



RIGHT: This attractive cherry wall unit features lighted bookcases and hidden storage. When the bed is down, the cabinetry provides a cozy surround.

photos courtesy of
ManhattanCabinetry.com

Flex Appeal

Multi-Purpose Guest Rooms

by Lisa Jensen

WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL MOST WELCOME when you're an overnight guest? I like being shown to a cozy, tucked-away room with a bed dressed up in catalog linens and a down duvet, adjoining a full bath stocked with fluffy towels and wrapped soaps.

Of course, before we built our new home, I showed my guests how to yank open the 10-year-old family room sleeper sofa, which usually spit out shriveled snacks from the last slumber party, a balled sock and a plastic limb or two from a Polly Pocket™.

When we built new, creating a comfortable guest room was foremost on my agenda. We merged our street-facing, main-floor, 13 x 14

square-foot den into a home office, library and guest room. Built-in shelves surrounding the large double window are filled with magazines, biographies, children's books and photos. Next to a new top-notch sleeper sofa (mattress tested to ensure comfort!), we placed a trunk-turned-coffee table that stores pillows and bedding. My desk and computer sit on the opposite wall, next to a great reading chair. The room can be closed off with French doors.

I'm pretty thrilled with this space – and so is my family. Everyone loves to read, study, work or watch a small T.V. here. Guests have found it cozy, private and convenient to our half bath.

"This type of flexibility is one of our primary focuses in our current designs," comments Rob Phillips, home plan designer for Design Basics. "Most of our new designs incorporate a flex room that can be used as a den, an office, a homeschool room or a craft room, on an everyday basis and also occasionally be used as a guest room."

MAKING SPACE A PLACE – OR TWO One of today's hottest new homebuilding trends, the "flex" room appeals to homebuyers who want to make the most of every square foot. Whether it's in a bonus room, loft, den, top floor of a Cape Cod, or finished lower level – whether it becomes a home theater,

music room, home office or place to meditate – this personalized space can be designed to lessen the chaos of daily life and accommodate your changing lifestyle.

THE PLUS?

Innovative and packed with surprises, today's flex room can offer perks that yesterday's overnight guests – as well as homeowners – never dreamed of.

Want to hide a home office that looks “all business?” Consider investing in multi-purpose furniture. The Closet Re-Organizer Company in Toronto (www.ClosetOrganizer.ca) offers a revolutionary custom cabinetry system that can incorporate a table, desk, shelving, storage drawers and wardrobe space – in every décor style.

The highlight of this system is an orthopedic, latex mattress that rolls out of the rear of the cabinet or shelf unit base with the touch of a button – then disappears just as swiftly when it's not needed. The multi-functional system can also house high-tech media equipment or transform into a dining room.

Based in San Francisco, design-and-build firm Modern Spaces (www.ModernSpaces.com) is the U.S. distributor for ip20, a European manufacturer of high-end, space-saving modular wall components that can define a work space, provide ample storage, and include a contemporary wall bed system.

You can easily cozy up a home office that's used primarily for paperwork and personal projects. A trunk that holds files can double as a coffee table. A computer can be rolled out on a cart, hidden in an armoire or closed into a ready-to-assemble closet organizing system. A sleeper sofa can be paired with a cushioned window seat that flips up to reveal linens, pillows and storage space for guests.

Phillips comments on the importance of lighting in a guest room that doubles as a work space. “High, transom-type windows or corner windows retain maximum wall space for furniture placement, while reducing the chance for glare on computer screens. A combination of general and task lighting is needed, and drama can be added with lighting accenting special ceiling details, a bookcase or a window seat. Incorporating a dimmer switch can create a soothing, evening atmosphere for guests. I also suggest including multiple access locations for data/communication wiring to allow for more than one furniture arrangement.”

“If it's a home office that needs access for clients coming to it from the front door,

locate it near the foyer or side entry of the home, so they won't have to travel through other parts of your home to get to it,” advises Jennifer Pippin, a residential design specialist from Cornelius, North Carolina.

DETAILS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Not So Big House author and architect Susan Susanka promotes alcoves, which offer an “alternative space within a larger space.” A sleeper sofa can be nestled beneath the eaves of a low roofline in an alcove. Or, consider adding an alcove in your flex room with a built-in desk that can support your laptop and a T.V. for guests. Add a small table with a chair or two for game playing, bill paying or conversation over coffee.

If the budget allows, barrel vault the ceiling in your flex space for interest and a tucked-in feel. Such a nook will offer family members and visitors a special refuge.

Whether you're outfitting a home office or an “away” room – Susanka's coin phrase for a more secluded quiet space – shelving on either side of a window seat and drawers below it provide practical and eye-appealing use of each square foot. Cantilever the seat out further to accommodate a twin-sized sleeping niche with a built-in mattress. Add over-sized throw pillows to create a cozy study spot or reading nook.

Got books? Beyond building in a wall of shelves, you might also drop a shelf a foot or so down from the ceiling and encircle the room's perimeter. If your ceiling height is taller and space allows, add a rolling ladder for easy book access. Ensure plenty of natural light by adding transoms above shelves.

For guests, look for over-sized reading chairs that transform into twin sleepers; add two in your library, or combine one with your window seat retreat.

A home office, library or frequently used hobby room can share a two-sided fireplace with your family room – a perk your guests will love during brisk autumn visits or the Christmas holidays.

In a media room, Grand Rapids, Michigan architect Eric Hughes notes that a wall-mounted plasma T.V. screen can “hide” behind one of VisionArt's fine art prints. When the T.V. is turned on, the specialty ink-sprayed canvas subtly rolls up into a customized hardwood frame. With a touch of a button at the show's end, the canvas elegantly drops back down to conceal the screen. (Visit www.digitallyenabled.com and click on “VisionArt.”)

“It's great ambience for guests, and for homeowners as well,” Hughes says. “It's especially nice over a fireplace.”

If you homeschool, you can connect your T.V. to the Internet. “Kids love surfing the Internet on a giant T.V., and parents love a bigger display screen for teaching,” Hughes comments. When parents are done browsing websites with kids and lessons for the day are done, homework and learning supplies can be tucked out of sight in built-in drawers.

A futon, a Murphy bed or another bed wall unit from specialty furniture makers like The Closet Re-Organizer Company or Modern Spaces, can keep floor space open when you're using your flex room for schooling, sewing or scrap-booking.

STILL MORE ALTERNATIVES

Gopal Ahluwalia, vice president for research for the National Association of Home Builders, says the most popular spot for guest rooms and flexible extra living space is the bonus area over a three-car garage.

“It's a great multi-purpose space,” he comments. “You can make it a playroom, a home office, or a media room – it can change as your family grows. Teens especially like to hang out in this area. And when you add a full bath, it makes a great guest room for the college student home on weekends, or a mother-in-law suite.” (You can search for plans with finished rooms over the garage by visiting HerHome.com/homeplans and checking “F.R.O.G.”)

High-tech media components including surround sound, computer stations and wall-mounted plasma screens can be added to this trendy bonus space.

Such a room is a far cry from the sleeping porch. Depending on where you live, this might be yet another option to consider – particularly if you love the sounds of crickets and wind chimes, looking at stars and enjoying a light night breeze.

Historically, a screened porch located on the second floor above a ground-level veranda, the sleeping porch was a common place to keep cool in the twentieth century.

Today, including a sleeping porch in your blueprint just might lend a little magic for guests staying overnight during summer months or in a climate which is warm year-round – and become the perfect place for you to rejuvenate, too.

No matter which kind of space you create, be careful. If it's planned out too well, guests won't want to leave.