Built-ins: A Commonly Overlooked Design Option

There are many ways you can improve the value of your home; update the kitchen or a bathroom, create open spaces by removing interior walls, add on new living space—the list goes on and on. One of the simplest ways, often overlooked, is by installing built-ins. Built-in options range from media centers to desks and cabinets, with the most popular being bookcases.

In the words of Robert Frost, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall…" — which may help to explain the popularity of built-ins. Don't like that wall? Cover it with a bookcase.

Books, in my opinion, are the ultimate wall treatment. An expanse of book spines are like natural wood floors — they go well with any color scheme, enriching any room. My house has bookcases in every room except the bathrooms. Even our kitchen has a bookcase — for cookbooks, of course, but also a handy space for a dictionary. The dictionary we often used as the kids were growing up to answer questions or settle arguments over dinner; it's a 1971 American Heritage Dictionary that I got from my grandparents as I headed off to high school.

As my house suggests, we can put a bookcase just about anywhere. A 1949 survey of a college library showed that 85% of all books will fit on an 8" deep shelf (the same survey indicated that only 10% of books require a shelf as deep as 10", and just 5% require a 12" or deeper shelf). A much less comprehensive survey (of my own collection, so the statistic may be skewed by the disproportionate number of Edgar Rice Burroughs paperbacks) indicates that about 50% of all books fit on a 6" deep shelf. You can fit a 6" deep shelf just about anywhere without intruding too much into valuable floor space and still accommodate a significant part of your library. A deeper shelf can often be installed out of the way—like over a doorway—to hold the outliers (like the "Historical Atlas of Massachusetts" which comes in at a whopping 16" deep).

If you really truly can't spare even 6" for a bookcase, consider painting faux book backs on a wall, to get the character of a bookcase without taking up the real estate. Faux painted book backs give you an opportunity to be particularly creative: Charles Dickens, for instance, had faux bookshelves installed in his study at Gads Hill Place, with fake book backs that included titles such as the series *"The Wisdom of Our Ancestors,"* in seven volumes: *I Ignorance, II Superstition, III The Block, IV The Stake, V The Rack, VI Dirt, and VII Disease.* Next to this series was a very thin bookback entitled *"The Virtues of Our Ancestors."* Aldous Huxley, it is said, had fake book backs in his library with these titles: *"Biography of Men Who Were Born Great"*; *"Biography of Men Who Achieved Greatness"*; *"Biography of Men Who Had Greatness Thrust Upon Them"; and "Biography of Men Who Were Never Great at All."*

Some technical details to think about when you think about built-in bookcases:

Doors

If you put glass doors on your bookcases, you can still see the books but they don't gather dust. This is particularly useful for the shelves close to the floor, especially in a high-traffic area like a hallway where dust gets kicked up all the time.

Shelf adjustability

Everyone assumes shelves should be adjustable. That's possibly true. It's also true that after you first put your books on the shelf, it could be decades before the shelves are ever adjusted again. Fixed shelves can yield stiffer shelves, so maybe just lay out the shelf location beforehand.

Vertical divider details

Built-in bookcases are typically assembled from ¾" plywood. A ¾" edge looks pretty flimsy, though, so carpenters will often make the plywood edge look thicker by adding a piece of wood to the edge, maybe 1-1/2" or 2" wide. This detail, while it looks nice, has the disadvantage of creating a lip that "traps" a book partly behind it. It's more expensive but classier to double the plywood to 1-1/2" or 2" to begin with, and eliminate the lip.

Paint or natural finish?

With the books in place, you don't see much case. We usually paint our built-ins (less expensive) and use the adjacent trim color. In a particularly formal space, though, we'd go with natural wood, like quarter-sawn oak with a light walnut finish.

Two depths

A large, tall wall unit can often look better balanced if the lower third is 6 or 8 inches deeper than the upper section. This can give you a lower section that fits larger art books, for instance, and a small counter that can be used for display. The two sections can be visually unified by aligning the vertical dividers.

Lastly, keep in mind the design of your home. Your new bookcase should look as if it was built with the original house. Planning and attention to details even as simple as the design of the surrounding trim is key to creating beautiful built-in casework for your home.

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Last Issue!

Well print issue that is.

Byggmeister will be bringing News You Can Use directly to your email box in 2011. We are going virtual to offer our readers more frequent and up to date information on design and building news. To continue receiving News You Can Use via email, simply send an email to info@byggmeister.com. You can opt out of this subscription through our unsubscribe feature at any time.

Tale Of A Deep-Energy Retrofit

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siding. By the way, we didn't use that fluffy, pink stuff.

Can you seal a house too much? We need to breathe fresh air, right?

Absolutely. When you seal a house that well, you need a ventilation system, but you don't want to have cold air coming in, so we use an energy-recovery ventilator that exhausts air from inside the house and as that air flows out, it transfers its heat to the fresh air coming in from the outside.

What were the goals for updating the interior?

The layout was typical 1930s. It wasn't very open and there was a funny hallway that ran down the middle of the house. We removed walls and took out two chimneys to make it much more open and contemporary.

Isn't open space less energy efficient? What about heat zones?

That concept of heat zones doesn't work to help efficiency much. You want to keep the whole house a constant, comfortable temperature. So, if you keep a seldom-used room colder, that is just going to be siphoning off warmer air from the rest of the house, which creates drafts and does little to save on heating.

There was a family component to "greening" this project wasn't there?

One of the reasons these homeowners bought a two-family was to have the grandparents live on the first floor and the immediate family would live in the top. They embraced the idea of going from two homes to one, which reduced the family's overall carbon footprint.

Were there any big hiccups along the way?

In the eight months it took, there was nothing serious, but with all the choices between the two units: five bathrooms, two kitchens, all the living spaces, six bedrooms, heating systems, appliances; the number of decisions that had to be made was really pretty mind blowing.

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NEWS YOU CAN USE

Tale Of A Deep-Energy Retrofit

Q&A with Production Manager Cador Pricejones

A deep energy retrofit home

When Byggmeister's Cador Pricejones talks about the latest energy-saving techniques, he sounds a little like a surgeon talking about the latest life-saving techniques. It isn't far off the mark because a Byggmeister retrofit project can give a home a new lease on life, and in this case, even bring a family closer.

Deep-energy retrofit sounds like some sort of extreme makeover. What is it and why would a client want to do it?

The standard for a deep-energy retrofit is to reduce a home's typical energy consumption by 50 percent or more. We recently worked on a project in Belmont where the homeowners bought a two-family house that needed a lot of work, and energy efficiency was a priority for them. National Grid provided generous financial assistance for this project. (For more information on their incentives, visit www.powerofaction.com/der)

Why Byggmeister?

While Byggmeister has always been energy-efficiency minded, the last couple of years we've taken it to a much higher level with retrofits where we do better than 50-percent reductions. Residential housing accounts for 20 percent of our country's energy consumption and we feel as builders we have a responsibility to help our clients decrease their carbon emissions substantially. Besides, by remodeling, you are really giving your home a whole new lease on life in the order of 50 or 100 years, so you should give it the best you can.

Wrapping the house with foil-faced insulation

This house was built in the 1930s. How do you increase energy efficiency by more than 50 percent in a house that old?

Well, when you buy the worst house on the block, you can make a big impact. This house wasn't the worst, but it was in poor condition and the homeowners knew it was going to take a lot more than just weatherization to make it energy efficient.

So, it takes more than just rolling out the pink insulation?

There were a lot of details like a solar thermal system that preheats the water going into their hot water tanks, exterior doors and window replacement, and changing the heating system from a boiler to a furnace that is 95 percent efficient. Of course, insulation does make a very big difference in sealing the house as tightly as possible, which we did by blowing dense cellulose into the exterior walls and then using rigid insulation as well under new

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