

# Domestic Details

by Gordon Tully

Last month I described the major planning decisions — the strategy — behind the renovation of my recently purchased old home. This column describes the detailed planning of space — the tactics — in several key rooms.

Working intensely with the client (myself) on this 1700 square foot house taught me some important lessons about small-house planning. In a big house with lots of space, anyone's belongings can be accommodated, and a quick generic solution can work. In a small house, the design must closely match the living habits and possessions of the occupants, and client-specific planning becomes much more important. The sad irony, of course, is that the budget for small jobs rarely holds enough design money to do this.

## Master Bedroom

We chose an 8 x 20-foot room, entirely finished in darkly stained grooved boards and a dark pine floor, with the entry door near the middle of the long side for our master bedroom. Next to the door is a 2-foot-high triangular enclosure, which forms the headroom over the stair below. At first glance, the room seemed almost useless: There was no room for anything, let alone a bed.

But there was no reason the bed (a 6-inch mattress on solid core doors) couldn't partly cover the enclosure. This required the bed to be extra high — about 28 inches — and since it is 80 inches long,

only 16 inches is left between it and the outside wall. The rest of the exposed cover of the stair table below became a stepped bedside table. The height of the bed turns out to be wonderful both functionally and aesthetically (see Figure 1). It looks good, it is easy to get in and out of (and more comfortable to sit on than a low bed), and there is space beneath for drawer units in which to store out-of-season clothing. The tight squeeze at the foot of the bed is a compromise, but a minor one. It would be no problem at all if the dogs didn't insist on sleeping there, in the cool under the windows.

Fitting in a closet required more compromises, as we couldn't accommodate all our clothes; and of course we had to give up the idea of a luxurious dressing room/closet. The closet wall is made of four six-panel doors stained dark to match the room. The two doors attached to the walls are fixed, while the two center ones slide outside the fixed ones, so they won't catch the clothes when they open. There was no reason to make the fixed doors operable, since our dressers are in front of them. Though not ideal, the closets works fine. We made much use of various closet gizmos to create extra hanging and hook space.

At the other end of the room we put bookcases, again stained to match. With sliding doors at one end, built-in bookcases at the other, and reading lights over the bed, the room seems even more like a cozy ship's cabin. It is a constant pleasure, something completely out of the ordinary — a place we would never have had the imagination or courage to design from scratch.

## A Home Office

My wife's study, which she uses daily, is in the smallest upstairs bedroom. After many, many plans, she came up with the idea of putting her antique desk across a corner, so that the surrounding built-in work counters would be within easy reach (see Figure 2). From my experience building architectural desks in small offices, I have learned that lining the walls with desks is the best strategy. They must be deep enough to hide ordinary 28 inch-high file cases.

The result is as nice looking as it is efficient. The three-dimensional

reality is a complete surprise after looking at the two-dimensional plan, which looks cramped and awkward. Part of the reason for the 3-D success is that the diagonal of the desk and the wall behind it makes design sense out of the otherwise incongruous slope in the ceiling formed by the gambrel roof. The diagonal wall also encloses the cast iron radiator, which would have been hard to move. (We provided grilles in the new walls to release the heat away from the desk.) There is still plenty of room for a large wardrobe on one wall (not shown), where we store the clothes that don't fit in the bedroom closet.

## Guest/TV Room

We created a multifunction room in what was once the dining room, between the kitchen and living room. It had to serve as an occasional guest room, TV room, music room, and library (see Figure 3). The design was simple, but hard to carry out — we needed to stretch as many bookcases as possible around three walls of the room, add a TV cabinet opposite the sofa bed, and fit the upright piano on another wall, adjacent to part of the bookcase.

I carried the bookcases to the ceiling and detailed them imitating the mock Craftsman-style woodwork on the existing stairway. On one side of the wide door to the living room, I made the shelving 2 inches shallower, to create a pocket for a double-width sliding door made of two 26-inch-wide panel doors cut down and doweled together. A full-width door would have stuck out into the room too far at the other opening, so I had the door cut in two and double-hinged (a trick I learned from a client). This is not a bifold — the hinge pins are all on the same side of the door. To make the door rigid when necessary, a wooden bar, anchored at only one end, swings up from one leaf and drops into a slotted cleat on the other leaf (see Figure 4).

For privacy, we added some economical white-painted wooden shutters to cover the lower window sash. We used a popular ready-made brand, and while they look all right superficially, they do not bear close scrutiny. A new sofa bed, some redecorating, and we have a wonderful TV-reading-music room that can also

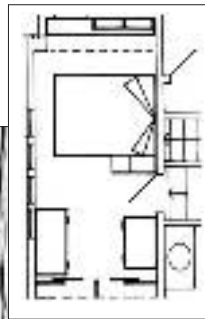


Figure 1. In the master bedroom, a custom platform bed and new shelving help make the most of the long, narrow space. The "bedside table" is the covered enclosure for a stairway running below.

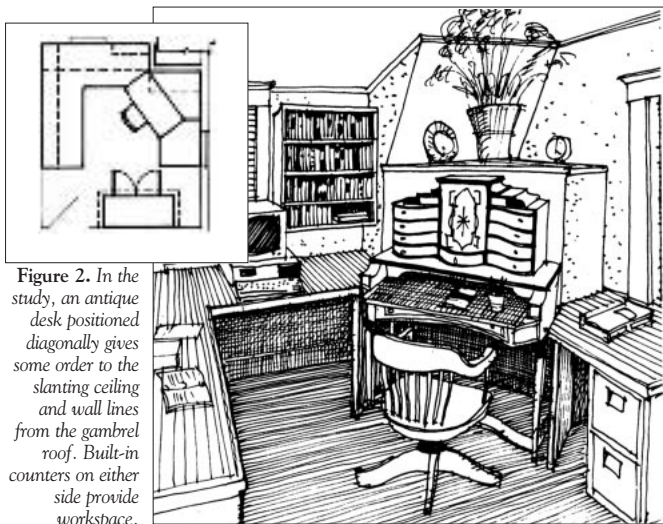


Figure 2. In the study, an antique desk positioned diagonally gives some order to the slanting ceiling and wall lines from the gambrel roof. Built-in counters on either side provide workspace.

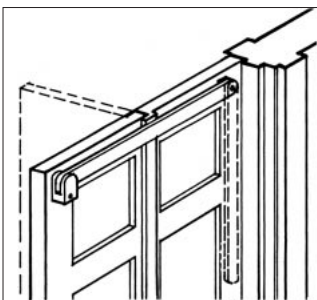
**Figure 3.** In the TV/guest room, a custom pocket door (made from two doors doweled together at their edges) slides behind the built-in bookcases to provide privacy.



accommodate our occasional guests. Believe it or not, we also keep the Nordic Track ski exerciser in there; it gets folded up and put in the corner between uses.

### Know Your Client

Perhaps because of the nautical feel of our bedroom, living in our new house reminds me forcibly of living on a boat. In the design of a boat or Pullman car, much ingenuity is needed to pack a great deal into a small space. Using such intensely organized space requires discipline — vigilance is the price



**Figure 4.** The door between the kitchen and TV room folds back on itself to save space; a slat of wood swings up and falls into a cleat to make the door rigid.

of neatness, as well as of freedom. Yet when everything has a place close at hand, cleaning up is easy and one does it more often. The intrinsic satisfaction of putting something away in its special place balances the inconvenience of having to move and replace item A in order to put away item B.

Boats, pullman cars, and airplanes are beautifully and efficiently designed for human use, because the designs are repetitive. Hundreds of similar or identical examples are built from each set of plans, so more design time can be amortized. Houses pose a special problem, because each must accommodate an individual's unique possessions and living patterns.

So here is the challenge for the '90s for the home-design profession: Help homeowners improve their living space by focusing your creative efforts on small design problems, and do it economically. Sadly, the economics of the design profession drive us exactly in the opposite direction: providing design services only for large, expensive projects. ■

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