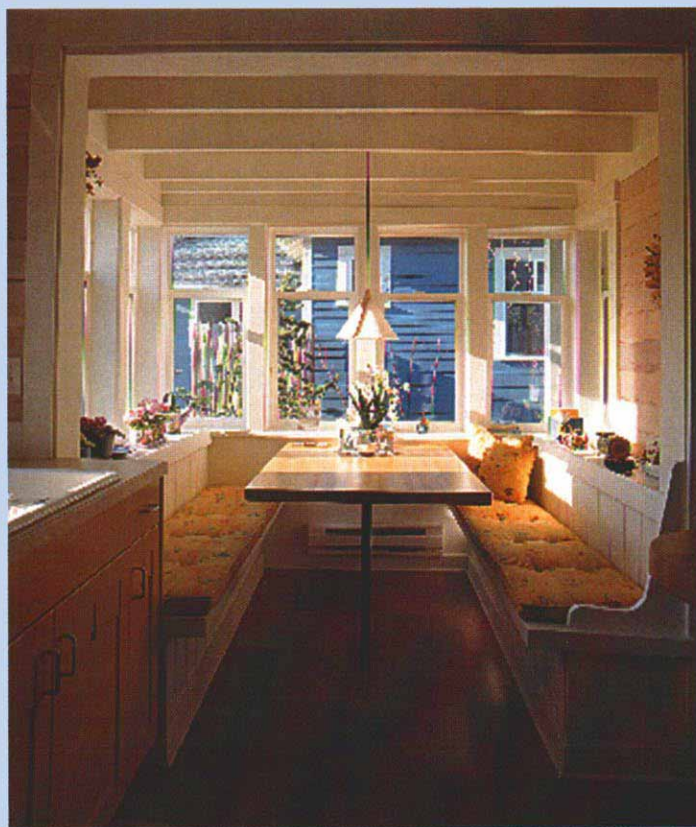
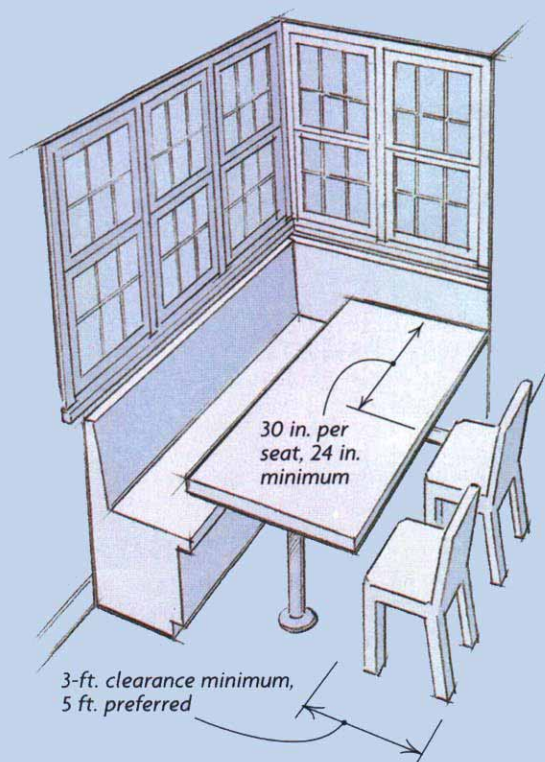
comfortable home for the adaptable booth.

Booths can feel larger by being surrounded with windows that come down to the bench top. This arrangement is effective if windows wrap around two or three sides of the booth. Booths invite casual breakfasts or lunches, daylight meals when a sunny outdoor view can be savored.

The width of the table in a booth is critical. Too wide, and sliding in is difficult. Too narrow, and you're forever leaning forward to eat. Ideally, the table should overhang the front of the bench by several inches.

Making a booth comfortable

The depth of a booth is limited by the arm's reach required to serve the people at the far end. The practical limit is about 6 ft. 2 in. The dimensions in the drawing are for upholstered benches. If you want seat cushions, you'll have to adjust the benches' height and width to accommodate them.



Surrounding windows make inherently intimate booths feel larger. Served from one end only, booths make efficient use of space because no passage room is needed behind the benches.

Even snacking in the kitchen should be comfortable

Because the host is most often the cook as well, dinner guests frequently start the evening in the kitchen (photo left). There, they chat as the host finishes preparing the meal, perhaps while everyone enjoys appetizers and an aperitif.

I've found the most suitable arrangement for this predining experience to be a raised counter and stools, usually on the opposite side of a kitchen work island (drawing below). I like this raised counter because it's comfortable with tall stools. Also, the raised counter protects unsmocked guests from flying chicken bones or splashes of tomato sauce arising from dinner preparation just inches away.

Once again, leave room for easy circulation behind the stools, and don't forget that the guests' view is opposite your own. When designing and decorating the kitchen, consider the vantage point of guests seated at the counter. Sit there yourself, and survey the view as critically as your most judgmental in-law might do.



Kitchen counters make the least-formal dining space. A raised counter protects seated guests from spattering food and provides a comfortable surface for those seated on stools.

Stool height determines countertop height

The best height for a dining counter is 42 in., slightly higher than the typical 36-in. height of the kitchen work counter. This height accommodates tall stools comfortably. Like chairs, each stool requires 24 in. to 30 in. of width along the counter.

