

These essential buffers keep out the elements while providing storage for everything from boots to backpacks

Getting Serious About Mudrooms

BY SCOTT GIBSON

A mudroom probably isn't the first room you'd ask to see in an unfamiliar house. Easy to overlook unless you come in the back door, this utilitarian space would have a tough time competing for attention with a big kitchen or a master-bedroom suite. But trying to live without one is to invite inside all the mud, grit, and snow that Mother Nature can throw at you, along with the mountain of clutter that families usually accumulate.

Mudrooms can range from little more than an enlarged hallway with a few coat hooks and a bench to several hundred square feet of clothing and equipment storage, plus room to give the family pooch a bath. Their common purpose is to serve as a sort of way station from outside to inside, a place where you can shed your coat and shake off the rain before going in the house.

"The mudroom is a transition space," says John Cole, an architect in Massachusetts and Maine. "It mediates between interior and exterior. It's not the same as an outdoor space, and it's not the same as an interior space, either. It has characteristics of each."

Design a house without one? Not the architects I spoke with. Mudrooms know no real

geographic boundaries, showing up in houses from Texas to Alaska. They serve a variety of purposes. "It's just kind of an essential room to support family life, really," says Seattle architect Peter Conard. "It's where you take care of the business of everyday life."

Size and location to suit the need

Mudrooms often wind up in the back of the house, becoming an informal entry between the garage or driveway and the kitchen. That's the path most people typically follow, and having a mudroom along the way offers a measure of convenience.

Less frequently—in seasonal homes or where homeowners don't feel the need for a formal entry—the mudroom can become the main entrance to a house.

In cold or wet climates, families collect a lot of outerwear—everything from heavy parkas and boots to raincoats—and mudrooms offer a dedicated place to stow this gear until it's needed again. Children arriving home from

Everyone gets a space. *The best mudrooms have individual storage for all manner of outdoor equipment. Designed by Design Group Three of Milwaukee; built by Steve Larson of Conway, N.H.*





Overheard ONLINE

We polled readers on "Breaktime," *Fine Homebuilding's* Web-site forum, for ideas on mudrooms and got more than a few suggestions. Among them:

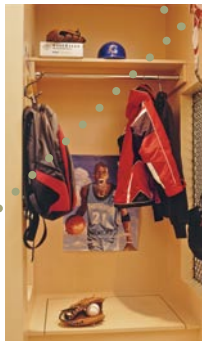
Natural light is good, but task lighting is needed. It does no good to have a nice open airing rack for muddy boots if you grab the wrong ones.
—CapnMac

Here in nonfreezing country, the mudroom tends to be a two-stage thing. Outside, a covered porch with a boot scraper and a hose bib and short hose lets you do the first stage of cleaning. Then you go inside where you can sit down and pull off the wet boots.

—John Sprung

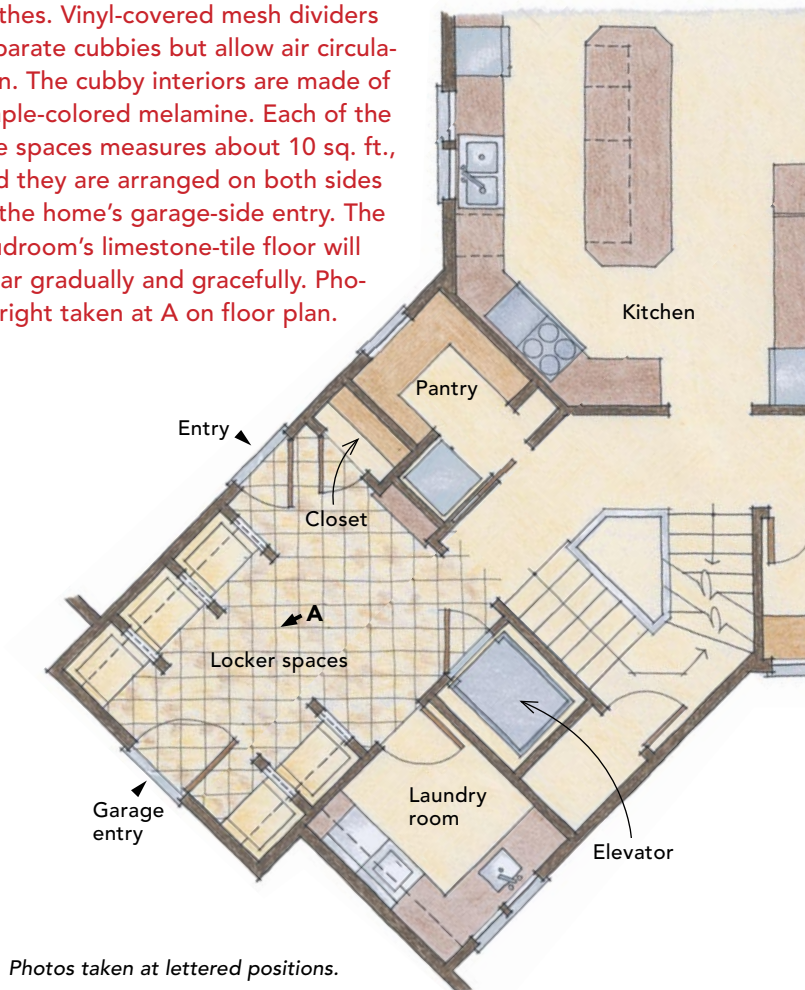
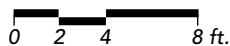
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A CLUBHOUSE MUDROOM



Architect Dale Mulfinger designed a locker-room-themed mudroom for a client who played professional baseball. Each family member has an individual locker/cubby complete with a bench seat, coat hooks, shelves, and storage below the seat. Outfitted with closet poles, the lockers are deep enough for hanging clothes. Vinyl-covered mesh dividers separate cubbies but allow air circulation. The cubby interiors are made of maple-colored melamine. Each of the five spaces measures about 10 sq. ft., and they are arranged on both sides of the home's garage-side entry. The mudroom's limestone-tile floor will wear gradually and gracefully. Photo to right taken at A on floor plan.

The mudroom is nearly 200 sq. ft. and acts as the buffer between the house and the garage. The five separate locker areas service the hallway that connects the garage, kitchen, and laundry room. Built by Erotas Building Corp. of Minneapolis.



Photos taken at lettered positions.



school will be looking for a place to dump their backpacks. Sports-addicted families need room for hockey sticks, baseball gloves, skis, tennis rackets, and other gear.

And it's not just clothing and gear. Mudrooms are used for storing recyclables like newspapers and aluminum cans, and for recharging batteries or cell phones.

Given the diversity of uses, one big mistake is making the mudroom too small, says Cole. "It's almost like designing a good closet," he says. "You have to understand what kind of wardrobe is being taken care of and what's

going to be a dressing ritual for an individual." Or in this case, a family.

Size is usually proportional to the overall square footage of the house, and if you have the space, mudrooms can be big places. San Antonio, Texas, architect Michael Imber designed one mudroom for clients who lived on a ranch. It included a bench for sitting and shedding boots; a large coat closet; a toilet; a dedicated room for guns, ammunition, and other hunting and fishing supplies; and a tool room. In all, he says, it covered more than 400 sq. ft.

Texans aren't the only ones to think big. Minnesota architect Dale Mulfinger once traveled to Wrigley Field in Chicago to measure the locker of a Cubs pitcher who wanted one just like it at home for everyone in the family. The result is a mudroom of five cubicles (photos above and facing page), roughly 3 ft. by 3 ft., that open on a central hall. That space didn't include storage for guest coats and hats.

More often, mudrooms are much smaller. Imber says the minimum size that would be useful is a hallway 5 ft. wide: enough for a

Overhead ONLINE

I am in ski country, and ideally, a mud-room would have a couple of tall cabinets for skis and poles and snowshoes. And a nice big boot cubby with a ventilated or louvered door, the inside equipped with a couple of receptacles for plugging in electric boot dryers.

—Gene Davis

We're going to install windows between the kitchen and the mud-room so that there's more light getting to the kitchen and so that when warmer weather comes, we can throw open the windows and enjoy the breeze.

—Jimkidd2

Glass-block windows allow in plenty of natural light without setting the mudroom on display for the guests ringing the doorbell.

—Golden Wrecked Angle

The dog door belongs in the mudroom. Better yet, an "air-lock" Arctic entry. Then it doesn't decrease the tightness of the house in the winter.

—David Thomas



Don't waste space. A bench seat is wasted space unless there's access for storage below. Spring-loaded hinges keep the lid from slamming shut.



MUDROOM MATERIALS **must stand up** to the elements

FLOORING

Flooring is a big concern because it will be exposed to a lot of foot traffic as well as a mix of dirt, sand, salt, and water. Ceramic tile, stone, and concrete are tough enough but should be sealed carefully. Sheet vinyl is also a durable choice, and it costs less than other types of flooring.



STORAGE

Cabinets should be planned around their intended use. Outdoor clothing requires lots of dedicated space; lockers handle coats, hats, and book bags, while sweaters, mittens, and gloves go on shelving. Pegs make hanging coats a less formal affair. Shoes and boots may need their own racks.



VENTILATION

Ventilation is important for drying wet clothes. Mudroom storage, whether cabinetry or hanging, should be spaced far enough apart to allow wet clothes to dry. Built by Mark Wild of Brunswick, Maine.



WALL SURFACES

Wall surfaces often are battered by flying book bags, rambunctious dogs, or the random boot toss. Painted surfaces show dings and scrapes more readily than stained or natural wood; dark colors show less wear than lighter shades. Stained-pine tongue-and-groove paneling is a common solution that fits the bill. Designed by John Cole; built by Damon Builders of Mechanics Falls, Maine.

3-ft. passageway and a 2-ft.-deep built-in for storage (drawing right). Cole would start with a space 6 ft. to 7 ft. wide and between 10 ft. and 15 ft. long for a conventionally sized house. The room could include built-in storage or simple wall hooks for hats and coats.

Look for durable materials

Because mudrooms are a sort of landing zone for people arriving from the outside, designers recommend materials that hold up well to grit, water, and the wear and tear that goes along with bringing bulky gear indoors.

For flooring, stone, tile, and concrete are the best materials because they resist damage and don't require much maintenance. Sheet vinyl or linoleum is another alternative; neither is as tough, but both are certainly water resistant and less expensive. Conard, among others, would not recommend vinyl-tile flooring because grit and water can work their way into seams over time. Wood flooring generally is considered too vulnerable to damage for a mudroom.

Floor drains may sound appealing, but they also complicate construction considerably and may not be worth the effort unless the amount of water routinely coming into the room is substantial.

On walls, architects typically suggest wood, not drywall, because it's less susceptible to damage. Painted-wood surfaces can chip, Imber points out, while stained millwork won't. That's probably more of an issue in families with kids who swing book bags or sports gear and inadvertently run into walls.

"You've got a lot of things banging around," says Cole, "and if you have drywall surfaces, they're just going to get dinged up."

He often runs wood wainscot up to the level of hooks or shelves, 5 ft. to 5½ ft. off the floor. Pine tongue-and-groove paneling is a relatively low-cost choice. Beadboard and frame-and-panel wainscot are other options.

If you do use drywall, try installing it over a layer of plywood, Conard suggests. It not only helps drywall to survive but also provides a solid anchor for attaching coat hooks. Lighter colors show more damage than darker ones, adds Mulfinger.

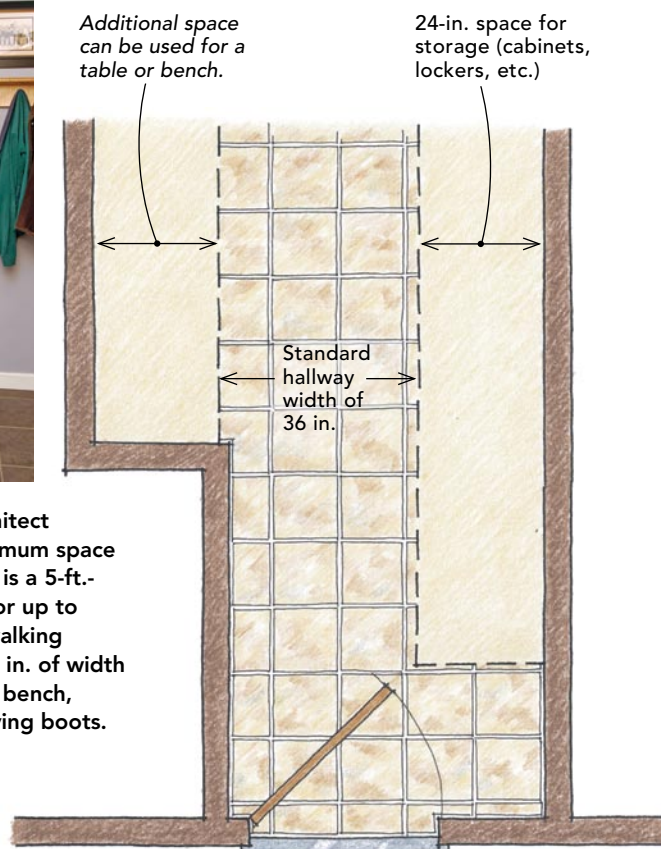
Creating a hardworking mudroom

If the basic mudroom consists of a bench and a few coat hooks, larger spaces allow more versatile storage options. Individual storage lockers, for example, can range from simple

HOW SMALL CAN A MUDROOM BE?



According to Texas architect Michael Imber, the minimum space needed for a mudroom is a 5-ft.-wide hallway, enough for up to 24 in. of storage plus walking space. An additional 24 in. of width would yield space for a bench, always handy for removing boots.



wood cubbies to metal lockers just like the ones you used in high school. In large families, providing each child with a labeled space for book bags, mittens, and hats is one way of encouraging neatness and order.

Open lockers may not look as organized as storage bins with doors, but wet clothing needs a way of drying. If they are installed, closet or locker doors should be ventilated. Wet clothing and gear should be segregated from dry outerwear. Wet hats, gloves, and boots also need a way of drying, which is why some folks suggest that mudrooms be equipped with electric boot warmers and a place to plug them in conveniently (sidebar pp. 55, 57). Benches with flip-up tops and ventilated compartments beneath also can keep air circulating around damp gloves and hats.

Mudrooms sometimes are connected with first-floor laundry areas, which makes it easier to snag really dirty clothing before it gets into the house. This arrangement may be useful for households where people routinely arrive home covered in mud, but Mulfinger says the recent trend has been to separate the mudroom from the laundry.

As laundry areas have migrated to master bedrooms, they have become less common in mudrooms.

More often, mudrooms become a place where dogs (or cats) and their kennels can be housed, along with a floor-level sink where pets can be washed off. A common approach is to use a conventional shower pan and tile the walls up 3 ft. to 4 ft.

Light is another amenity. Mulfinger and Conard both note the advantages of natural daylight in the mudroom, if only to make it a pleasant space. "It may seem kind of crazy and impractical to spend that money on windows in an unglamorous part of the house," says Conard, "but the reality is that's where you're coming in and out every day, so why not make it nice? The fun of it for me is to make it a really wonderful space, and not just a dark back hallway. It should be a space that really enlivens people's days." □

Contributing editor Scott Gibson is a writer in East Waterboro, Maine, prime mudroom country.