

The New Living Room

Grab a throw
and cozy up
with a good book
in the home's
newest sanctuary—
the library

By Joanne Furio

In 2001, the living room was proclaimed dead. In its stead: the library. Look around you. First-floor space in new homes that once would have been used for dens or guestrooms is instead being turned into libraries. In existing homes, libraries are being configured from underused living rooms, even dining rooms. As it meant in days gone by, taking refuge from the world once again means curling up with a good book.

"There's a sort of uncertainty about the future that makes you want to be home with family," says Sandra Steele Schneider of Sandra Steele Schneider Interiors in Bronxville, who has overseen some 20 library conversions. "People are going into their nests and creating a feeling of coziness and comfort—a haven."

Suzanne Novik of Suzanne Novik Interiors, Inc., in

Weston, CT, agrees. "Homeowners like to feel safe and warm in a cozy environment," she says. "And libraries are very warm, huggy spaces." Novik has created libraries in new houses and converted living rooms into libraries in existing homes, mostly in Fairfield County.

In Chappaqua, interior designer Carolyn Coffman of Palladio Interiors is quite familiar with the library trend. She and her husband, architect Wally Toscano, have built a 15-by-20-foot library addition to their house. "Living rooms have become obsolete," Coffman says. "It's the room you walk past to get to other rooms in the house. In homes where I've turned living rooms into library spaces, the library becomes a viable room in the household, instead of this white elephant that nobody uses."



Culin & Colella, architectural millworkers and cabinetmakers in Mamaroneck, built this cherry library in New Canaan, CT.

Chapter One: New Libraries

IN NEW CONSTRUCTION, INTERIOR DECORATORS report, homeowners are asking for libraries in addition to casual great rooms and formal living rooms they can use for entertaining. "These are very large homes," says Novik, who notes that they average around 7,000 square feet.

In one such house in Greenwich, CT, Novik designed a new 19-by-23-foot library with what she describes as an "Old-World quality." The wood Novik chose for the library is cherry. "It's very elegant and

skirt and piled high with books in the corner. The rooms could easily be converted back into dining rooms: Simply pull the table into the middle of the room, lose the books and add leaves and chairs.

As these examples illustrate, many home libraries are being used not only for reading but for other activities. As multi-purpose rooms, libraries often include audio and video equipment that easily can be hidden behind built-in cabinetry. Interior designer Coffman has even included pool tables or other game tables in some libraries.

barn that is attached to the main house into a library, and she used the barn siding to make paneling and bookcases.

In her own home library, which boasts an 18-foot-tall beamed ceiling, she created a rustic look, which she combined with traditional furnishings. Wooden slats that were affixed to the ceiling look like barn beams, while an old wagon wheel that was converted into a light fixture creates a folksy focal point. Cowhides layered over a seagrass carpet accentuate the rustic look and add textural contrast. The room is



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(Left): The library conversion Sandra Steele Schneider did for Walter Isaacson in Bronxville. (Opposite): Carolyn Coffman's conversion.

warm,” she says, from the coffered ceiling to the paneled walls and floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Located off the living room, the library serves as both an office and a sitting room. “It is a separate room used as quiet space and as a place to do occasional work,” Novik explains. A pair of armchairs faces the sofa, but can be turned to face the large desk in the event of a meeting.

Use It or Lose It

IN EXISTING HOMES, LIBRARIES ARE BEING created from unused or underused space. Schneider has turned many Manhattan dining rooms into libraries by adding bookcases and a round table, covered with a big

“It becomes a room the whole family accesses,” Coffman says. “It becomes another family room.”

Take the Coffman-Toscano library. Even though the family has a den, a large kitchen and a formal living room, their library has become the center of the house. “It's where we spend most of our time,” Coffman says. The living room, alas, has become an extension of the foyer.

A Matter of Style

WHILE MANY OF US MAY ENVISION A LIBRARY as a dark, wood-paneled room with faded Oriental rugs and bulky leather furniture, libraries come in a variety of looks, says Coffman. In Warren, CT, she converted a

large enough to accommodate a baby grand piano and plenty of plush furniture that's deep, overstuffed and “real comfortable,” says Coffman.

Building La Bibliotheque

WHEN CREATING A LIBRARY OF ONE'S OWN, the most important elements are the bookcases; virtually everything else is optional. If you're concerned about permanently altering a room by installing built-ins, you might consider freestanding wooden bookcases to line a wall. If you don't have a large collection of books, or would like an airier look, consider freestanding wood or glass étagères, which are open on all four sides; they can be arranged around the furniture,





A dramatic curved wall adds architectural interest to this Greenwich, CT, library built by Culin & Colella.

says Schneider. But if you're going to incur the expense of built-ins, go for wood.

Built-ins can range from \$5,000 for painted pine to \$100,000 for "fabulous mahogany with trimming and cabinetry below," reports interior designer Sandra Steele Schneider. If you add paneling, you could end up spending \$20,000 on a painted look for a 14-by-18-foot room, and up to \$200,000 for a 25-by-18-foot room or for finer woods like oak. Reclaimed wood, such as chestnut from old barns, creates "a fabulous look if money is not an object," says Coffman.

Lighter woods, such as maples and burls, and white-painted wood are usually more conducive to contemporary décors—but not always. Schneider is creating a traditional library in West Hartford, CT, using English pine, which, she notes, has a light yellow color that is "neutral, yet warm."

White bookcases make a room lighter and brighter. "Especially for young families, stained wood is too serious," Schneider says. For biographer and journalist Walter Isaacson, former chairman of CNN and former managing editor of *Time*, who is today president of the Aspen Institute, Schneider

turned a first-floor room in the home he shared with his wife and daughter in Bronxville before they moved out of town into a library to house his substantial collection of approximately 1,000 books. Although the floor-to-ceiling bookcases fill three walls, because they are white, Schneider says, they don't overpower the room. "A room doesn't have to be heavy just because it's filled with books," she says.

For those looking for a hint of color, Coffman recommends rubbing paint into the grain. In her own home, she had medium-oak paneling in her library rubbed

Decorating the Book-Lined Interior

Decorating can be tricky enough in a "regular" room, but when you encircle a room with books, new challenges arise. Here are some ways to tackle those challenges:

- **If you choose white bookcases**, paint the backs the color of the walls. "That way, you'll get a continuity of color around the room," says Sandra Steele Schneider. When the backs of the bookcases are white, "it breaks up the room."
- **Treat walls of books as ordinary walls.** "When the whole room becomes books, then books become the wall surface," Schneider says. You can hang pictures on bookcases and affix sconces to them "to add a nice glow to the walls."
- **Include architectural extras that add interest.** Consider a fireplace or window seats. If the room cannot accommodate a real fireplace, Schneider recommends a faux fireplace, complete with logs, rolled up newspaper and andirons "to add that psychological warmth."
- **Choose adjustable shelving.** It's impossible to predict how your book collection will fit within permanent shelves. "Have your shelving adjustable to allow flexibility," Carolyn Coffman advises.
- **Deviate from the straight and narrow.** Don't display books like the stacks at the public library. "It's more interesting visually to alternate between horizontal and vertical," says Coffman. Place oversized volumes on their sides and top with a bowl or other accessory.
- **Make it dual-purpose.** Get a sleeper sofa for extra guests or install a Murphy bed behind the paneling, as Schneider has done in a client's house. Hide a home theater or computer in the built-ins, or place a chess or backgammon set on a coffee table for quiet play.
- **Make it personal.** Display pottery, photographs or other personal artifacts alongside your beloved books. "It's not just about books," Coffman says, "but interspersing all the elements of your life."

with white paint. For the truly daring, brighter, bolder or more intense color can be added. Interior designer Suzanne Novik recently covered the walls of a Greenwich library with a burgundy-colored, felt-like billiard fabric—not your typical library wallcovering.

Fabrics and Furniture

BECAUSE LIBRARIES ARE USUALLY DESIGNED with wood, Novik recommends adding jewel tones to the room to heighten the warmth. In the fabric-covered library she designed, she balanced the burgundy walls with sage and olive upholstery.

Especially in older homes in which libraries were often built with oak or mahogany wood, the room can look like a dungeon, given the combination of dark walls with dark antiques and rich hues.

Novik suggests light accessories to accent the room.

In the "Old-World" library she designed in Greenwich, Novik included several fun and whimsical touches to the room, which was dominated by traditional furnishings. For example, an antique globe stand void of its spheres was replaced with a glass top, making for unusual end tables. Novik upholstered traditional-looking chairs with funky faux leopard fabric. To lighten the dark, grassy green palette, Novik added a pale butternut. "Warm and rich shouldn't mean stately and predictable," she says.

Whatever ambience you choose to create, a home library should be comfortable, a place where people want to be. "Everybody loves our library," Coffman adds. "The bad thing about it is, when people come over, I can never get them to leave." **H&G**



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