

DESIGN

A Pro Trick to Find Extra Bedroom Storage

Positioning your bed's headboard away from the wall can give you a better vantage point—and create a dressing or storage zone behind it



CENTER STAGE Architect Ricardo Bofill moved a bed away from the wall to fit two sets of shelves in his Spanish home, featured in 'Warehouse Home: Industrial Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Living,' by Sophie Bush (Thames & Hudson).PHOTO: RICHARD POWERS

By Elizabeth Anne Hartman

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WHAT DO Alvy Singer—Woody Allen’s alter ego in “Annie Hall”—and Achille Salvagni, the Rome-based architect and interior designer, have in common?

Stressful storage issues and an unconventional solution to them: moving the bed into the middle of the bedroom. Though the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that Alvy and his Valium-popping second wife placed against the emancipated wall ultimately failed to save their marriage, Mr. Salvagni and his wife of 10 years have had a happier result.

“The decision to move the bed away from the wall in the bedroom started from the need of my wife to have a much wider closet,” said Mr. Salvagni. Since the other three walls were pierced by windows or doors, the bed couldn’t go anywhere else, and its repositioning in the room’s center created space to build the sort of storage that saves relationships.

“Bedrooms have become more than a place to sleep,” said New York designer Nancy Ruddy. Using the headboard as a divider defines another “room” within the bedroom—for dressing or for working. “These spaces allow couples to partake in activity without disrupting their partner’s sleep,” she added.

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If you've tossed your TV remote because your bedroom's so small that you change the channels with your toes, this may not be an option for you. But many postwar urban apartments, for example, feature a long file-drawer of a bedroom—windows at one end, closets and the door at the other—with homeowners reflexively placing the headboard against one of the other two, windowless walls. But in a room just 15 feet long, pivoting the bed so it faces the windows will leave enough room to comfortably navigate around it.

“In cramped city apartments, you can't be a stickler,” said New York designer Grace Rosenstein. “A 2-foot clearance is good enough.” Floating the bed also frequently blocks an uninspiring view of closet doors.

This trick can also help people get more livability out of oddly proportioned spaces, such as lofts, said New York architect Andrew Franz : “Dividing a room with a large object can scale it down, creating more intimate areas.”

For a 19th-century cottage on Wistowe Island, in Ontario's Muskoka lakes region, Toronto designer Anne Hepfer moved a master bed away from the room's doorway, fashioning a vestibule of sorts that provides more privacy when the door is open. When you're exposing the back of a headboard, as she did by moving the bed from the wall, it helps if the headboard is more structural and pleasant to look at, noted Ms. Hepfer, “preferably made of wood, in a more modern style.” Alternatively, you can position a dresser or bookcase against the backs of less attractive headboards.

You can always ditch the headboard completely, but where space and resources permit, consider commissioning a headboard especially designed for floating beds. For a contemporary house in Larkspur, Calif., San Francisco firm Nicole Hollis designed a bed destined to sit in front of white oak floor-to-ceiling closet cabinets.

“The master bed is a single piece of custom furniture,” said Frank Merritt, of Jensen Architects, who designed the house. “It incorporates the bed frame, side tables, reading lights and, on the back side, a dresser, all in the same knotty oak as the cabinets.” The bed placement, closer to the windows, also gave its inhabitants better views of Mount Tamalpais and the bay beyond.

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Maximizing a view also motivated Holly Hollenbeck, of HSH Interiors in San Francisco, when she decorated a home in the hills of Marin County. Because three sides of the master bedroom were glass, when the bed occupies the middle of the room, “the wall behind you disappears from your visual plane, so it feels like you’re sleeping in a tree house,” explained Ms. Hollenbeck.

Bay Area architect Eric Haesloop similarly accommodated clients who wanted to apply a Thoreau-esque aesthetic to their Silicon Valley home. The room in which he floated the master bed looks onto a small private pond surrounded by a hillside garden, but he pointed out that “this works in any home with a dominant view on one side.”

Both Mr. Haesloop and Ms. Ruddy referred to studies suggesting that an uncluttered sleeping space—free of visual distractions that remind one of work or chores—allows for better sleep.

No matter how you set up a bedroom, “the bed is the centerpiece,” said Ms. Hollenbeck. The irreverent act of liberating it from the walls not only gives it pride of place, but opens up a whole range of design possibilities.