

A foyer or mud room can be your family command center

By Arlene Miles | Daily Herald Correspondent
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You're drinking your last cup of morning coffee, dashing around picking up your laptop, the papers you need for today's meeting, but where are your keys? After rummaging for several minutes, you finally find them under a pile of newspapers on the kitchen counter.

Or maybe this scenario sounds familiar: After school, you and your children are heading out to swim classes, but your son can't find one glove and his hat is missing. Everyone is late after it takes the family 10 minutes to find the errant clothing.

Want to avoid such stress? Consider making your foyer into a savvy launching and landing spot for your entire family - a place where you can organize what you need for the day outside your home, and in some cases, even inside, too.

Mud rooms, usually off the garage or adjacent to the kitchen, were all the rage with builders over the last several decades, but those spaces had little functionality other than being a place to dump things and not get the rest of the house dirty.

"We've started to address this in the last few years," said Chris Donatelli, owner of Donatelli Builders Inc. in Wheaton. "How many times have you not been able to find your car keys or something else? You can use this area as an entry point, a starting or stopping station that you can use to declutter and de-stress your life."

Savvy foyers have long been a part of high-end custom homes, but the functionality that they bring is applicable to the average suburban homeowner, and even for individuals living in small spaces.

"Family foyers or mudrooms are high traffic areas that have evolved over the years with increased storage and organization needed for shoes, gloves, hats, coats, sporting goods, etc.," said Vip Patel, owner of Castle Bldrs, a custom home construction company based in Schaumburg. "Each member of the family has different functional needs when entering and exiting the home several times a day."

Not surprisingly, creating a savvy foyer is often the province of professional organizers. Jane Carroo, owner of Clutter Coach in Palatine, noted that areas near entrances are perfect home launching and landing pads.

"Entryways are notorious for the mad dash, scrambling to get your keys, your day planner, your cell phone," Carroo said. "It's a source of stress for adults."

The trick to a savvy, organized entryway is making it work for you. Thus, there is no single correct way.

"It depends on the space that you have," Carroo said. "Ideally it is a place where you have closets where you can put away stuff."

What works, she added, is keeping the items that you use everyday - or at the very least, several times a week - in an organized place in the family foyer. These include athletic equipment, backpacks and other carryalls, footwear, coats and jackets, etc. Seasonal items may be swapped out and stored as appropriate.

One way to keep items organized is through a locker system, which give each individual a place to hang outdoor clothes and store personal belongings. These can either be built in through remodeling, or purchased in retail stores.

"IKEA has some wonderful lockers that are not expensive," said Joan Kaufman, owner of Interior Planning & Design, Inc. in Naperville.

Lockers bought in stores often have an inherent drawback in that the storage space up high, making it difficult for younger children to reach. Carroo suggested that for lockers to be successful you need to buy ones that are appropriate for children or modify hooks so smaller hands can reach them.

Let's say, however, that you live in an older, smaller home and have only one major entranceway at the front. Usually a small closet is located nearby, often crammed with coats and myriad items. Don't worry, you can still transform a small space into a workable, organized foyer. For one, buy decorative hooks to place on a wall at appropriate heights for each family member. With some prudent shopping, you can find storage options that will keep things organized as well as attractive.

Linda Navara of LMR Designs LLC in Arlington Heights specializes in finding inexpensive alternatives for her clients.

"For older clients I had who had a small foyer and didn't want to spend a lot of money, I suggested finding one stylish piece of furniture that you can sit on that also had storage underneath," Navara said.

To make it attractive, label each individual's hook or locker space with wall words or stenciling. Navara indicated Target sells inexpensive stenciling that would work well in such applications.

Another alternative once the coats are on hooks out of the front closet is makeover the area into storage space with double hang rods, bins and other organizational items. Navara further recommended removing doors, particularly if they are bi-fold, to give the interior more storage room, then covering the opening with draperies for an attractive look.

To make the area even more attractive, Kaufman suggested placing a potted plant in the corner, having an attractive light fixture, and placing an area rug on the floor.

"If you can't fit a plant in, a welcome sign or a wreath on the door works, too," she said. "You need something welcoming, something nice because psychologically it has a big impact."

Just about any kind of flooring will work in a family foyer, Donatelli said, except wall-to-wall carpeting. Tile, stone or vinyl, even hardwood floors, are all appropriate as long as they are slip-proof. The nature of the family foyer requires waterproof materials and finishes for other elements, too.

How much you put into the family foyer and just what use it will have depends on its size and configuration. The equation gets more difficult when the mud room is also the laundry room and a passageway from the garage to the rest of the house. In these instances, Donatelli recommended that the minimum size for a rectangular family foyer of this nature be 15-by-7 feet.

"You have a washer and dryer in that space, and it's really hard to get cabinets, bins, cubbies, and a hanging area in anything smaller," he said.

Yet, because many existing mud rooms are near house perimeters, they can often be easily expanded via an addition. In these instances, Donatelli recommends adding a second, family-only powder room to the area, and reserving one located toward the front of the house for guests.

When space is no problem, the sky is the limit to what you can do with a family foyer. In addition to laundry, another popular option is to use the area as a craft room. Think about setting up a family "tech station" in the area for charging cell phones, iPods, and other electronic devices. It's also a good area to set up pet food bowls and beds, and possibly even including a washing station to clean muddy paws.

Because family foyers are often located between garages and the rest of the house, Kaufman likes to add elements of feng shui to the area. Even with lockers and hooks to hang things, cabinets with lots of storage space are a good idea because you can close them when things do get cluttered.

"These areas are a reflection of our daily lives and if they get messy, I suggest you go through the front entrance for a few days as you'll feel better," she said.

Kaufman has even extended the welcoming aspect of the family foyer out into the garage, having recommended painting the wall of the garage where the entrance door to the house is to start the transitional outside to inside process.

But what if your house doesn't lend itself to a savvy foyer in either the front or the rear? Donatelli recommends finding an unused room in your home and remodeling it to achieve the same goal.

"Remember it's not so much about decorating as it is about functionality," Donatelli said. "It's an organizational drop zone where you're looking to make your life easier."

How to create your family foyer

- *Arlene Miles*

Home entryways are busy areas and by definition should be functional as well as attractive. After all, these areas set the tone for your whole house, no matter if it's your family foyer or a main entrance where you greet visitors.

When setting up your launching pad, make sure you have adequate space to store your items. Don't forget vertical storage, either. Clutter Coach's Jane Carroo suggests the following items be part of a savvy foyer:

Family calendar to identify activities, appointments, etc.

Checklist of daily items:

- Keys
- Mail holder
- Docking station for cell phone, iPods, etc.
- Hooks for coats
- Baskets for hats, scarves, gloves
- Cubbies for backpacks
- Racks for shoes
- Place for purses, wallets, briefcases
- Place for tote bags
- Bin for items that belong to someone else
- Mirror
- Clock
- Flashlight
- Umbrella stand
- Water/refillable water bottles
- Emergency kit
- Miscellaneous on-the-go items, i.e. bug spray, snacks, travel games
- Sport bags for equipment
- Pet equipment such as leashes and toys