

HIDDEN ROOMS

What lies behind that bookcase? Only the cabinetmaker knows

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BRUCE WAYNE, D/B/A BATMAN, HAD ONE. SCOOBY Doo and the gang were always stumbling into them. Even King Tut had a few, until archaeologist Howard Carter came along and told the rest of the world about them.

We've long been fascinated by secret

rooms, and nowadays some homeowners are asking for them by name. Architects and builders are learning to create a little mystery and whimsy for clients who combine substantial means with a sense of fun.

When it came time for one mystery-minded couple to build a new home in Lincoln, Massachusetts, their friends all urged them to "do something fun with it." They had been hosting mystery dinners (in which guests play roles and try to solve a murder that purportedly occurred on the premises)



IN A CLASSICALLY decorated second-floor study, shelves full of mysteries and other books conceal another sort of mystery: a hidden passageway. There's no secret catch or button, but it takes a hefty pull to the right on one of the shelves to slide the heavy unit on a built-in track about two feet into a pocket within the central column.



at a Vermont inn for years, so a concealed passage had instant appeal. “They loved being involved in the building process,” says Jim Catlin, of Woodmeister Master Builders, the Holden, Massachusetts, firm that built the house’s millwork. “They got right into the idea with the architect and us.” Mike Gorman, of Gorman Richardson Architects in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, designed a hidden stairway that links the second-floor study to a hallway closet on the main floor—allowing for stealthy exits and entries during mystery dinners to come.

Catlin says Woodmeister has built several other secret rooms lately. Some customers desire a purely fun feature, like the stairway. Others are more concerned with security. As featured in the 2002 Jodie Foster movie of that name, a “panic room” or safe room is a place to which a home’s occupants can retreat in the face of a house invasion. “We’ve lined these with bulletproof panels and installed satellite phones,” Catlin says. “I’d say ninety percent of the safe rooms I’ve heard of are built in response to the question ‘How can I protect my kids if necessary?’” Finally, there’s what he calls the “cool factor.” Says Catlin, “These folks have grand homes and want to be able to say, ‘Hey, look at what I’ve got.’” Of course, that means letting others in on the secret. Catlin helped build what he calls a “man town” on the other side of a home-office bookcase. “It’s a mahogany-paneled library complete with its own ventilation system. The man of the house likes to go in there with his pals and smoke cigars,” he says.

Secret rooms require a disguised entry, usually a bookcase or cabinet that swings when pushed or pulled at the right spot. Where a regular door is 1¾ inches thick, swinging bookcases and other concealing woodwork can be 12 to 16 inches deep and loaded with heavy stuff. For another hidden room at the end of a hallway, Catlin built a niche complete with bookshelves and a cabinet and capped with decorative shell molding. “We always use heavy-duty top and bottom pivot hinges, the kind you see holding glass doors on commercial buildings,” he says. “And you have to make sure to build the back edge skinnier, so the thing can swing shut.” Most such entries swing inward, so that the seam around the swinging element can be disguised with casings, which stay fixed in front of the door.

Not every hidden space is a budget-buster. Catlin likes to build a little hiding place into the blind corner of a client’s



BEHIND THE SLIDING bookcase in this study is a built-in aluminum ladder that descends to a coat closet below. A light switch is conveniently positioned on the wall at left, and a handle on the back of the shelf unit allows whoever enters to close the portal behind them, leaving no trace.

master closet, for example. “And I always offer kids some kind of a secret cubby for their rooms,” he says—after clearing it with their parents, of course.

The pleasing nature of a secretspace is no secret, and if you can’t build one yourself, you can visit one. Alex Mason, curator of Salem’s House of the Seven Gables, reports that Caroline Emmerton, the preservationist who restored the building in the early 1900s, wanted to attract tourists so as to fund her other philanthropic works. Working from an anecdote she’d heard about the house’s history, she had a secret stairway built that starts from the back of a closet next to a first-floor fireplace. “She hid the door behind solid brick veneer,” says Mason, “and ran the twisting steps up through a brick tunnel all the way to the third floor. The visitors absolutely love it.” ■

While some people want a hidden “panic room” for security, others request concealed rooms purely for fun, for the chance to show off the “secret” and say, “Hey, look what I’ve got.”