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Interpreting Period Built-ins today

Bookcases, buffets, nooks, and benches—all up for reimagining with reference to the best 20th-century models.

The quest for storage that gained momentum in the late 19th century continues unabated. If only we could order from one of the many builders' catalogs popular in the 1920s! For just a few dollars, you could buy virtually any built-in, from a china cupboard or buffet to an entire staircase, delivered straight to the site of your house. • No such luck now. Good stock built-ins are hard to come by, but custom ones are not. It's a matter of finding a period-sympathetic carpenter, cabinetmaker, or design-build team that shares your vision and aesthetic taste, then following through on the details. **BY MARY ELLEN POLSON**



ADDING PERIOD CHARACTER

"There's something to be said for using a built-in instead of a piece of movable furniture," says architect Nicholas Blavat, who remade existing bookcases as china cabinets in what became the dining room.



BOOKCASES & shelves

Built in a vaguely "colonial" style sometime in the mid-20th century, this Milwaukee lakefront house was ripe for reinvention. The house was solid, but rooms lacked character and dimension, explains Nicholas Blavat, the architect who oversaw the transformation: "We wanted to work with its good bones and extend the Colonial Revival style throughout the house." • Simple changes included replacing one-piece crown moulding in the living room with a deeper two-piece crown, and repeating the unusual shouldered trim mouldings found in the house. • Plain bookcases that had been on either side of the enlarged opening in what's now the dining room were transformed into glass display cabinets. "We used that as a way to create character while adding storage," Blavat says. In what's now the family room beyond, new built-in shelving is capped by a high window.



BEFORE



JOE DEMAYO FOR DEEP RIVER PARTNERS (OPP.); SUSAN GILMORE (RIGHT)



LEFT Formerly the living room, the remodeled dining room gains proportion and grandeur from deep, high-relief moldings and casings. Backlit for display, the two crowned, glazed cabinets frame the view into the remade family room, where open bookcases flank either side of a new, Colonial Revival-inspired fireplace. **ABOVE** In a new cottage by David Heide Design Studio, cabinets salvaged from the owner's city house became bookcases; the next room has new built-in cabinets.



Imagination is important, too. You may not think there's room for more storage in your house, but clever carpenters and homeowners have found space for drawers built into bedroom eaves, closets (even powder rooms) tucked under staircases, and fireside inglenooks for decades—come to think of it, centuries.

Surprisingly, a built-in often takes up less space than a comparable piece of furniture, especially when it can be recessed into unused wall space. That's why built-in buffets, bookcases, and breakfast nooks were so popular in early-20th-century bungalows, many of which checked in at around 800 square feet of living space.

Built-ins do double duty or perform unexpected services, too. A built-in china cabinet may reduce the need for cabinets in the kitchen, for example. Bookcases make excellent use of the dead space on either side of a fireplace mantel. A bench built into a staircase is a convenient place to set groceries or the mail on the way into the house.

Until I moved into a house with even fewer cabinets than my New York City apartment had, I never realized how much storage a single tall serving buffet could provide. [cont. on page 30]

Though an obsession of **bungalow builders**, built-in or permanent furniture dates to every era. Think of the inglenooks from Elizabethan times, carved **corner cabinets** in Georgian houses, Victorian window seats, the Murphy bed patented in 1900, and ironing cupboards of the '20s.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Built-Ins

RESTORATION+DESIGN

- **CARISA MAHNKEN**
DESIGN GUILD cmahnken.com
Period-sensitive interior design
- **CROWN POINT CABINETRY**
crown-point.com *Custom cabinetry for the entire house*
- **DAVID HEIDE DESIGN STUDIO**
dhdstudio.com *Restoration, additions, new builds*
- **DEEP RIVER PARTNERS**
deep-river.com *Craft-conscious residential architecture & interior design*
- **GREG PAOLINI DESIGN**
gpdwoodshop.com
Kitchen cabinets, millwork & furniture by a Roycroft Renaissance artisan
- **THE KENNEBEC COMPANY**
kennebeccompany.com
Period cabinets for any room
- **TIM ANDERSEN**
timandersenarchitect.com
Restoration & new design

MORE RESOURCES ON PAGE 103.



ABOVE A recessed china cabinet borrows an idea from early-20th-century linen closets: the drop shelf. **OPPOSITE** A built-in should look original to the house. This buffet designed by architect Tim Andersen is new. With stained-glass door inserts and a three-part, beveled-mirror backsplash, it merges seamlessly into its bungalow setting.