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**Special Section:** Fall Houston Home Show Guide



*For comfortable reading, light from more than four windows converges in architect Fernando Brave's library. The shelves were painted white to highlight the books. Flooring is inexpensive Oriented Strand Board, which Brave likes because it resembles autumn leaves. (photo by Miro Dvorscak)*

# home libraries

## three architects who love books show ways to display them

**by david rose**

In his famous essay, *On Books*, Michel De Montaigne writes on behalf of the average reader: "I seek in books only to give myself pleasure by honest amusement; or if I study, I seek only the learning that treats of the knowledge of myself and instructs me in how to die well and live well."

Whatever use we have for them, books can be said to have shaped all our lives in some respect or other, and the question of how they can be featured or stored in the home is an intriguing one. Just think of the aura of an antique first edition, a coffee table conversation piece, a family Bible, an instructive textbook or a paperback page-turner that accompanies a lazy bath.

How you feature your books in your home is a matter of personal taste and how you want to accommodate your personal needs and interests. Do you like to display your books as you would your interests, place them where convenient for reference and browsing, or situate them more discreetly in a private, family room for rest and relaxation? Spaces where books are stored will often double as reading rooms or studies.

Here, three Houston architects share different ways to incorporate books into the home. Each has come up with inspiring contemporary treatments of book collections on medium, large and small scales.

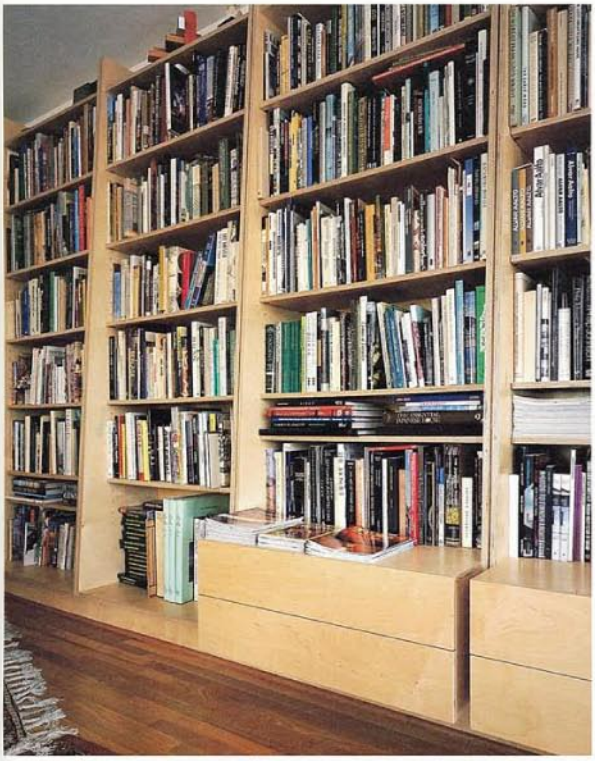
### DON'T LET THE SHELF FALL

The co-author of *Houston Architecture* and editor of the *Buildings of Texas* compilation volume in the U.S. series, Gerald Moorhead, AIA, has cultivated a collection from his personal interests and self-confessed impulse buying. As well as a great many books related to design, architecture, city planning and gardens, Moorhead also enjoys books on history and travel. He estimates he has 3,400 books in his house.

The different facets of his collection underline his view that, despite having a great interest in architectural history, "seeing the buildings first-hand is always preferable." His treasury of architectural books, which numbers about 1,900 volumes, is stored along one wall of the spacious open-plan kitchen / dining/ living area upstairs in his Montrose area duplex.

In keeping with the minimal modern furniture in the room, shelves of thin-ply Scandinavian birch were designed to fit this space so that, from the dining table or an inviting sofa, Moorhead can survey his collection, chronologically arranged from ancient to modern times. The shelf wood complements the maple coffee table in the living area and matches the wood used in the kitchen.

The shelves themselves have an ingenious distinguishing trademark. "When you get a bookcase over about 5- feet tall, it doesn't look straight anymore—it feels top-heavy and looks like it's about to fall on you," says Moorhead. As someone who's actually had the experience of a bookshelf falling on him while he was in bed, Moorhead definitely wanted to avoid this problem. The solution is simple: the segmented supporting columns of the shelf unit are slightly angled away from the perusing reader, providing a forced



*The supporting columns of Gerald Moorhead's library shelves are slightly angled toward the wall. Moorhead and Yolita Schmidt designed the shelves and had carpenter Max Cegielski build them. The drawer fronts are from a single piece of wood; Cegielski beautifully matched the grain of the wood. (photo by Gerald Moorhead)*

perspective that appears to lift and raise the ceiling of the room, and places the books firmly against the wall where they belong.

This multi-purpose space is a place to relax and, importantly, to read. Luckily, the upper floor of the duplex occupies a site for exposure to light from the north and east, making for what Moorhead describes as "very soft light, all day long, ideal for reading and working."

When designing a space around a number of books, consideration must be given to having available space for the collection to vary and to grow. Moorhead has included drawers in his shelving unit to accommodate new media types: CDs, audiotapes and videotapes. Changing fashions and new technologies produce a problem however. "Of course, now DVDs won't fit," he complains, jokingly. As for as books go, "Every now and then we check for something in particular," and now he may find have to find it in an annex of the collection downstairs, as space has run out on the first floor.

**LIBRARY SIZE DICTATES THE ROOM SIZE**

In a home designed by Enrique Albin and Associates in Bellaire, the library is the focal point of the whole home. Here, the library occupies a complete wall of the double-height, living/reception area, compassed on both sides by full-length windows. "The size of the collection, and the desire to have the house's main living space contain the collection, was determinant in shaping the size, shape and position of this room, which, during the design process, became the theme and focal element of the house and the design of the garden," says Albin.

The roof of the house slopes up to its apex from the supporting wall the books occupy, and a line running perpendicular to the street on one side can be traced from the bookcase to the pool on the other. "The whole design of the house, its position in the lot and the shape of the pool, was driven by the characteristics of this room," he says. The library, with its rich display of books, is visible from the front lawn, backyard pool and garden and from a second-story mezzanine over


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*Windows above the books and on either side of the book wall fill this Bellaire living room with ample natural light for reading. A very comfortable leather chair keeps readers happy for hours on end. The sculpture on the bookshelf is of a dark-skinned Virgin from Cuba believed to be the Madonna del Caridad del Cobre: "of the Charity of Copper." (photo by Paul Hester)*

looking the living room.

The large bookshelves themselves, in this expansive, well-lit setting, had to be designed as a façade of the wall behind them. "The library piece was conceived as a free-floating element surrounded by glass," he says. "It is a horizontal composition of solid oak shelves, which play against recessed round metal columns. The horizontal lines are punctuated by a niche piece for a sculpture that the owners had, and by a solid piece on the other side, which is a bar."

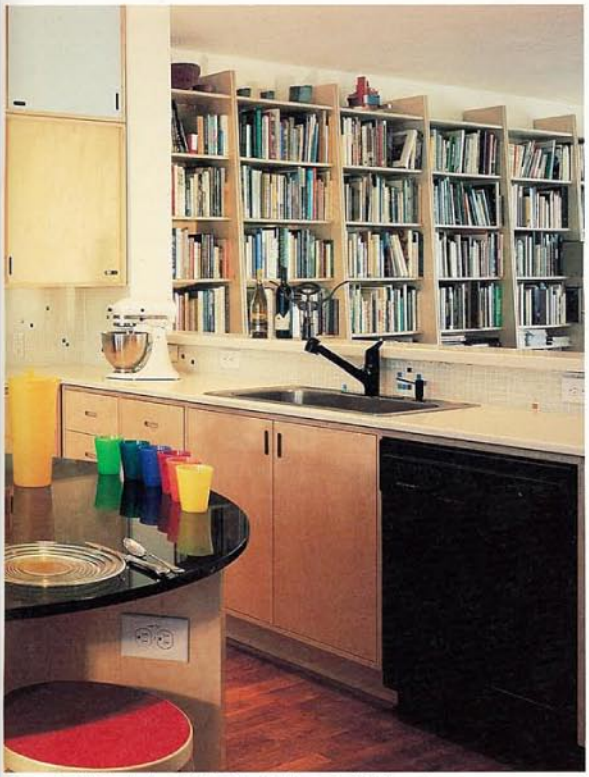
The tall shelves here avoid any impression of falling with the structural height of the room and a warm band of coved lighting. A sliding ladder provides access to the higher echelons of the collection, which is apparently a big hit with children who visit the house. Among the books, some of the owner's multi-cultural and resonant souvenirs can be found, but the collection's scale is impressive in itself. It is mainly devoted to history, fiction and titles devoted to cookery and languages, the shelves also have to be sturdy enough to support the weight of over 400 dictionaries relevant to the work of the owners.

The homeowners do notice on occasion the perennial and sudden disappearances of key volumes, which they've traced to opportunist poaching by their grown children. Even this does not seem to slow the growth of the collection, however.

"It has been my experience that regardless of the space you (and the clients) think they are going to need; you always end up needing more space," says Albin. "Book collecting is an ongoing pursuit, and space in a library in a house is physically limited. However, in the Mulberry house, we designed for a possible one-third growth of the collection, which, in four years, has already happened!"

**LIGHT AND BRIGHT ON A BUDGET**

If the house on Mulberry Street emphasizes a lifetime's accumulation of titles as an obvious focus for the home, the home of Houston-based architect Fernando Brave features a more discrete treatment of a book collection with a smaller scale and lifespan. Brave's home was designed



*Gerald Moorhead and Yolita Schmidt's library is visible from the kitchen. This particular collection contains books solely on architecture and design and is arranged chronologically—"from Egypt to now," says Moorhead. (photo by Gerald Moorhead)*

and built with budget very much in mind. While his extensive art collection is featured prominently downstairs, Brave has a family of young children, and books—featured close to his office and the bedrooms on the first floor—are easily accessible to accommodate a bedtime story request or to fulfill the need for a convenient reference.

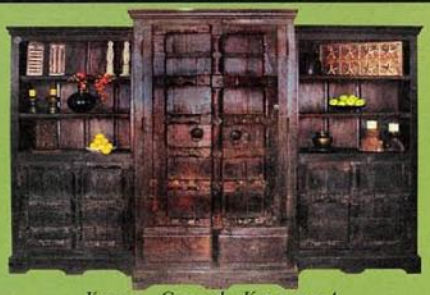
Ascending the stairs of the house, one is confronted with a pane of glass offering a widening perspective of what Brave, with due awareness of his family's nautical pursuits, terms "the bridge." It is an apt term for the space directly above the south-facing entrance to the house, which affords lookout window views in several directions, as well as back down the stairs through the single piece of tempered glass. Under some spare space offered to a houseplant by a slanting roof, the bookshelves here are compact and tightly packed. Their plywood material was painted white to blend in with the surrounding walls, in order to highlight the books themselves, Brave explains.

Seated in the easy chair that dominates this landing, Brave felt it important that light come to both sides of the reader's book, so light from more than four windows converges on this space. The placing of the windows is also striking: as Brave explains, he prefers low windows in bedrooms and living rooms "because with windows at head-height, when you're lying down or sitting you can't see out properly, you can just see the sky." The windows in the reading space in this house are at different levels, varying the views available to the observer. The inexpensive Oriented Strand Board (O.S.B.) flooring, coated with polyurethane was chosen for practical reasons, and because it resembled "leaves in the Fall," for Brave, and complements the simplicity and functional traits of this space which leads into the upstairs hallway.

Brave likes to keep the size of his collection manageable, and he is aware of the limitations of the space he has devoted to books in his home. How does he achieve this and still accommodate the frequent new additions that any voracious reader will compile? The answer is simple: although they have a core collection of



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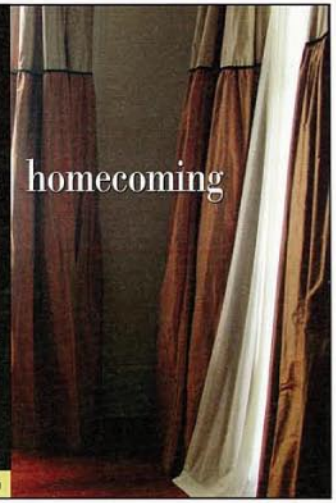
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**GUIDELINES FOR STORING BOOKS:**

The following guidelines will help you select storage sites, and outline the principles to be followed to protect your collections in storage.

- Wherever possible, the storage site should be in a central area of the building, where it is buffered from the extremes of climatic fluctuations, which can occur near external walls or in basements and attics. The storage site should not contain any water, drain or steam pipes, particularly at ceiling level. Leaking pipes can cause a lot of damage. Basements should also be avoided because of the risk of flooding.

- Don't store books in sheds. The storage site and the shelving used for your books should allow reasonable ventilation. Also remember to inspect and clean bookshelves regularly. These two simple measures help reduce the risk of insect and mold infestation and help greatly in controlling any outbreaks.

**Give books adequate support** and try to reduce the physical stresses, which can damage them. Many books are very badly shelved. This eventually distorts the binding and can damage the sewing structure, which causes books to fall apart. Don't allow books to flop to the side on their shelves. Bookends or book shoes should be provided to keep books upright. Book shoes also support the text block.

**Keep them upright on the shelves.**

**Store large volumes flat rather than upright.** Most large volumes have heavy text blocks, and not all of them have adequate binding structures to support them. Flat storage prevents the weight of the text block from collapsing the spine. If several heavy books are to be stored horizontally, they should not be stacked too high. This makes handling awkward and can cause damage. Try to place an empty table or shelf nearby—the books on the top of the stack can be put there if you are trying to remove those at the bottom.

**Provide easy access to books**—ease of access contributes greatly to the care of books. Difficult access often leads to awkward handling as people try to lift too much weight at one time, risking injury to themselves and damaging the books.

books that are permanent residents in the house, he estimates that about 20 to 30 percent of the titles are just passing through temporarily. Brave and his wife donate used books frequently in order to make room for new acquisitions.

**PROTECTING COLLECTIONS**

However modest or extensive your own collection is, and whether it is a mouth-watering accumulation of cookbooks or a scholarly shrine to literature, there are some general considerations to bear in mind when storing books.

Ideally, books should be stored in an environment where the temperature is constant and moderate, and relative humidity is in the range of 45 to minus 55 percent. If placed in the heat of Houston's direct sunlight, books may warp and their colors may fade. If the relative humidity is too high, mold and insect activity are highly likely to increase because they are attracted to the glues used to bind books. Alternatively, if the relative humidity is too low, the glues dry out and lose their flexibility. Because paper, leathers, book cloths and glues react at different rates to changes in relative humidity—and because fluctuations in relative humidity can cause bindings to distort—it should be kept as stable as possible.

Where valuable books are concerned, light should be kept to the minimum necessary for the activity. Of course, this is not always practical because books are often stored in the same area in which they are read, or simply cry out to be shown off or displayed as beautiful objects in themselves. Books fall into different categories of light-sensitivity, depending on the materials from which they are made, their value and their condition. Most collections of general-use books would be considered nonsensitive to light. Despite this, if you want them to last, you should try to keep their exposure to bright light down to a minimum. You may wish to bear in mind the particular bleaching effects light can have on your most prized family heirlooms or rare first editions, however.

Some people like to be surrounded by their books. Others prefer their formal living areas without books and stow their books in a separate room of the house. Whatever your particular choice, collecting books (like any other hobby) occurs across time and makes demands on the available space in your home. It is up to you to make the most of your collections and to prioritize what makes them significant and relevant to your own setting. ■