

## Real Estate

# The Shelf Life of Home Libraries

There's a new term for the enduring pleasure of being surrounded by bound volumes: "book-wrap."

By JULIE LASKY

At the turn of the millennium, Reid Byers, a computer systems architect, set out to build a private library at his home in Princeton, N.J. Finding few books on library architecture that were not centuries old and in a dead or mangled language, he took the advice of a neighbor across the street, the novelist Tom Morrison.

Mr. Morrison "once famously said if there is a book you want to read and it doesn't exist, then you must write it," revealed Mr. Byers. So, in a video chat from his current home, in Portland, Maine.

The project stretched over a generation and culminated this year in a profusely illustrated, Latin-styled and yet remarkably stylish book called "The Private Library: The History of the Architecture and Furnishings of the Domestic Bookroom," published by Octopus Press.

The aptly named text is an ambivalent treatise for book owners. As the publisher's social and economic disruptions have changed people's lives, some are questioning whether it is worth dragging out their collections. Given the inflated costs of real estate and the capacity of readers to hold thousands of titles, many of their previous floor and wall space could be put to other uses.

Lisa Jacobs, the founder and chief executive of Imagine It! Design, a home organizing firm in New York City, said that out of hundreds of projects in the past few years, she could recall only three requests for organizing books. In one of those examples, the arranged books were treated as a backdrop — to be admired but not read. "The clientele that has collected books through the years are not as numerous for us," she said.

And yet there are clear benefits in a passion to having a private sanctuary programmed for eras. "The tactile connection to books and the need for places of refuge in the home, both for work and for personal well-being, have made libraries a renewed focus in residential design," said Andrew Copley, the president of Historical Concepts, an architecture firm with offices in Atlanta and New York.

Margot Morrison, who sells real estate for Compass in Brooklyn and Manhattan, has seen well-groomed libraries in brownstones help set off bidding wars. "Even when I stage a house, I put books in there," he said. In "The Private Library," Mr. Byers goes to the heart of why physical books continue to beguile us, individually and collectively. They are frequently useful or delightful, but it is when books are displayed on a mantel that they really work wonders. Covering the walls of a room, piled up to the ceiling and creating the breath of generations, they nourish the senses, stir memories and relieve distress.

"Entering our library should feel like stepping into a hot tub, strutting into a stage door, emerging into the orchestra pit, or entering a chamber of curiosities, the club, the circus, our cabin on an outboard yacht, the house of an old friend," he writes. "It is a snug berth, and it is a rooming back to center."

Mr. Byers coined a term — "book-wrap" — to describe the exhilarating comfort of a well-stocked library. The lively spelling is in alliteration but an efficient packing of meaning into a tight space (which, when you think of it, also describes many libraries). To be surrounded by books is to be held tight in an enclosed circle and to experience the rigors of being transported to other worlds.

So how many books does it take to feel book-wrap? Mr. Byers cited a common belief that 1,000 is the minimum in any self-respecting home library. Then he quickly divided that number in half. Five hundred books ensure that a room "will begin to feel like a library," he said. And even that number is negotiable. The library he kept at the end of his book on an ornate street in Vienna, he said, was "very highly valued, though it probably didn't have 30 books in it."

"What's five times 40?" Alice Waters, the chef and food activist, recently asked. (The question was rhetorical.) "Five hundred, 400, 600, 800," she calculated, apparently since the bookkeeper involved had been adding up their contents (she was speaking on the phone). "And then probably another 800," she said, referring to other rooms in her Berkeley, Calif., bungalow.

Yes, Ms. Waters, 77, who spends a restaurant in Los Angeles called Lulu last month, is officially book-wrap. She owns hundreds of cookbooks organized by cuisine, as well as volumes on farming, nutrition, education, environmental calamity, victory gardens, chef memoirs, French gastronomic terminology, art, architecture, design and fiction. The author of more than a dozen of her own books, she recently published "We Are What We Eat: A Slow Food Manifesto," written with Bob Carron and Cristina Mueller.

Taking inventory in the room where she works, she checked three canon bookshelves last year. Mr. Waters verbally enacted the capricious browsing habits of a book lover on the loose, for whom all authors are alive, even when they are not. Her references skipped from the journalist Michael Pollan to the graphic and product designer Thor Kilman to the environmentalist poet and novelist Wendell Berry to Patti Smith. (Ms. Waters bought 25 copies of the rock star's memoir "Just Kids" to give away as Christmas gifts.)

She uses a library ladder — her shelves rise that high. "But I'm not a reader; I'm a fan person," she said. "I like to be able to pull out a book and read a passage and be



MR. BYERS' LIBRARY, WHICH HE BUILT FOR HIS NEW YORK HOME.



Alice Waters, the chef and food activist, estimates that two-thirds of the LWB or so books in her Berkeley, Calif., home, above, have something to do with food. "I have my own strange organization," Ms. Waters, left, said. "But I pretty much know where everything is." Alexander Ansolina, bottom left, designed a library wall that reaches 13 feet from floor to ceiling in his leased apartment in Manhattan.



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inspired." Reader or not, Ms. Waters's spartan-like style of dipping and dipping is one of the great joys of library ownership, in Mr. Byers's view. "The ability to browse among your books generates something completely new," he said. "I like to think of it as a guaranteed cure for boredom."

Alexander Ansolina's loft in the NoLita neighborhood in Manhattan is not technically book-wrap, yet Mr. Byers was almost surely cut from the book. Chief of operations, brand and strategy at Ansolina, the publishing company founded by his parents, Prosper and Marjorie Ansolina, he recently designed a library of 400 books that fills a wall of the unit, clear to the 13-foot ceiling.

"Every day when I wake up, this is the first thing I see," Mr. Ansolina, 28, said of his collection, which is dominated by glamorous coffee-table books — the company's specialty — and in visible from most spots in the one-bedroom apartment. Because he leases the unit, he had to erect the solid walnut shelves without drilling into the wall; they are supported by posts compressed between floor and ceiling.

Mr. Ansolina designs private libraries for other people, too, and said he treated each as a mirror of the owner's personality, giving weight to both books and objects. Gazing into Mr. Ansolina's own reflected depths, one finds whimsical Italian porcelain monkeys and rare antique brass items, a miniature statue group of The Three Graces and an ailing juniper bonsai tree that raised a sigh from him when its condition was pointed out. (He acknowledged that it really should not be indoors.)

"I want it to be alive," he said of his display, meaning not just organic but changeable. "To me, a library is never done."

It is easy to fall into a common trap, figuring out exactly where a jumble of books ends and a library begins, but we have clear ideas of what a room designated as a library should look like. You can thank the English country house for that, Mr. Byers said.

"Libraries always refer to earlier libraries," he said. Influencers include the 40-foot-long Italian Renaissance room with a covered vault built in the mid-15th century by Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, and, to a lesser extent, the bookcase in the home of the British diarist Samuel Pepys, who died in 1703. Asked to describe what the library of the future might look like, Mr. Byers thought of a place of a room of 18th-century style in England, the setting of the television series "Downton Abbey."

Indeed, private libraries now so closely to convention that it is often hard to say at a glance what any particular unit was created — even roughly. In this way, libraries are the opposite of kitchens, which a practiced eye can clue to within half a decade.

"It is often a very cozy room, or a room that has a deeper color sometimes, if painted," said Gil Schuler III, a New York architect, of the libraries he routinely incorporates into residential projects. (However, when Mr. Schuler added a small library to his own retreat in Maine several years ago, he covered the walls in sheets of oak plywood rather than traditional paneling, to create an effect that was "beautiful but not hunky.")

Even a postmodern sensation like the inventor and entrepreneur Jig & Walter's library, built in 2002 in Ridgefield, Conn., which is dedicated to the history of human imagination and had to be an M.C. Escher laboratory, with books stacked 28 shelves high — makes clear retrogressions in taste. Mr. Byers points out in his book "The recessed and paneled wall frames might have come from Kipling's," an English country estate in Derbyshire, designed in 1790 by Robert Adams. And "the barrel vault over the library distinctly recalls Stoneham," an 18th-century Palladian house in the English county of Wiltshire, he noted.

Which is not to say that if you build a library it will be used as one. Roger Seltzer, a partner at Robert A.M. Stern Architects, in New York City, typically designs houses that contain a main-floor room with bookshelves, which he described as "a more intimate type of living room." The space is labeled a library on the plans but might morph into a den, study, media room or — especially now — home office.

Conversely, rooms intended for nonbookish purposes are finding new lives as libraries. Mr. Schuler was not a maverick when he chose to put a sofa, bookcases and a television at one end of a dining room in one of his projects. "Dining rooms can be study rooms where there's a table and chairs and no other use," he said.

Mr. Byers writes: "Any large room looks wrong without the appropriate number of people in it. An unused living room looks empty. An empty hallway is absolutely creepy. It looks as if it is waiting desperately for something to happen. A library, on the other hand, is delightful when full but still especially attractive when empty." And master of books, he said, represent "delights that we hold in possibility" — the joy of being able to lift a hand and tap unexplored worlds. (Because who among us has read every single book in our libraries?) "I like to be in a room where I've read half the books, and I'd like there to be enough books that I can't possibly read them in my remaining years," he said.

Still, one can dream of completion, as Mr. Byers, who was ordained as a Presbyterian minister, apparently did when he inscribed this verse inside volumes from his own collection.

This book belongs to the  
Rev. Reid Byers.  
Who will hope to read it  
Before he expires.