Our homes are beset by conflicting demands. Interior spaces must provide a sense both of community and of personal well-being; they must be places where we can invite the world in, and where we can shut the world out. In other words, they must serve needs both public and private.

In his 1955 book, *The House and the Art of Its Design*, Robert Woods Kennedy points out that design has made fewer and fewer provisions for conventional privacy, citing the example of Le Corbusier’s bedroom, which contained a toilet, tub and bidet. Kennedy asks, “Where does too little privacy begin to have bad effects on the individual and the family’s self-esteem? …When the individual is not able to withdraw without undue manipulation of architectural gadgetry; without apology; and when, in emergency conditions, the family cannot operate the house according to the most conventional patterns of its time and class.”

And yet, our homes don’t always keep pace with our needs. The open-plan concept has been fashionable since the middle of the last century, both in urban and rural settings. Initially, it symbolized a new informality, a democratization of living areas that eliminated the distinction between formal and informal spaces, and between public and private parts of the home. In cities, this was often reflected in converted lofts and industrial buildings. In the suburbs, the artist’s loft found its counterpart in the “great room”—where the kitchen, dining room and living room are combined into one shared social space.

An intense yearning for more personal space in homes and the workplace has emerged within the last five years, however. A backlash against large, multipurpose interior architecture is inspiring a move toward designing more articulated spaces, and buildings’ design blueprints are starting to reflect the growing need for privacy. Some credit the shifting nature of privacy to technology—they believe we’re configuring our private spaces...
to allow us to better curl up and tuck into a mobile device. But perhaps the move to more intimate living spaces is just the natural swinging of the pendulum.

Mary Duggan, an architect and judge for the RIBA House of the Year Award in 2015, coined the term “broken-plan homes” to describe homes that offer more walls, nooks and private spaces. But is a “broken-plan” home not simply a home as it was before the dawn of the open-plan? What sounds like a neologism reflects how architects are not simply returning to life before the open-plan, but are adapting the home in new ways.

The most innovative among them are finding creative methods for introducing more privacy. Fala Atelier in Portugal added a semicircular wall to create the illusion of seclusion in a Lisbon flat. WT Architecture added floors to break up exceptionally high ceilings in a Scottish stone mill–turned–family home. And Barcelona’s Nook Architects used mesh partitions to separate the staircase from the living areas. Meanwhile, Kuwaiti firm AGi Architects created Secret House—a house that generates its own mist (on a timer) to shield the house from prying neighbors. But lower tech solutions are also available: Sliding pocket doors are now being added to close off kitchens.

These changes are also apparent in our workspaces. A report in September 2014 by office furniture specialists Steelcase found that offices without private spaces experience quantifiable problems. Losses in productivity due to lack of privacy, distracting noise and visual stimuli cost US companies up to $135 billion and UK companies up to £70 billion. But despite calls from all quarters for more privacy in the workplace, nearly 70 percent of American offices still use open-plan layouts.

Overstimulation, it seems, is robbing us of balance. In Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander write, “The very instruments that have given man increased dynamic power—total mobility and instantaneous communication—are destroying the equilibrium in the human habitat.” They define the home as a protective shell, which takes a stand for us “against immediate neighbors” as it’s “the only physical insulation against the dangers and pain of invasion.”

However, in The Power of Place, Winifred Gallagher suggests that it is crowding within that protective shell—the home—that can create the ultimate stress and overstimulation. “Learning from our experiences,” she writes, “can’t happen unless we have refractory periods to digest them in.” In other words, people need places to rejuvenate in order to absorb and process information.

Ultimately, this relationship between design and privacy becomes a human balancing act. Individuals must integrate a certain amount of solitude and a certain amount of companionship. The reintroduction of private space into the home and workplace is in fact quite optimistic. It suggests that technology might actually not take over our world. Human ingenuity may be able to provide the essential balance we crave between privacy and community.