

STORAGE

The power of nooks and crannies

Architects are discovering the virtue of building small niches and alcoves into clients' homes

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Whether a house is 500 or 5,000 square feet, storage space is always at a premium. It's one of the reasons that goldsmith-turned-architect Cindy Rendely will often build niches in clients' homes. To her, carving out a nook is a great way to add storage without unnecessarily chewing up floor space.

Rendely's alcoves aren't just utilitarian. Sometimes the cavities house books, bath towels or even shampoo, but they can also act as the architectural equivalent of a highlighter, underscoring something important – a work of art, perhaps, or a collection of figurines. "They provide a moment for viewing something special," she notes. To heighten the effect, she might place the niche somewhere highly visible – the top of a staircase or the end of a living room – and draw attention to it with built-in spotlights or elegant materials such as oak shelves.

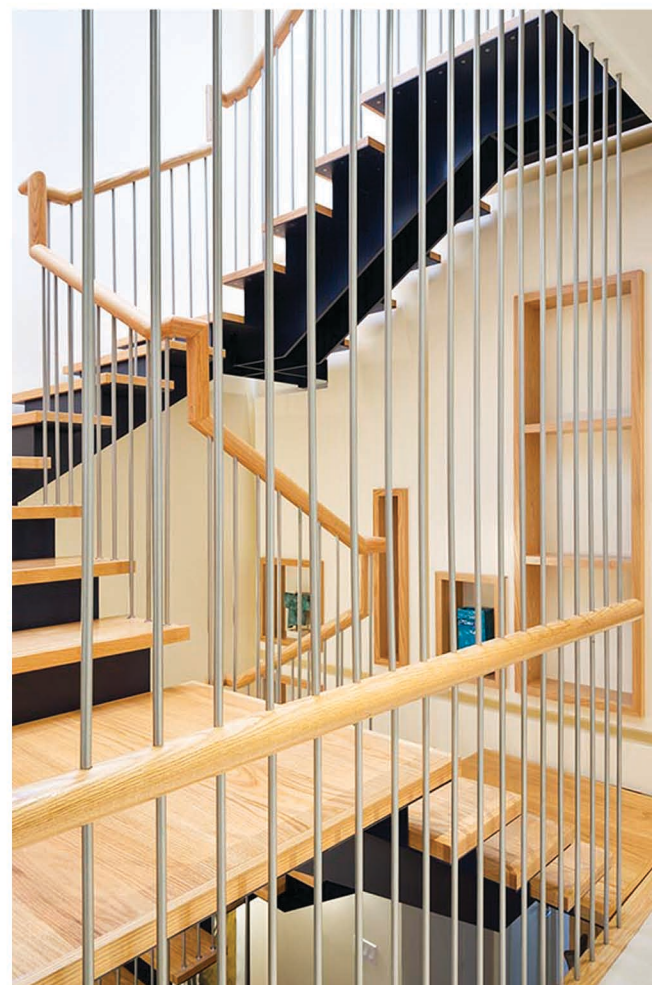
Architect Heather Dubbeldam uses niches as a showcasing tool as well. When she and colleague Kristi Morrison designed a house for a cookbook author, the kitchen, naturally, required special attention.

Dubbeldam and Morrison provided ample room for gadgets and tools by covering a whole wall in custom cabinetry. To break up the monotony of the cupboard doors and drawers, they also included a band of spot-lit niches. The homeowner rotates what she displays to keep her work area feeling fresh – her extensive collection of Pez dispensers adds a cheeky punch of colour.

One of the benefits of niches, according to Dubbeldam, is that they can make a room feel larger, "since the openings give additional depth to the space." That's especially true if the nook punches through a wall entirely, something architect Paul Raff did in his award-winning Cascade House, where he perforated a three-storey slate wall that runs through the centre of the home.

Raff planned the cut-outs thoughtfully. On the upper level, the nooks are sized to provide interesting look-throughs and to hold ornaments. In the basement-level kids' area, the holes are large enough to kick a soccer ball – or run a train track – through. The perforations create a sense of airiness by allowing natural light to penetrate deep into the house.

One of the challenges of adding niches is that the cavity needs to



have enough depth to carve into. Standard four-inch- to five-inch-thick slabs are too narrow to create anything worthwhile. In their Alpine Chalet, Toronto-based Atelier Kastelic Buffey turned the often-underused space beneath a fireplace – a spot that naturally has a lot of depth – into a row of elegant storage and display shelves. Without the recesses, it would just be a big blank gap. With them, it's an architectural showpiece.

Clockwise from top left: a basement play area in Paul Raff's Cascade House; niches by the stairs in a house designed by Cindy Rendely; display spaces in a Heather Dubbeldam house; a nook for firewood beside a fireplace.

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