

Live / Work

Finding your way through the pains and pleasures of living AND working in your open space

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Maybe David Byrne was right: Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens. Which might explain why your loft can occasionally feel like hell. Something is always happening. Having a generous space means you can live there, work there, play there, and party there. But creating spaces in your loft that allows all those activities to thrive can be quite a challenge.

Thankfully, loft-dwellers tend to be a creative lot, finding a variety of interesting ways to navigate their multi-purpose homes. *LoftLife* takes a look at how some of them have made it work.

Get to Work

The words “home office” used to conjure images of a stay-at-home dad trying to start his own business. These days, it’s estimated that a whopping 7 out of 10 of us have some sort of workspace in our home. No matter if you are a painter or a doctor, the volume and architecture of former industrial spaces offer the opportunity to create wildly interesting work environments. The term “home office” doesn’t really apply.

Steve Holley, a successful New York lawyer, moved into a loft that needed to be gutted and completely redesigned. He

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worked with top-notch architects who created a work of art, literally—it was recently featured in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. With an office downtown, his home didn't need a primary workspace. In keeping with the ultra-modern open design of the space, the architects carved out a sleek office that houses books and personal files. However, Holley generally prefers to do his after-hours work at the kitchen area's spacious round table.

Which points to an often overlooked home office consideration: comfort. "If you can find out what makes you comfortable, then you'll actually be able to work there," says Charna Mintz, a doctor of behavioral psychology. "You may need to be messy. People often wind up at the kitchen table because it offers them the space to spread out." So you may want to think about making that desk a bit less sleek and a bit more roomy. "In the end it's all about what works," Mintz concludes.

However, if you live with other people, it also has to be what works for them. Kay and Bill Garvey share a recently converted loft in Chicago—and they both use it as an office. "We kept the large living, kitchen, and dining areas all open and continuous," says Kay, "then beyond all that is our workspace."

The long thin office area is secluded behind a freestanding wall, with entrances on either side. The wall holds a long custom-built desk, divided at the center by a simple cabinet for files. Kay uses one side for her real estate work while Bill works

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on the other side doing web design. The ends of the room are airy and the loft's large windows produce plenty of light. The wall provides a definite physical and visual separation from the living area.

Clearly defining the living and working spaces like the Garvey's did is crucial. Elizabeth Wilhide, author of *New Loft Living*, says, "It's a mistake to try and double up a workspace with an area that will be used off and on during the day." You'll not only end up getting distracted while you work, but wind up working when you meant to stop for the day. "Even if you're creating a work area within a large bedroom, rig a partition so you're not reminded that it's a sleeping area—and vice versa."

One solution Wilhide recommends, in spaces that have a mezzanine level, is to put the office upstairs, away from the main living quarters. Matt Newburn, an architect and designer, who lives with his partner Craig Hales in a dual-level loft in Atlanta, has done just that. They made the decision partly because, "the mezzanine being higher up means the ceiling is lower so it feels cozy, as opposed to the height of the main space downstairs."

The upper level has a walled-in room toward the back and an open area overlooking downstairs, which suited each of their needs nicely. Hales, a doctor, took the more traditional room, while Newburn colonized the open space to do his design work.



This accommodated what Wilhide calls, “the need to stare off and space out while you’re working.” Newburn likes letting his mind wander out into the rest of the open space and large windows of the main loft, while the smaller window overlooking the building’s courtyard is just the view that Hales enjoys while he’s working.

If your loft is one level, choose simple ways to denote your work area without compromising your space. Bookshelves on casters can set off an area without feeling too permanent and open shelves delineate an office without disturbing the loft’s sense of flow. One of Wilhide’s favorite solutions to the semi-permanent work area was a flippable wall she saw in a London loft. “There was a small nook that they fitted with a wall that on one side had shelf and desk space, but it could be flipped around when they didn’t need the office.” She cautions that this type of work must be custom-done, and done well, because, “if it doesn’t work easily, it’s a permanent vexation.”

That’s Entertainment

If you have to meet with clients in your home office, the need for dividers becomes more pronounced. “You want it to look professional, though if your work is artistic a certain amount of creative clutter is O.K.,” says Wilhide. Still, while your client might not mind the interesting items decorating your workplace—say, your collection of thrift-store smiley-face mugs—they should not be subject to a view of your roommate’s unwashed coffee cups sitting out on the kitchen table. So, how to separate the office without compromising the inspiration your loft offers?

To start, try to locate the work area near the entrance so visitors don’t need to traipse through the main living space to get to you. Half-height walls can work well, as Wilhide says, “they at least leave you aware that you have volume and continuous space.” She also suggests non-traditional shapes, like curved walls which feel more dynamic, adding: “you don’t want to put up too many barriers or you could be living in a conventional space.”

Florent Morellet, a New York restaurateur, has been living in his loft for many years and is familiar dealing with different roommates. “Each of them used the space to work in, which mostly I didn’t mind,” he says. Then, a costume designer moved in. “When he was working on a show, he wasn’t aware of anything else,” Morellet explains. The roommate would have actors over for fittings and in his frenzy of designing and building the outfits, he’d leave the loft covered in fabric swatches and discarded mockups. “That was a little much,” Morellet admits.

Which is why some of the most important boundaries you construct when cohabiting are psychological ones. Says Mintz, “You need to set clear rules right at the beginning. Each person gets to name one or two things that are absolute ‘no’s.” For instance if dirty dishes—or fabric swatches—in the common area drive you nuts, state that clearly when you move in. Just make sure you don’t wind up restating it every time there’s a wine glass out of place. Mintz stresses that reinforcing good behavior—praising your cohabitor for times when he’s cleaned up, for instance—will go a lot further. “It’s human nature to pay



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attention when things go wrong,” she explains, “but focusing on what’s working gives you something to build on.”

It also helps if you design your space in ways that make it easier to clean from the get-go. Straightening up a loft, whether to placate those you live with, or to make the space presentable for clients, comes with special challenges. “People don’t give enough consideration to storage,” says Wilhide. “We acquire things in a piecemeal way—especially if we have the luxury of a large space at home—but we don’t think about how to store them.” She recommends determining what you use everyday and what you use less frequently. Then you need to create space to hide things away, leaving the open lines of your space visible.

Close Friends

Cohabiting a large untraditional space brings a host of special considerations. Tyrone Curtis lives in a former warehouse in Brooklyn's trendy Williamsburg. Describing it as a treehouse with several mezzanine areas, he says he's lived there with a variety of roommates with varying degrees of success. One constellation involved living with two sisters, who both soon had live-in boyfriends. "I felt like I was living in other people's relationships," Curtis says, "they were all over each other and not sensitive about living with someone else."

"In this situation, communication is even more important," Mintz advises. She recommends talking directly with your roommates, not only about everyone's comfort levels with displays of physical affection, but about more practical things like schedules and use of the common space. "If there are times when the couple want the living room for themselves, try setting up a schedule so they can ask for a night to make a private dinner for the two of them."

Privacy was precisely what Curtis took into consideration with his next set of roommates—who were also a couple. Liv-

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ing with one set of connubial roommates rather than two, meant the duo could use the additional bedroom as an office. Which in turn meant that they could conduct most of their lives in their own space. Now, he says when they all come into the common space to have dinner together, it's a choice and clearly a more social non-private time.

So while a spacious loft invites company, it's that very company that requires some compromise on the ultra-open aesthetic. There are many ways of making communal life work, from experimenting with materials and different types of dividers to inventing ways to give yourself some mental privacy. For instance, Kay Garvey dealt with Bill's need to listen to music while he designs his websites by buying an iPod for him and a pair of earphones for herself. To help with that difficult morning transition from the bed you just slept in to your workspace a few yards away, Mintz recommends getting out of the house. "Go out for breakfast or just for a walk," she says. "Give yourself that mental space to clear your head and get ready for work."

For all its challenges, loft living, solo or with others, comes with invaluable assets: light, space, history, and atmosphere. So when your work day is done, and your space sharers have returned, don't forget to let your roomy industrial-strength loft do the job it was born to do: host a party. And watch all those interpersonal tensions—and boundaries—melt away.

EXIT

