

New York Times Article --- Curtis Master Woodworkers

A few years ago, Reginald Black Jr., chairman emeritus of Time Inc., decided he wanted a television set in the living room. But his wife wouldn't allow such a modern intrusion amid their English antiques. So they hired Herbert Roberts, a New York furniture designer, to make a Biedermeier-style table. Inside is the television, which rises dramatically at the touch of a remote control.

"Anything else would have spoiled the room's appearance," insists Mr. Black, who also keeps his computer, printer and file out of sight behind gleaming cherry panels.

Whether it's the trappings of technology, valuable collections, or ugly exercise equipment, everyone has something to hide. And Mr. Roberts, co-owner with his wife, Joan, of Curtis Co., has built a furniture business with 3.5 million in annual revenue by helping people keep their secrets while keeping up appearances. Mr. Roberts is a master of illusion, using false front, hidden drawers and hinged bookcases. His designs, which range from \$1,100 for a computer-concealing armoire to \$35,000 for a room full of camouflage cabinetry, have attracted such clients as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and actor Gregory Jbara.,

For soap opera actors Robert S. Wood and Loyita Chapel, Mr. Roberts created an L-shaped wall unit that displays what the couple wants to show off, like Mr. Wood's Emmy, rare books, and a collection of military miniatures, but discreetly conceals linens, multimedia equipment, film memorabilia, and even their toolbox behind cabinetry. "People who live in houses with attics and garages don't know what its like to try to store things in a two-bedroom apartment in New York," says Ms. Chapel. "We couldn't exist without this wall unit."

Indeed, Mr. Roberts specializes in making the most of the odd and annoying spaces common in older apartments. He redirects the air flow from heating and air-conditioning units, so it is possible to install a heat-sensitive computer directly in front of a radiator. And he makes all his furniture free-standing so the owner can take it along on moves, "I've moved my big computer armoire three times," says Mr. Jbara, a Broadway actor who plays a supporting role in the just released movie "In & Out." "My current apartment is too small to hold it, but I like it so much, I've got it all set up as a working office in mini-storage."

One reason Mr. Roberts draws actors as clients is the fact he was once one himself: As a child, he was one of Hal Roach's Little Rascals. During breaks, he helped to build stage sets, which sparked his interests in building and design. Later, he received a graduate degree in architecture; today, as a sideline business, he builds custom homes in Alpharetta, Ga.

And in fact, some of his ideas seem cinematically inspired. His favorite ploy for saving wall space, for instance, is familiar from old mad-scientist movies: The hinged or rollaway bookcase that reveals something entirely different behind it.

William David Reeves, president of WDR International Ltd., a textiles firm, and his wife, Grace, installed a wall hinged bookcase in the small media room of their Manhattan duplex. It boosts storage space and screens an exterior door and powder

room. “The weight makes them a little hard to open,” says Mrs. Reeves. “But the room is so long and narrow, it would be difficult to decorate without them.”

But nothing tops the client who wanted bookcases and cabinets to disguise an entire guest suite. “He didn’t want all his friends to know” he had a guest room, Mrs. Roberts confides.

- June Fletcher