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REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

Murphy Beds: The Old-School Space Saver Is Back in Style

With trustier mechanisms and chic ways to hide, a sitcom staple joins the 21st century



NARROW-MINDED In a San Francisco home office, a center rail breaks up the expanse of cabinets (above) that frequently gives away the presence of a Murphy bed. Designer Jennifer Jones, of Niche Interiors, also clad the slim bed box and frame in walnut veneer and added a collapsible reading light, integrating the bed into the design of the room when it's revealed as well. PHOTO: THOMAS KUOH

By *Kathryn O'Shea-Evans*
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ALISON MAZUREK was residing in a 600-square-foot apartment in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband and their infant when she realized their cradle-in-the-living-room subsistence was untenable. “We need our life back! We need to be able to have friends over!” she recalled thinking. So she gave her son the lone bedroom and invested in something that until recently conjured a Marx Brothers routine: a Murphy bed for the main room that would virtually disappear against her dove-colored walls when shut. “We never looked back,” said Ms. Mazurek, who runs the blog “600 Square Feet and a Baby.”

As the word “micro-apartment” enters the lexicon, designers are employing the hideaway bed that time forgot. New York designer Alan Tanksley, a fan of the space-saving gambit, said that when he broaches the idea with clients, “I start off by saying ‘Don’t fire me, keep your mind open! How about using a bed that *folds down*?’” Resource Furniture—a New York-based company which sells streamlined, custom wall beds that start at \$5,900, from Clei (an Italian maker since 1962)—reports a 20% jump in year-to-year sales. And the beds are not just for urbanites crammed in Manhattan walk-ups: Resource Furniture has shipped the foldaway berths to 34 states in 2018.



GLASS ACTION Impressed by new hide-a-bed technology, designer Jenny Kirschner had a mill worker install a mechanism from Murphybeds.com behind built-ins. "It's not the spring-loaded, old-fashioned kind that can close up on you," said Ms. Kirschner, who lives in a former Brooklyn printing factory with 30-foot ceilings. Glass walls add some privacy but allow natural light in, and drapery dupioni silk in taffy pink hides a desk on wheels. PHOTO: RYAN DAUSCH(TOP); CHRIS MOTTALINI

The secret sleepsack was invented in the late Victorian era by San Franciscan William Lawrence Murphy, who lived in a studio apartment. As lore has it, according to New York School of Interior Design professor Judith Gura, to entertain any self-respecting woman, Mr. Murphy had to hide his bed to make a parlor of the room he slept in. During the early 1900s, the covert bed became associated with shoestring urban living, and the reputation stuck. "When clients brought up the idea of a Murphy bed five years ago, I kind of cringed a little," said New York designer Gideon Mendelson. He's since come around, recently convincing client Amanda Wasserstrom to approve a double bed that retreats seamlessly into the slate-blue cupboards of her Brooklyn home office. "There really wasn't an option," said Ms. Wasserstrom, who admits she considered Murphy beds "a '70s, bachelor-pad thing," a la Dudley Moore's deeply embarrassing version in the 1978 Goldie Hawn movie "Foul Play." Still, she added, "the room was so small, if you put a sofa in you wouldn't be able to use the desk."

Jennifer Jones of San Francisco's Niche Interiors said saving even a few inches can make all the difference in a floor plan: The cupboards Murphy beds require "only take up 18 to 20 inches of depth off of a wall; a sofa bed is at least 36 inches." Mr. Tanksley has seen traditional guest rooms become catchalls—"just stacks of clothes"—when they could be used as a study or exercise room if not for the space-sucking bed.

Murphy beds' unfolded mattress also can make the oft-lumpy sofa bed less appealing. "Pullout couches have gotten a bit more comfortable in recent years, but there's something about having an actual mattress to sleep on," said Brittany Zwickl, principal designer of West Hollywood's Studio Life/Style. Ms. Zwickl installed a white oak bookcase that hides a bed in a client's Los Angeles pool house.



FITS RIGHT IN In a client's Los Angeles pool house, Brittany Zwickl, principal designer of West Hollywood's Studio Life/Style, included a double Murphy bed. Elegantly camouflaged within a white-oak built-in cabinet when it's stowed, the bed appears part of the original design of the room when open, in part because the shiplap that panels the walls and the back of the bookshelves continues above the head of the bed. PHOTO: STEPHEN BUSKEN

As with telephones and cars, the technology has improved. Now you can even tuck reading lamps and bedside tables within. “I was pretty surprised how easy it goes up and down,” said Mr. Mendelson, who concealed a Murphy mechanism behind custom walnut paneling with adjacent bookshelves on the Upper West Side. “I was expecting a sort of clunker.”

Ultimately, designers select a hide-a-bed because it can blend into a room's architecture, said Ms. Jones, who designed a particularly discreet one into a filmmaker's San Francisco home office. The goals: Free up floor space for a big drafting desk on which the client lays out film stills, while allowing the client to accommodate frequent weekend guests. To create shelf space above the bed's cupboard to display a taxidermy collection, Ms. Jones tucked in a twin bed horizontally instead of vertically. “We painted all the elements of the room the same moody blue, Benjamin Moore's Black Pepper, and you'd never know there's a bed in there.”

Beyond the design's functional and aesthetic advantages, Ms. Mazurek, an admitted slob of sorts, exalts another unexpected perk of a Murphy. “With a wall bed, I have to make my bed every morning or I don't have a living room.”