

A photograph of a modern dining room. In the center is a round, light-colored wooden table with a dark, thick central pedestal. Four wooden chairs with light-colored frames and dark brown upholstered seats are arranged around the table. To the right, a dark wood side table holds a large, shiny silver vase filled with yellow roses. In the background, a hallway leads to another room with a framed picture on the wall. A window with a dark frame is visible above a white cabinet on the right. The floor is covered with a light-colored, textured rug. The overall lighting is warm and soft.

The New American Dream Living Well in Small Homes

By James Gauer
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Beyond Functional

Harrison House

Nashville, Tennessee

2,100 square feet

Architect: Price Harrison Architects + Associates PLLC

The house that Price Harrison designed for himself and his wife, Dr. Stacy Davis Harrison, is exemplary in so many ways that to choose it as an example of multifunctionalism seems arbitrary. It could just as easily illustrate most of the other architectural principles essential to good small dwellings. Its plan of parallel zones exemplifies proportion, spatial layering, and modularity. Its clear separation of public and private spaces is an object lesson in hierarchy and procession. And its deft handling of windows combines the lessons of both scale and light. But if ever there was a space that combined multiple functions with extraordinary elegance, it is the combined living, dining, and kitchen area of this house.

Advising architects and their clients to strive for multifunctionalism is a bit like telling children to eat their vegetables. It may be good for them, but it doesn't sound very appealing. It can conjure up images of tenement apartments with bathtubs in the kitchen and of houses where dinner is eaten in full view of all the dirty pots and pans. It can make us long for

a house with a proper kitchen, living room, and dining room. But the multipurpose public space of Price Harrison's house is so refined and so luxe that it makes all such preconceptions and longings disappear.

Harrison organized his house in a manner that recalls the rigorous asymmetrical plans of Mies van der Rohe. It consists of two solid rectangular volumes that slide past each other. The longer volume houses the garage and the private spaces. The shorter volume contains the public space. The transparent void between the two volumes links them and serves as the entry.

Harrison underscored the importance of the public volume with two deft moves. First, he gave it grand proportions. It is ten feet high by twenty feet wide by forty feet long. These are the proportions of a noble and important room. Second, he provided it with windows on all four sides, an ideal condition that is much more difficult to achieve in a large house.

A room with these qualities of light and proportion would ennoble any function that takes place within it. In Harrison's house, it ennobles three functions: living, dining, and kitchen. And yet the room accommodates these functions in a livable, even casual, manner. "All of the spaces are used everyday," says Harrison. "There are no formal spaces."

The room assigns each function a specific location. The long double-galley kitchen is centered on the south wall close to the entry. It acts as an anchor, a solid between entry on one side and windows on the other. One half of the kitchen is concealed by tall cabinetry. The other half is open to the living area, which allows the Harrisons to prepare dinner while talking to guests. Living and dining each occupy half of the remaining long, narrow rectangle parallel to the kitchen. Overscaled windows, in asymmetrical compositions of glass and mahogany, wrap the corners and keep these areas from feeling like furniture groupings floating in a void. The windows provide transparent anchors for living and dining in counterpoint to the solid anchor of the kitchen.

Furniture and finishes play an important role in this room. You cannot combine multiple functions in a single space with any aesthetic success unless all the functions share a palette of harmonious colors and materials. Fortunately, Harrison had some expert help from his mother, Marilyn McMackin, a gifted interior designer who converted to her son's brand of ascetic modernism several years ago when he designed her house. Together they developed a limited but refined palette, consisting mostly of white with accents of chocolate brown, and applied it as artfully to cabinets as they did to upholstery. Their collaborative brand of high-style minimalism makes multifunctionalism seem like the height of luxury.