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Rooms with Rhyme and Reason

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

Reprint of "Furniture Arrangement" by Jane Graff, Home Furnishings Specialist,

Cooperative Extension Programs of University Extension

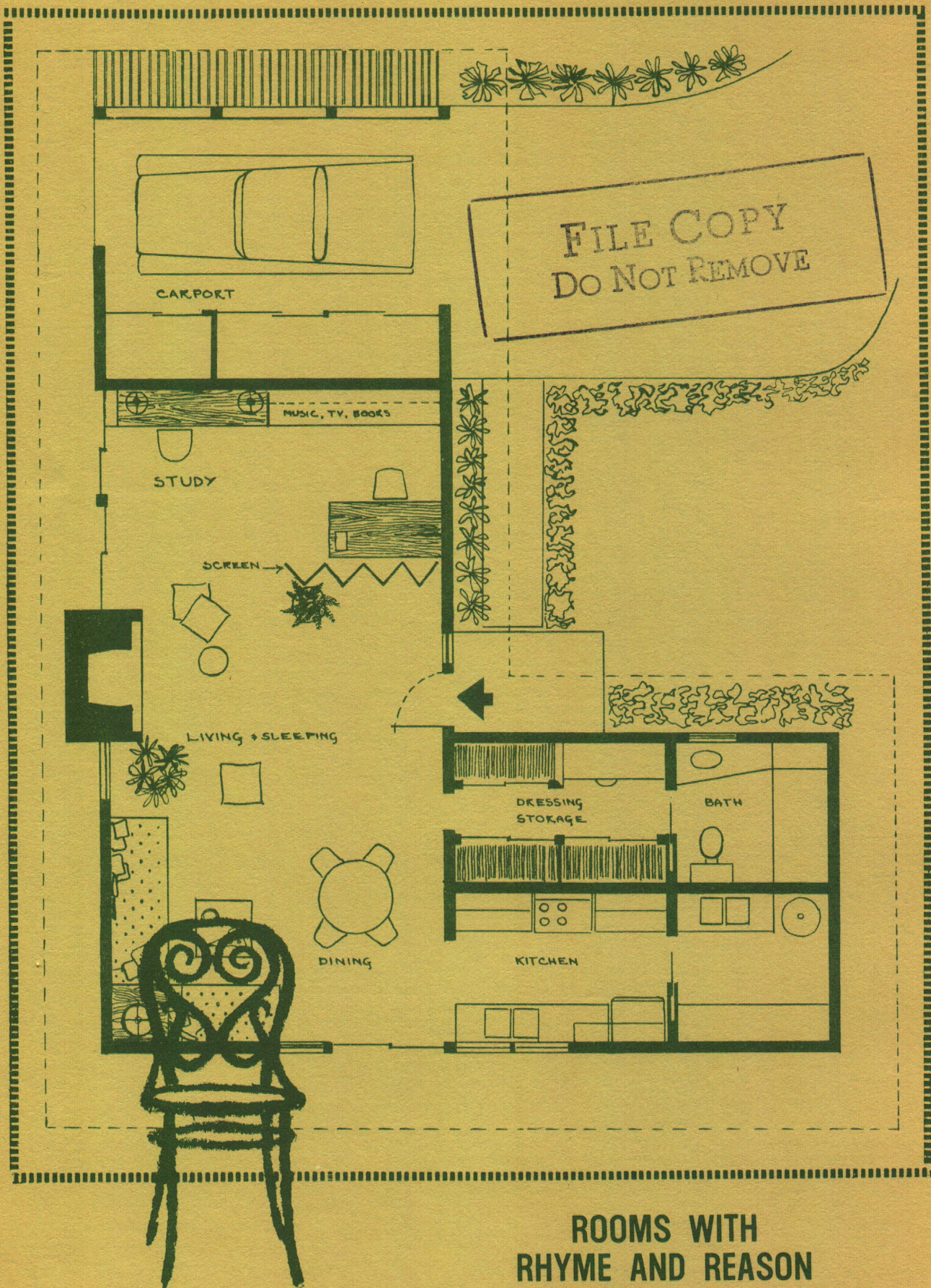
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ROOMS WITH
RHYME AND REASON

A room is the sum of many parts. One of the most important parts is the arrangement of its furnishings. This alone can make the difference between one room which is inviting and usable and another which lacks appeal. A good arrangement is attractive to look at while providing for the needs of those who use the room.

Organizing what may be a miscellaneous collection of furniture and objects into attractive groupings unifies a room. Grouping the various shapes and sizes with an eye toward how they will look together creates order and eliminates clutter. By keeping the comfort and convenience of your family in mind, you can turn a seldom-used room into one which is used often with just a new arrangement.

COMFORT-CONVENIENCE

People enjoy most the places where they feel most at ease. Some areas in a home may be so attractive and well-equipped that the family uses them all the time. Others may not be used enough. Are there areas in your home which need to be used more often or that are used too much?

For instance, do family members study or read right in the midst of other activity because there is no place that seems better? Does your family, like many others, do everything around the kitchen table, including entertaining their friends? Perhaps they would use the living room more often if it were really comfortable and inviting.

Furniture is meant to serve people, to help make living as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. But, many times our furnishings could serve better than they do. To get the best possible use from what you own or plan to buy, keep the following points in mind:

1. If your living room or family room is large, divide it into separate activity areas -- music and TV, conversation, dining, serving, etc. This way people can be doing different things at the same time without getting in the way of each other. In a small room where the central seating area often must be the hub of many activities, it may be necessary to find areas for individual pursuits elsewhere.

2. Try to arrange your living room so that it can adapt to various occasions without being disrupted. Place large pieces where they do not have to be moved. Then, lightweight chairs, benches, pillows, stacking tables and stools can be easily added to one grouping or another as needed. Some of these can be stored; others placed permanently in the room. If possible, provide several small groupings of chairs or stools for guests rather than lining them all up around the wall.

3. Arrange a close knit area for conversation. Conversation usually is easier and better with a small group than it is when everyone must be included. People talk to each other best when they are not more than eight feet apart. The architecture of the room will indicate where this grouping should be placed. It may center around a fireplace; in an area containing TV, records and books; in a corner, or several comfortable chairs may be arranged around a large low table. Since reading, serving refreshments and other activities may take place in the conversation area, provide conveniently placed tables and good lighting.

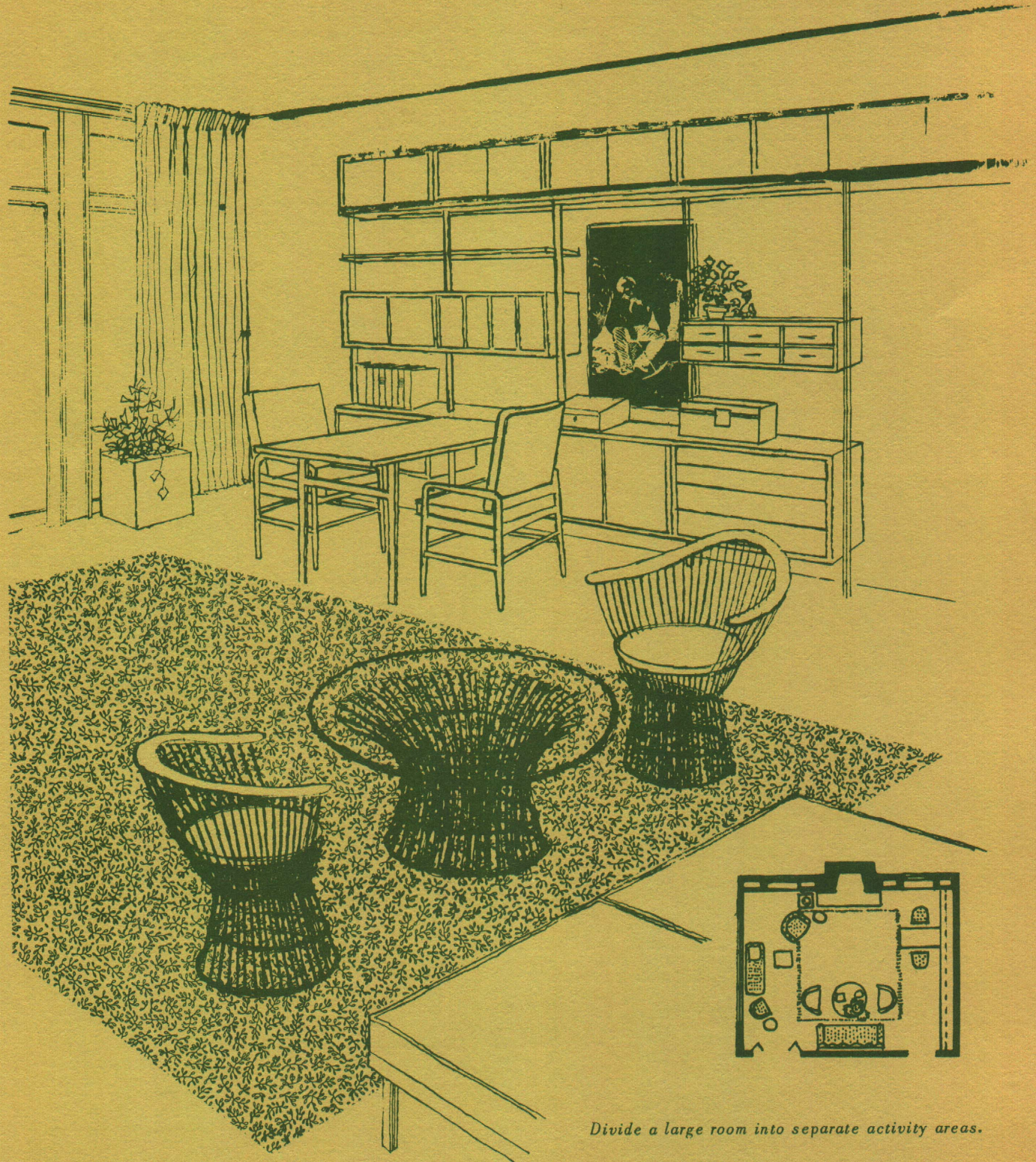
4. For convenience, put things close to where they will be used -- books and magazines where they are read; toys and games near play areas. A portable television set, on a swivel or on wheels, can be moved according to who is watching where. This may simplify arrangement of other furniture. Books, records and record player, TV, accessories, etc., may be placed together in one area. Placed separately, these small items can clutter a room. Organized into one wall area, they help create a unified appearance.

If you like a built-in look, but don't want a permanent arrangement, use movable case pieces or units which hang on floor to ceiling poles. A wall of this type can make a good center of interest with a conversation grouping around it. Or, it might be a part of a reading-study area. If your house has an open plan, this area might be at the dining end.

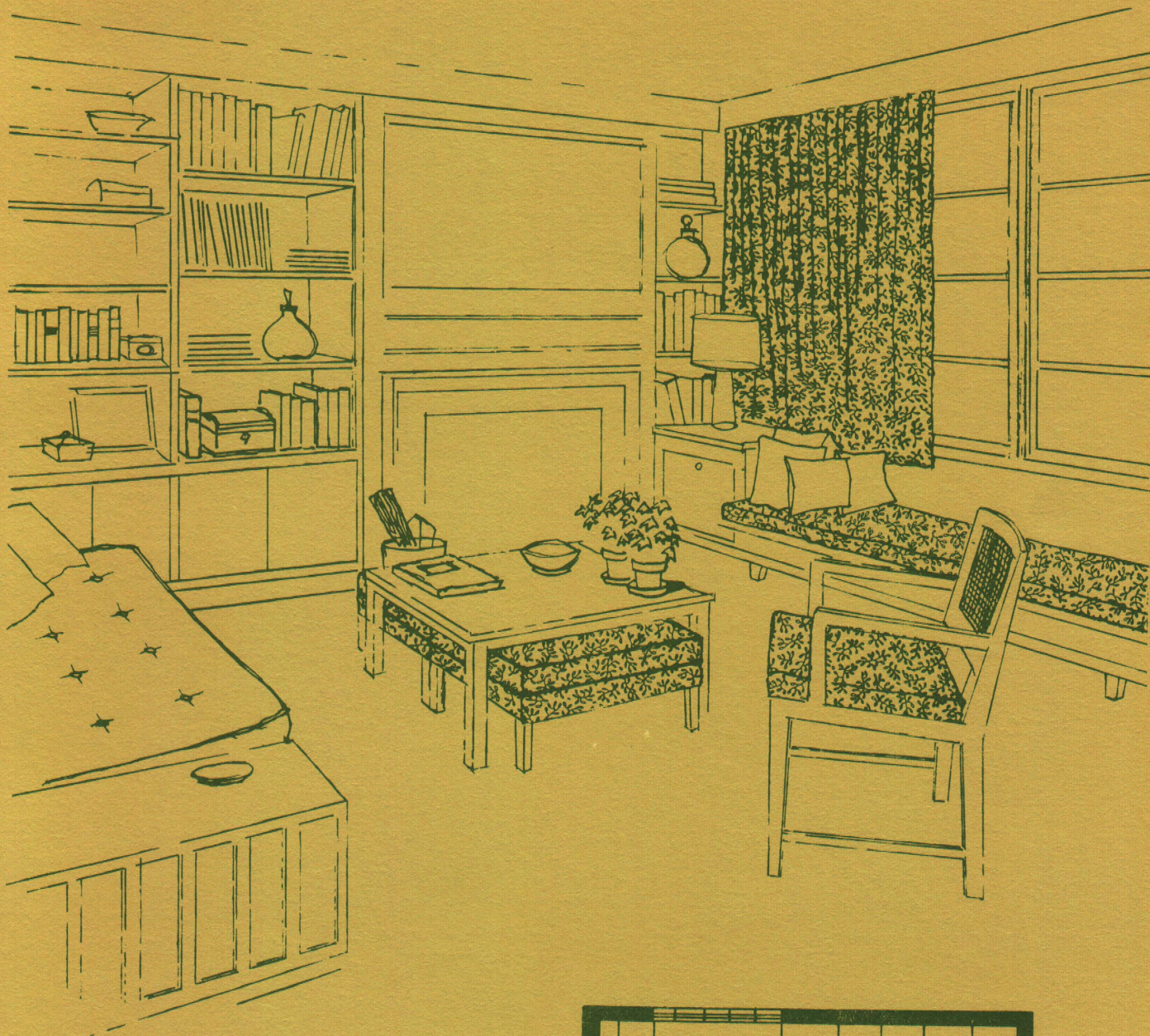
5. Bedrooms usually have enough space for reading, studying and sometimes, hobbies, if the beds do not take up more room than is necessary. If children must share a bedroom, place the beds against the walls -- perhaps at right angles to each other in a corner -- or use bunks. While this may make bedmaking more difficult, the gain in space is often worth the inconvenience. A double bed need not be in the center of the room, either. Allow just enough space between it and the wall (two feet or so) for easy access. The floor area you free by these arrangements also makes the room look more spacious.

6. To serve you best, each activity area should be well-equipped. Provide a study area with a table or desk large enough to spread out books and papers. Drawers, baskets or shelves for equipment, good lighting, and a comfortable straight chair also are musts.

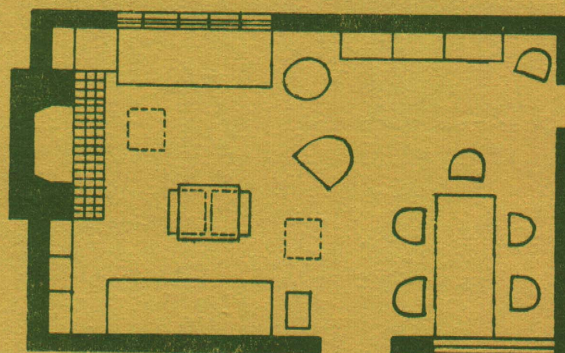
Ample work space should be available for hobbies, bookkeeping, sewing, or other activities where things must be spread out. If any one spot must serve many of these tasks, be sure to provide enough storage nearby to keep anything that is not currently being worked on.

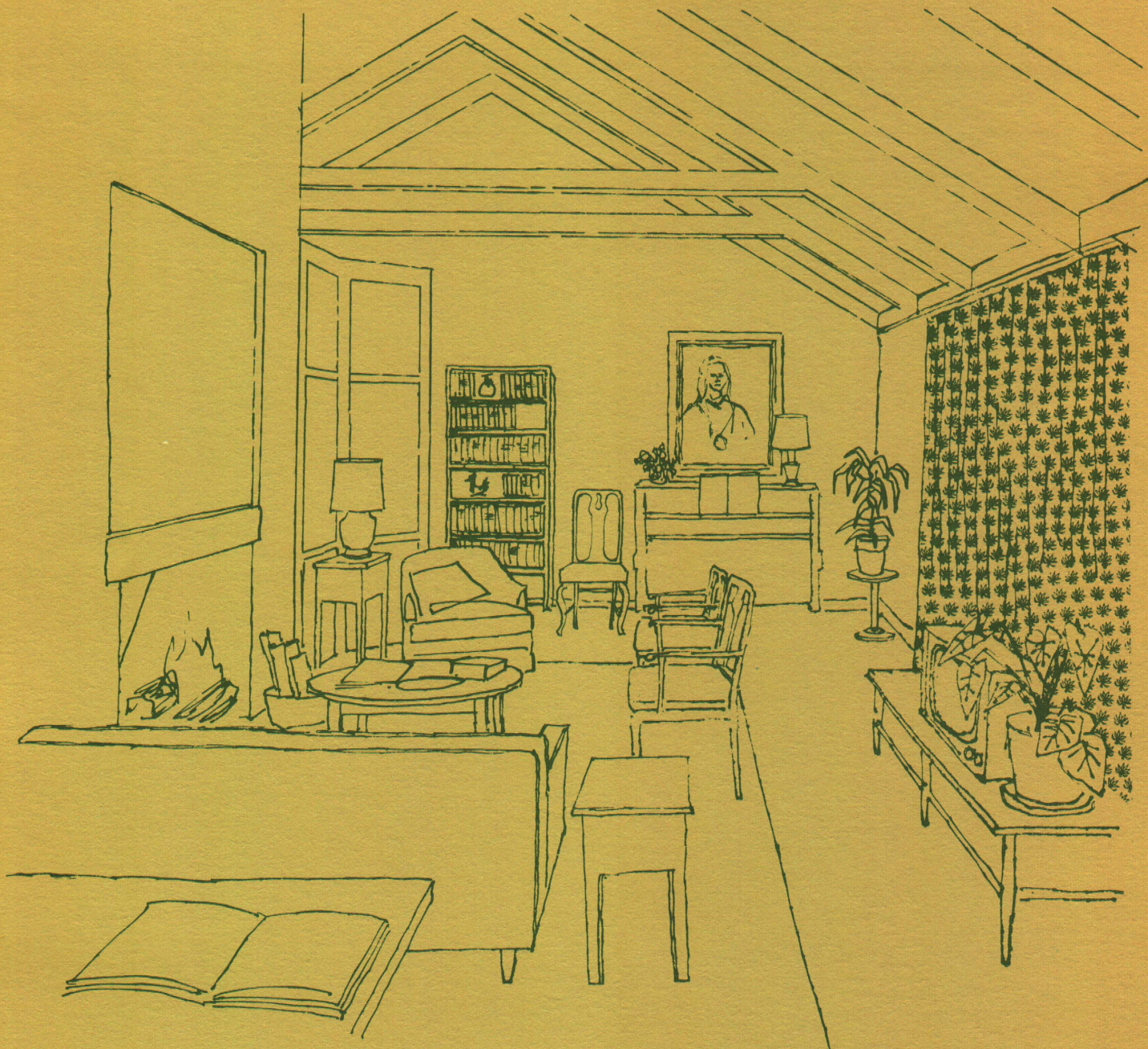


Divide a large room into separate activity areas.

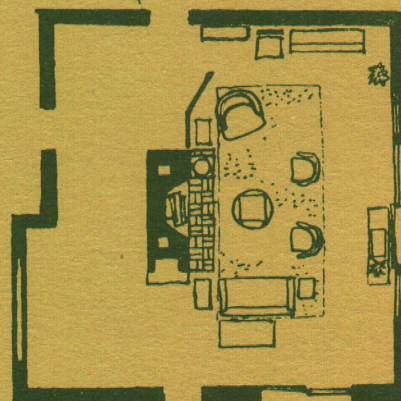


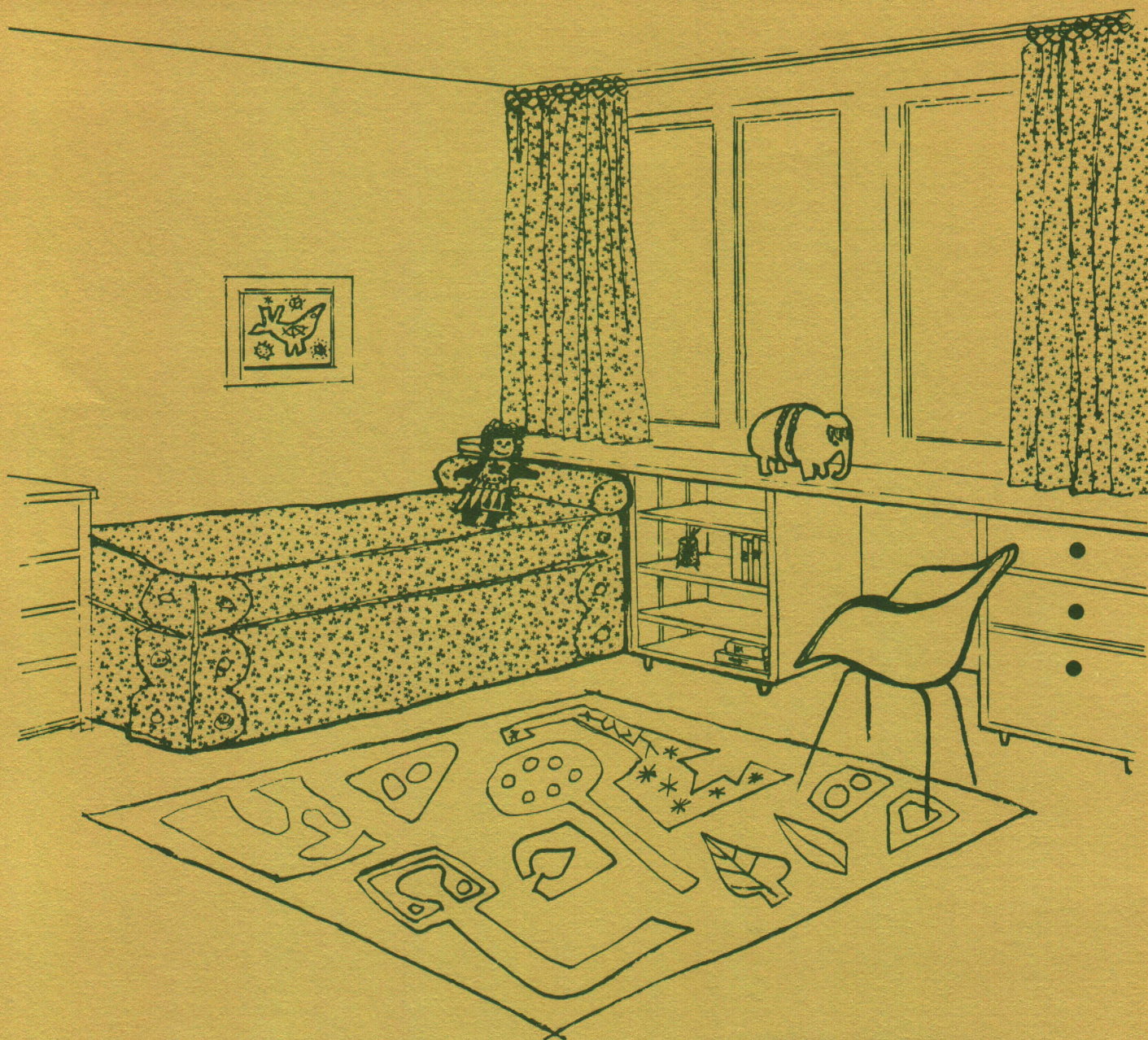
Small chairs and stools can be moved without upsetting the basic arrangement. A built-in window seat takes little space but adds lots of seating in small rooms.



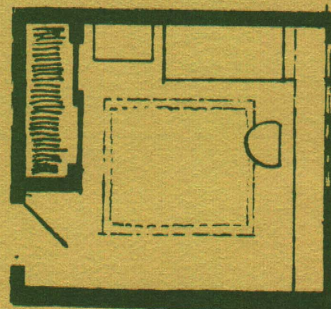


Plan for close-knit reading and conversation areas away from traffic lanes.





Placing the bed against the wall and constructing built-ins under the windows frees floor space.



For reading, provide a table, comfortable chair and, perhaps, a footstool. Unless a floor lamp is used, the table should be large enough for a table lamp as well as books and magazines.

7. All of these special activities need good, direct lighting in addition to any general lighting the room may have. Lamps should be large enough to spread light over all the work, but made so that you don't get glare from the bulb. Avoid sharp light and dark contrasts by using a translucent shade -- preferably white or a light color value.

ATTRACTIVENESS

A well-designed room is not only comfortable and convenient, it is also pleasing to look at. So, while planning for use of space, keep your eye on the appearance of each area. A small reading area needs to be as much of an organized unit as does a larger seating group. To pull a room out of the doldrums, avoid the most obvious arrangement. Do something a bit unexpected.

1. Reserve large wall spaces for your largest pieces, such as a sofa, a series of storage units, or a conversation grouping. Many small pieces placed on a long wall make it look cluttered.

2. Place heavy furniture and rugs parallel to the walls so that they follow the natural lines of the room. This helps keep an orderly appearance and allows you to place smaller pieces freely without destroying the unity of the room. Large pieces placed diagonally across corners go against the lines of the room, waste space, and contribute to a cluttered look. On the other hand, a small chair with a curved back may look best rounding a corner.

3. For good balance, try not to put all your heavy pieces at one end. An area that seems underfurnished does not necessarily need more furniture. A large picture, wallhanging or accessory grouping may be enough to provide the needed weight.

4. Pieces that look best together have something in common. For instance, they usually should be similar in scale. An end table used with a sofa needs to be heavier than one placed with a small chair.

Be careful of tables that are too large or too small for the areas they serve. Avoid too many different heights among pieces used together, too. End tables about the same height as the arm of a sofa will seem more related to the sofa than if they were much higher or lower. Arm height tables are easier to reach, too. Chairs with seats of equal height will seem to belong together.

This doesn't mean you should try to make everything equal. That would be monotonous. The point

is, the majority of the pieces in a grouping need to be related to each other in size and scale.

5. Usually furniture should be related in scale to the room itself. Large furniture may fit into a small room but it tends to make the room look crowded even when only a few pieces are used. If you must use upholstered pieces that are too heavy, cover them in a fabric that blends into the wall. A heavy wood piece can be painted to match the wall or finished in a light wood tone.

6. If your house has an open plan with living-dining areas together, one part can be separated from the other without destroying the feeling of spaciousness. Folding doors, screens or drapery hung from a ceiling track can screen a dining area after dinner. Doing this also helps increase the use of this area, by providing a quiet spot for reading or study.

If you don't have a separate entry hall -- and dislike the drafts and interruptions that a lack of one can cause -- try installing a storage wall or room divider, if space allows. Or, try one of the space saving ideas listed above for the dining room. Some large plants or a piece of furniture with its back to the entry will at least give a feeling of separation between the two areas.

ACCESSORIES

Accessories are the details without which few rooms seem to be complete. A painting, plant or piece of sculpture can complete a furniture grouping visually. A pottery pencil holder, a colorful box, a sewing basket or one for holding magazines can add to the usefulness of an area too.

Accessories contribute a great deal in color, texture and pattern. But, don't fall into the trap of selecting them strictly for effect. Use those which hold an interest for you and those which you can put to use.

If you are looking for ideas, investigate family interests. There are very few which can't be made visual. Display maps or pictures from a trip you've taken; show off your son's butterfly collection, your daughter's drawings, rocks, plants, or anything else that interests them. Look into what museums offer in the way of reproductions of paintings. Both children and adults usually enjoy contributing something personal to the home.

Tastes and interests will change and you will want to replace some of these items from time to time. To remain "alive" a house needs change. As furniture usually must remain fairly permanent, changing accessories becomes a wonderful way to

A few well placed large items are usually more effective than a lot of little ones.



refresh your surroundings. Here are some hints for placing the accessories you plan to use:

1. Plan where to use accessories only after everything else is in place. Then you will know what is truly essential.

2. Reserve large areas for your largest accessories or groupings.

3. A few well-placed large items are usually more effective than many little ones.

4. Little things are often hard to deal with. Alone they may be lost; too many scattered about may simply clutter the room. Use small things in small places, or use them as a part of a grouping or arrangement. Collections usually need to be grouped. So do items used on a desk. Put ink, pencil containers, stamp box, etc., in one area or organize them on a small tray. Group items which are similar in scale and which harmonize in color and texture close together so that they seem to form one unit.

5. Use accessories wherever you feel they are appropriate. For instance, there is no one area

that is more suitable for a rock collection than any other. Whether it goes in the living room or a hobby area depends solely on your tastes and those of your family.

ARRANGING FURNITURE

You will save time and come up with many more ideas if you begin your furniture arrangement on paper.

1. First, draw your room plan to scale. If you use graph paper, each square on the paper represents one foot of floor space -- $\frac{1}{4}" = 1'$. If you draw your own plan, you may prefer to make each square larger -- $\frac{1}{2}" = 1'$. Draw doors, windows and heating units to scale in the same places they appear in the room.

Trace your original room plan several times so you can try many arrangements and compare one with another. Your first plan must not be the best for your room and your furnishings.

2. Using heavy paper, cut out pieces to represent the exact size of each piece of furniture you plan to use. If you plan to add new furnishings, keep in mind that furniture today comes in many sizes. Bookshelves are usually 9 - 12 inches deep and can be made any length. Chests are usually 18 - 24 inches deep. Most are $2\frac{1}{2}$ - $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet long. Sofas and chairs vary, but are more limited.

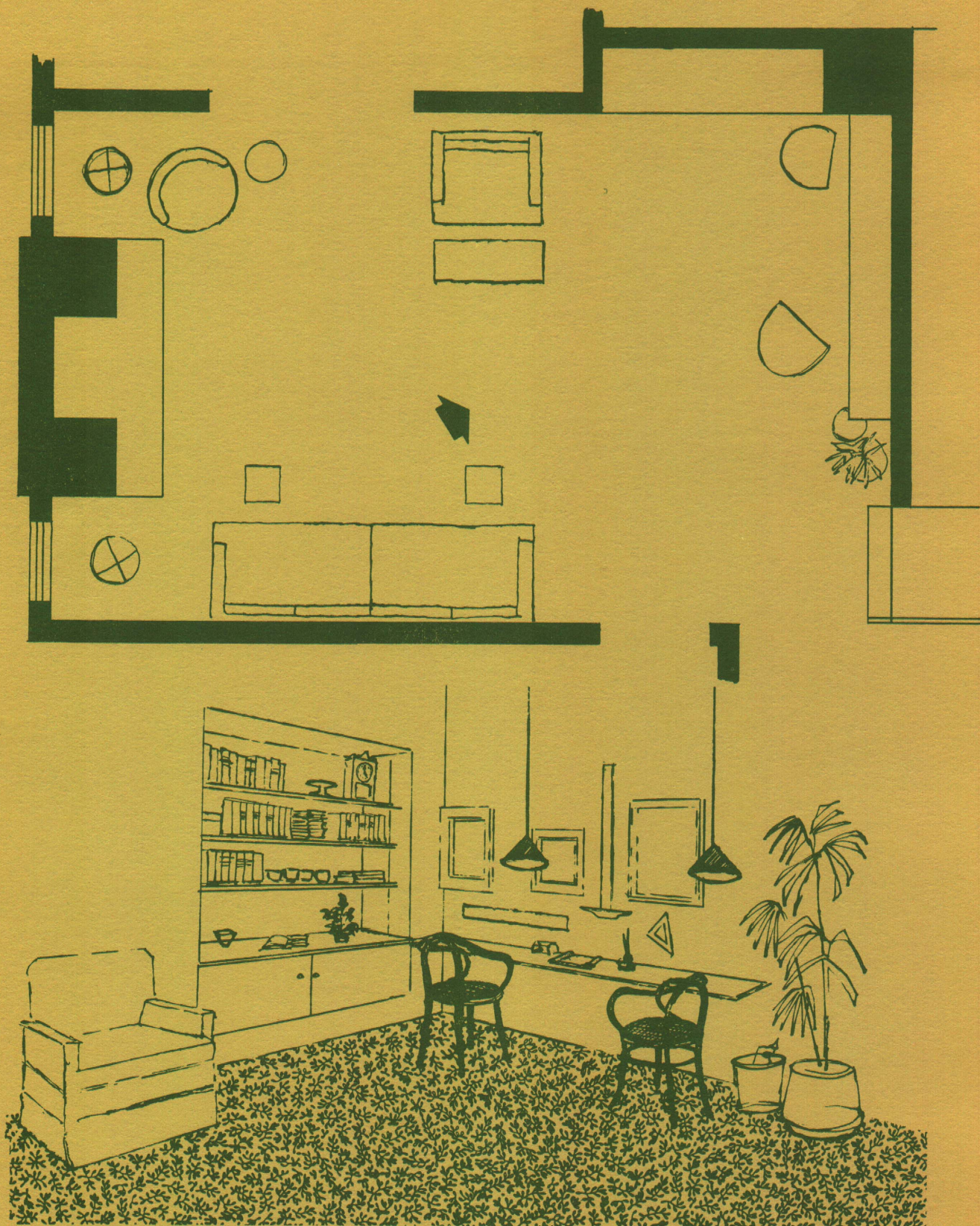
3. Then, on your plan, group the cutouts representing your furniture pieces as they might be used for each activity area. Arrange the larger pieces first, then add the smaller chairs and tables. Don't crowd your plan. Furniture in a room always seems to take up more space than it does on paper.

Separate each activity grouping by enough space for people to move freely -- at least 24 inches. Allow leg room in seating areas and at least 10 inches between chairs or sofa and coffee table. Unless pieces are meant to be pushed together, leave some breathing space between them and between them and the wall.

Some large chairs look best when pulled 6 inches or more from the wall. About 36 inches is needed on each side of a dining table for ease in seating and serving. For entertaining, you may need space for circulation of people, serving refreshments, and card tables and extra chairs.

4. When you find a workable arrangement, draw around the pieces of furniture.

5. After arranging the furniture in your room according to plan, try it out for at least a week before making any changes. Your family may need time to adjust to a new pattern.



Two can share this writing and working counter and still have plenty of room to spread out materials. Note that ample storage for other materials is nearby.

COLLECT IDEAS

You can often improve a room simply by rearranging the furniture and accessories you now have. However, through rearranging you may become aware of some things you want to add. Decide where these items will be needed, as their placement will affect the type and size you select.

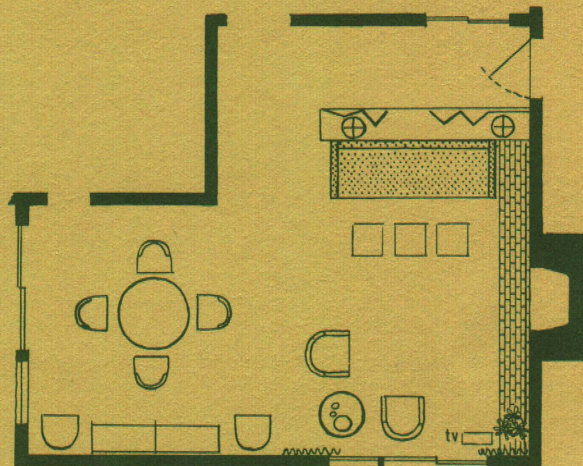
For instance, a lounge chair that sits out in a room needs to be lightweight so that it will not block off too much space. Shelving planned for one wall may not fit another area at all.

You may want to make some minor changes in things you already own. A lamp that gives poor light may need a new shade. A lamp which is too low can be placed on a 2 - 3 inch base to make it a better size. Legs on tables or chests can be cut down, hardware changed and the pieces painted or refinished.

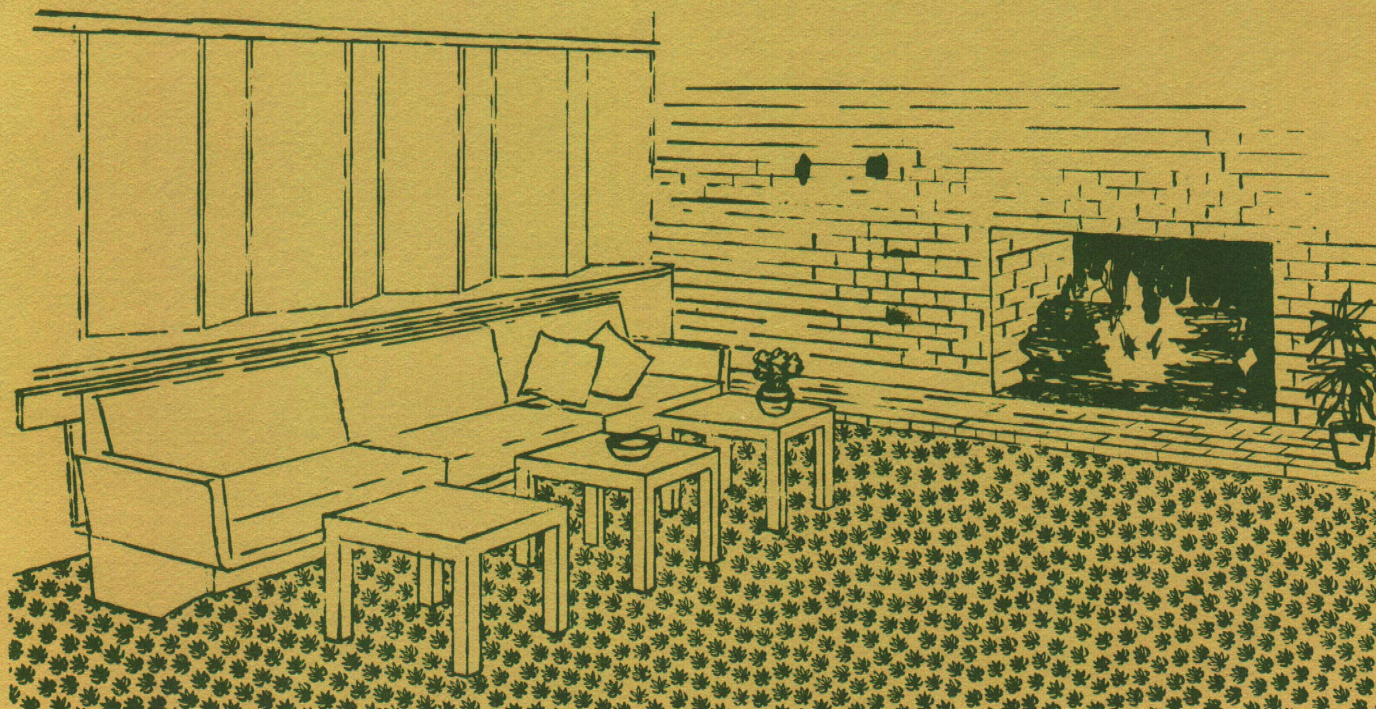
Also, you may need ideas on how to build-in radiators, minimize many doors and windows, or play down bulky furniture.

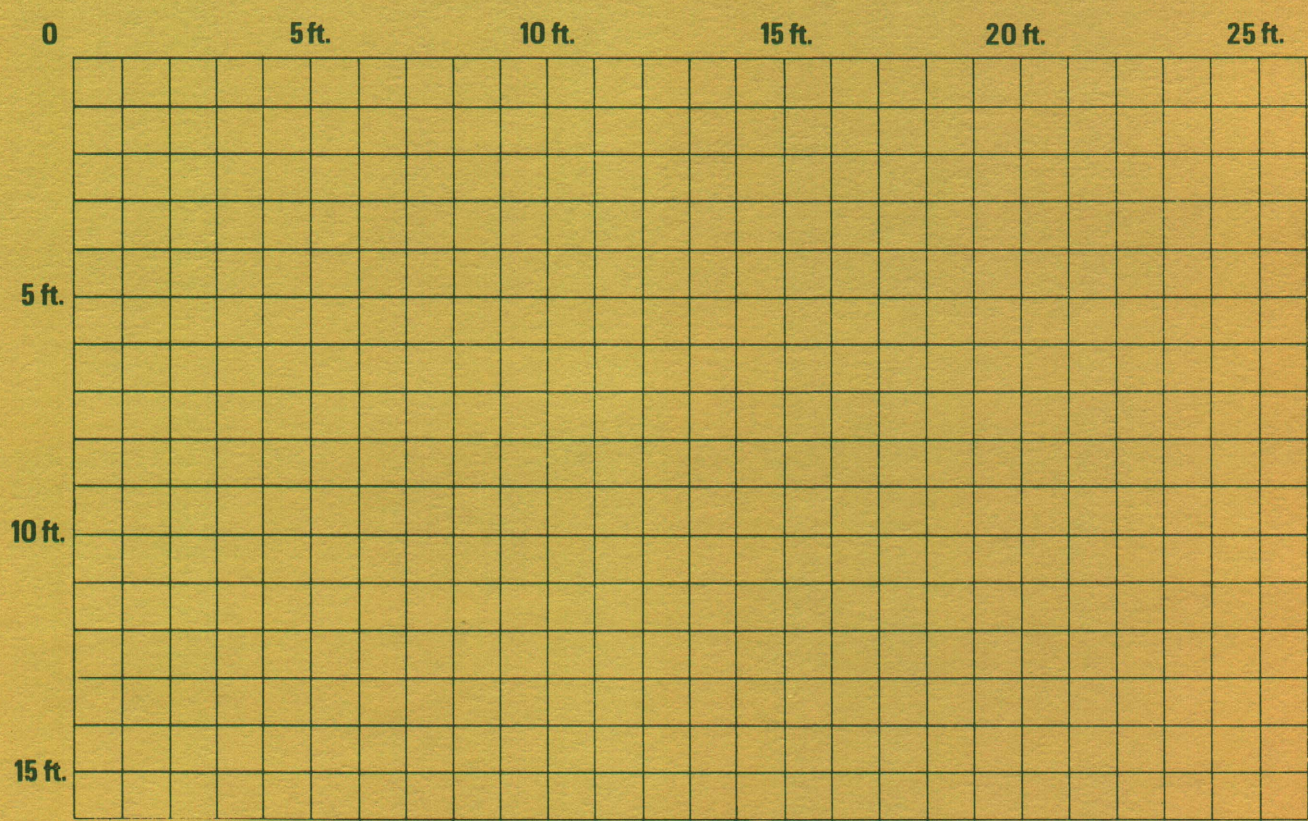
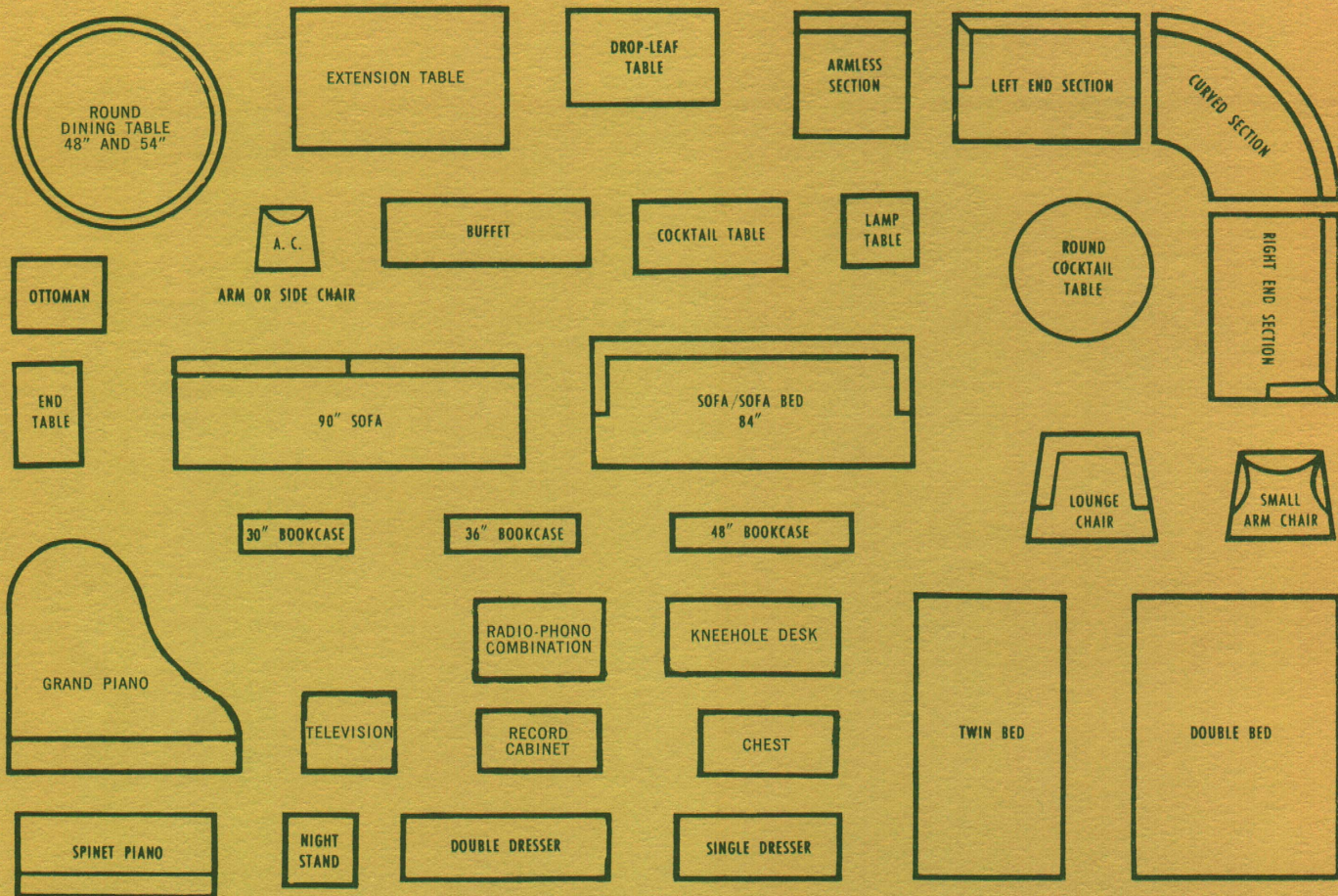
Keep a notebook and look everywhere for these ideas. Magazines may not illustrate exactly what you want, but they can suggest new possibilities.

When you look, check furniture and accessory groupings and note the size of pieces used together. Be aware of heights of tables and lamps. See how different areas are equipped for activity. Look for convenience features -- small stacking tables that double as stools, simple shelves that help with meal service in a small dining area. You may find ideas for using old or remodeled furniture, too.



Folding screens separate the living room from the entry. When the screens are pushed open a feeling of more space is created. The small tables can easily be moved where needed.





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