

New uses for original built-in features

Many a “quaint” architectural feature was once a cutting-edge innovation. The built-ins of homes constructed between the early and mid 20th century, for instance, developed to serve the particular needs of that time.

The rising middle class could afford suburban houses but not servants, so designs that minimized housework became all the rage. Also, people had begun to connect dirt and microbes in the home with disease, so streamlined furniture with no spaces behind or underneath to collect dust appeared more hygienic.

Though also found in Colonial Revival and Foursquare homes, built-ins were most popular in Arts & Crafts bungalows. The Craftsman vision was all about harmony and simplification, and what could be simpler or more harmonious than furniture that was actually part of the house? In a Craftsman home, they most likely would follow squared-off lines and be constructed of a good hardwood, usually oak.

Typical built-ins found in older houses include:

- an inglenook — two fixed bench seats that bookend a hearth, so people can sit near the fire for warmth
- bench seats under windows
- bookcases flanking a fireplace
- a built-in sideboard or buffet in the dining room, sometimes recessed into an alcove
- a colonnade between rooms, consisting of waist-high cabinetry below and tapered piers or columns above.

These days, few of us need to huddle close to the fireplace to stay warm (unless we haven't paid the heating bill) and our bookcases may hold DVDs more often than classic literature. Still, those who love older homes keep finding new uses for original built-ins.

Storage and Display Spaces

When Jill and Richard Berson purchased their 1904 Craftsman home in Pompton Lakes 27 years ago, they were charmed by the high, coffered ceilings, the deep woodwork that framed the doorways and wrapped around the fireplace, and the built-in corner cabinet in the dining room. They were just a little disappointed that all of this trim was painted white.

“We wanted to bring it back to the



PHOTOS BY EUGENE PARCIASEPE JR.

The Bersons' living room fireplace features a deep, wrap-around mantel ideal for displaying art.

natural wood, but there must have been eight layers of paint, so we gave up,” admitted Jill.

“It would have been a huge job,” her husband agreed, “and we weren't even sure what was underneath.”

The small dining room cabinet now holds barware, displayed behind the upper glass doors. “It used to have a heating pipe running through it,” Rich recalled. “In the old days, they tried to hide

pipes wherever they could.”

The living room fireplace, with a doorway on either side, features an unusual wrap-around mantle. The Bersons have taken advantage of this space to showcase family photos over the years. At the moment, it holds a single Lladro porcelain figurine, because the house now is on the market. (For real estate inquiry, contact Phyllis Fields, sales associate with Coldwell Banker Realtors, 973-694-8000, Ext. 178.)

Craftsman houses from the early 20th century often feature unusual built-ins, such as this corner cabinet in the dining room of the Berson home in Pompton Lakes. The glass-front upper portion shows off a collection of vintage barware. Although the Bersons were disappointed that the woodwork and built-ins in their home had been painted, sometimes that approach is best if the wood is not top-quality or has been patched over the decades.



Just Add TLC

A home's original built-ins may just need a little repair or tweaking to give them a new lease on life.

“Sometimes, if there's a radiator or baseboard heater behind the built-in, they put a grate on it and over time the heat dries the wood out,” explained Mike Alleva of Alleva Construction, Hackensack (alleva-construction.com). “We'll have to rebuild the portion where the heat comes through. Also, old hinges on a (cabinet) door can deteriorate it so that we have to rebuild the door.

“If the glass on a door is broken, we may replace it or get rid of it altogether and make a solid door. We'll do a nice raised or recessed-panel door, depending on the detail the homeowners want.”

When built-in shelving covers a large part of a wall, Alleva sometimes has given customers a pull-out shelf to hold a TV, and put cabinet doors over it.

He noted that his most common request, regarding built-ins, is to make the fixed shelves adjustable. “We'll drill holes and put in pins so they can be moved,” he said.

Whether wooden built-ins will be painted or stained affects the cost of the job — “Stained is more expensive, because we have to use oak, birch or another hard wood.” Less-expensive wood and patch jobs need to be camouflaged by a couple of coats of paint, Alleva said.

— EILEEN WATKINS

USES FOR BUILT-INS

- **Shallow shelving** — Holds CDs, DVDs, decorative plates (displayed on end) and collectibles
- **Deep shelving** — In the family room, can hold electronic equipment; add solid cabinet doors to store toys, linens or tools. Near the kitchen or bar, outfit a shelf or two with wine racks.
- **Window seat** — Can hide bed linens and bath towels. If none exists, add a hinged lid on top
- **Columned room divider** — If lower wall is solid, retool it for greater function with bookshelves or cabinets.