

The act of conversation has always had an architectural framework. In ancient Rome, the triclinium—a small dining table surrounded on three sides by couches—was a dedicated space for food and talk. Chilly medieval houses added benches next to a central fireplace to create nooks for intimate conversations. Arts and Crafts designers in England and the United States adapted these “inglenooks” in late-19th-century cottages. As modern central heating made toasty alcoves unnecessary, 20th-century house planning blended functions across large continuous rooms. To make space for intimate talk in these sprawling open spaces, architects devised a novel (some might say novelty) solution: the conversation pit.

The Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen, along with industrial designer Charles Eames, designed one of the first conversation pits in 1949 for publisher John Entenza. According to architectural historian Esther McCoy, writing in 1962, the living room in this house—Case Study House #9 in Pacific Palisades, California—“was designed on the principle of elastic space. . . which could graciously expand or contract for an occasional party of forty or a friend in for morning coffee.” A lowered lounge area encouraged guests to talk while sitting casually against cushions on its carpeted steps.

Saarinen and interior designer Alexander Girard refined the idea further in a house for Xenia and Irwin Miller in Columbus, Indiana. In this widely published house, completed in 1957, a built-in couch and myriad colorful pillows surrounding the sunken conversation area softened and enlivened

the stark white marble living room. Saarinen added a similarly colorful conversation pit under the fluid concrete vaults of the 1962 TWA terminal at JFK airport. Plush couches upholstered in crushed velvet invited travelers to lounge and chat as they waited to board their flights.

By the early 1960s, so many other mid-century architects had taken up the trend that a 1963 *Time* magazine article could claim derisively that “there was hardly a blueprint around that did not include specifications for a large, shallow hole to be sunk into the living-room floor.” In arch terms it pointed out the potential “down-fall” of this arrangement: Not only did the conversation pit separate out the smug and “more serious-minded” party guests who “could step down to form a sort of basement discussion group,” it also put more frivolous guests in danger of tumbling down among them. “Today,” the author claims, “few home-builders are insisting on conversation pits, and a remedy has been found for homeowners discontented with the ones they have. A few cubic-yards of concrete and a couple of floor boards will do the trick.”

The conversation pit idea has enjoyed a revival over the last few years, perhaps in the hope that architecture can help turn the attention of family members away from digital screens and back toward each other. But those same screens will, of course, contribute to the pits’ precarity: Who hasn’t stepped off a curb while scrolling on the move? Designers of contemporary conversation pits might be obliged to mar their sleek designs with a perimeter fence.

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## THE LOW-DOWN

An architectural conversation starter.



WORDS  
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It is a truth universally acknowledged that inherent quotability keeps a novel alive in the public consciousness. But the nature of how we read has changed, as has the notoriety to which we assign quotations.

Historically, a quality literary quote contains elements of inspiration (“To thine own self be true”), advice (“It is nothing to die; it is dreadful not to live”), timelessness (“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”), or a level of deeper meaning that underscores the readers’ intelligence (“Time moves slowly, but passes quickly”).

These esteemed turns of phrase were historically cherry-picked by critics and adopted into the culture over a span of many years. But the rise of e-book readers over the last decade has placed the lightning-fast ability to promote quotes in readers’ hands.

The Amazon Kindle’s open-source “popular highlights” feature allows readers to view an e-book’s most highlighted passages and contribute their own. The result? Expressions memorialized through group think. One highlight leads to two, then 10, then 100—and a viral quote is born.

“Because sometimes things happen to people and they’re not equipped to deal with them,” in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*—one of the bestselling books of the last decade—has 31,072 highlights. If that many people consider it worthy of remembering, it *must* be good, right? The majority of popular highlights read not as beautifully written sayings, but like fridge magnet-style aphorisms.

Do literary quotations require gatekeepers, or is it inevitable that objectivity turns subjective when filtered through social tech? Perhaps a sense of quality is no longer required for a quote—instead, the act of annotating has become a way to connect with others during an otherwise solitary activity.

In an update last year, Kindle released a feature sure to take the self-curated quote phenomenon to new levels: the ability to highlight any passage, turn it into an image, and share it to social media. If the closest thing to immortality, for an author, is the ability for their output to be boiled down to a few easily disseminated sentences, the market will soon be brimming with prosaic vampires.

## AIR QUOTES

When highlights make history.