

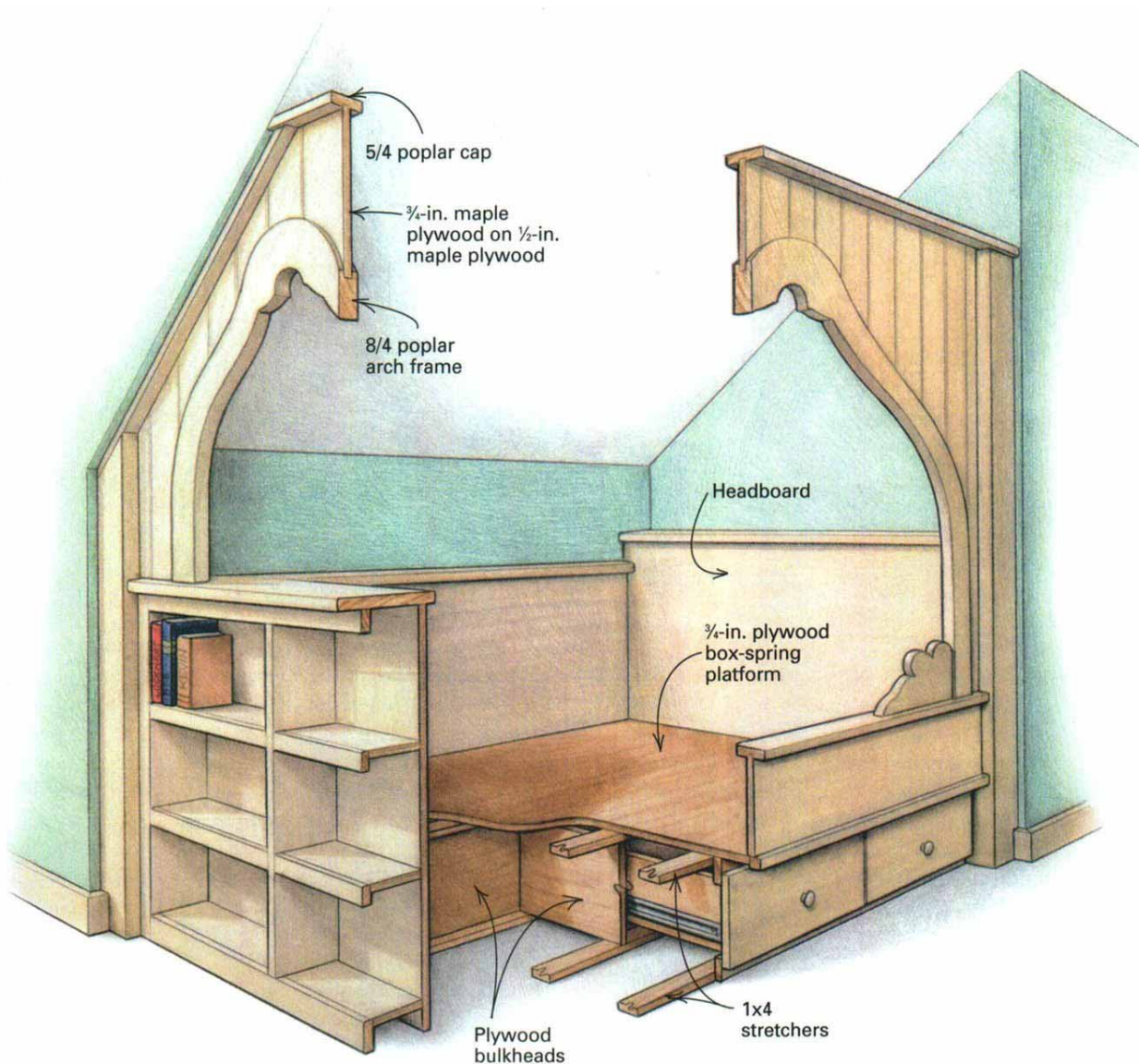
Fanciful Built-in Beds

A look at the design and construction of Scandinavian-inspired bed alcoves

by Jean Steinbrecher

Inside the cloud bed

As a true built-in, this bed relies on the frame of the house for much of its own structural integrity. Cleats affixed to the wall hold up two sides of the mattress platform, and the house framing serves as anchorage for the arched sides of the bed. The box spring rests on a sheet of plywood supported by plywood bulkheads that house the three drawers under the bed.



As I paged through Harriet DeWolfe's collection of books on Scandinavian houses, I marveled at the built-in beds. They are delicious hybrids—part furniture, part room and part fantasy world. You don't just sit on one of these beds. They're too tall for that. Instead, you sort of occupy one, like a scout establishing an outpost on a piece of high ground.

Harriet and her husband, Russell, live in a house I designed for them on the western shore of Whidbey Island, in Washington state. From

the outset, they were definite about the character they wanted in their home. It had to have Swedish flavor, color and texture. And it had to have built-in cabinet beds, like the ones that Harriet and Russell have so enjoyed during their trips to Scandinavia.

I was fascinated by their vision of the house and excited by the prospect of doing some innovative design work based on historic precedent. It seemed a logical extension of my former career as a costume designer for the stage

and my studies of historic preservation in architecture school.

The master suite overlooks the shipping lanes

—We eventually worked three built-in beds into the house. The first is in the master suite (photo p. 97). This bed's alcove is raised high enough to allow a full view down the west side of the island, where ships follow the deep channel into Seattle. At the head of the bed, a shelf holds odds and ends, and forms a back-

rest for in-bed reading. Along the sides, built-in night tables house drawers over cabinets. Built-in shelf units, replete with light fixtures and electrical outlets, flank the bed head and frame the window above. At the foot, bookshelves built into the lower platform are backed by deep storage drawers that open onto each side of the bed.

Like the trim in the rest of the room, the bed is painted off-white and ties into the chair rails and wainscoting. Quarter-circle brackets hold the foot of the mattress and echo the brackets holding the shelf at window-top level in the kitchen.

Upstairs, the beds engage sloped ceilings—The DeWolfe's house has a cross-gable roof with shed dormers and cathedral ceilings. These quirky rooflines create grandmother's-attic-like spaces that are perfect for built-in beds.

Russell's study has a bed made of Douglas fir with turned columns and two-tone staining (photo right). We based this bed on a historic example we found in *Scandinavian Country* by JoAnn Barwick (Clarkson Potter, 1991).

The bookcase at the tall end of this bed becomes the headboard. It is flanked by massive corner posts made of kiln-dried fir 6x6s. Our cabinetmaker, Dick Kieffer, had three posts turned at a local millwork shop. One post was split in half, becoming the two pilasters at the foot of the bed. Three deep drawers store linens and office supplies below the bed box made for a queen-size mattress and boxspring.

Cloud forms meet ogee arches—Guests who stay in Harriet's study enter the queen-size sleeping nook, fondly called the cloud bed, through a sensuous ogee arch (photo p. 94). The bed takes its name from the cloud-motif brackets that retain the mattress. We adapted it from a photo found in Elisabeth Holte's *Living in Norway* (Abbeville Press, 1993).

Dick made all the beds in his shop as individual components, then assembled them on site. For example, the cloud bed is made up of five parts: the drawers and their carcass; the headboard; the footboard and its bookcase; and the sides with the arched openings.

Making the beds in sections made transporting the various parts into their appointed rooms easy—or at least possible. In fact, Dick met our client Russell for the first time on the stairs,



Bookcase as headboard. Vertical-grain Douglas fir, tinted with gray and vermilion, is the predominant material in the captain's bed (above). Cabinets and bookcases flanking the head of the bed in the master suite (facing page) provide storage for bedtime books.

where Dick had become wedged against the stairwell by the big-arch side of the cloud bed he was trying to maneuver around a corner. The two of them were able to wrestle the bedside back down the stairs. Fortunately, the windows weren't installed upstairs, so Dick and our builder, Phil Stringer, brought the bed components in through a second-story window opening.

The cloud bed is almost exclusively maple plywood and poplar trim (drawing p. 95). To begin, Dick routed V-grooves 5 in. o. c. into sheets of 3/4-in. maple plywood. Then he glued and stapled the grooved pieces to other sheets of 1/2-in. plywood running the opposite direction, making panels large enough for the bed front and side.

Working at full scale on paper, he sketched the arch and refined one side of the curved opening, then made a plywood template of the half-arch. Using the template as a guide, Dick glued up sections of 8/4 poplar into the rough shape of the wide trim pieces that define the arched openings. Each poplar arch blank is composed of five separate boards connected by scarf joints and using pairs of 1/2-in. dowels.

Dick used the template to mark cutlines on both sides of the arches and roughed them out

on the bandsaw. Next, he cleaned up the edges of the arches using a router with a bearing-guided bit following the profile of the template.

The rest of the bed box is made of 3/4-in. plywood and trimmed with poplar. Dick sized the bed box to accommodate the DeWolfe's queen-size mattress and box-spring set, adding 1 1/2 in. around the edges to allow space for bedding and bed-making. If we had used a futon or European mattress without a spring, we would have raised the bottom of the bed box and added ventilation holes in the top surface to allow the mattress to breathe.

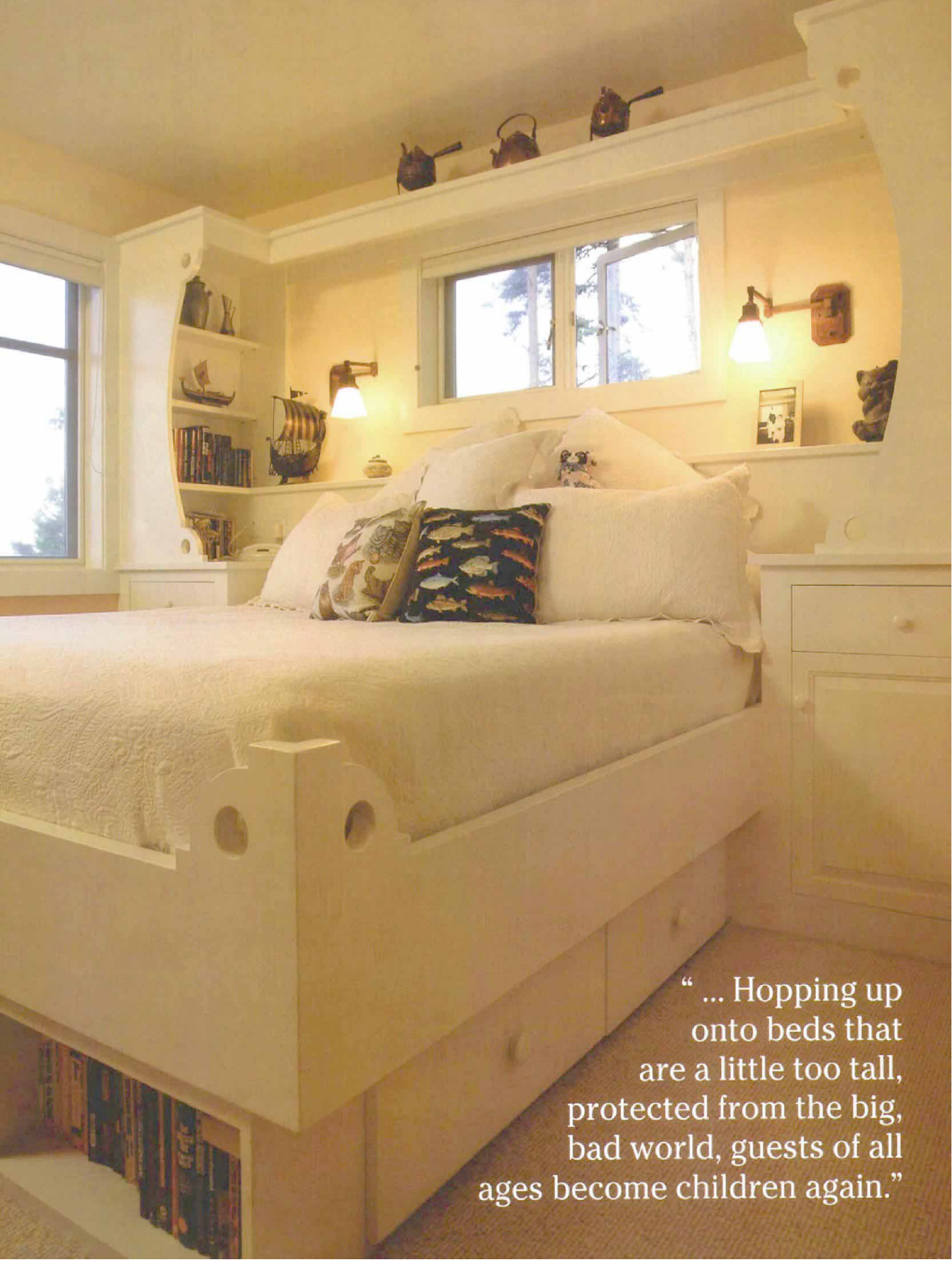
The plywood drawers beneath the bed are 25 in. wide, 8 in. tall and 28 in. deep. They slide on Accuride 4034 full-extension 28-in. drawer glides with ball bearings and 1 1/2 in. of overtravel (Accuride; 562-903-0200; www.accuride.com). Dick swears by these drawer glides. They're rated at 150 lb., they're smooth and quiet, and he's never had a callback on them.

The drawer unit is set back 3/4 in. to create a kick space under the bed. This is the kind of detail that doesn't seem important until you've stubbed your slippered (or bare) toes on a pedestal bed without a kick space.

Once the components were in place, Dick screwed them together with 3-in. coarse-thread drywall screws. The wall cleats are affixed to the house framing, as are the plywood sides of the bed. They're screwed to the studs from the top, where the poplar caps conceal the fasteners. After plugging the screw holes and putting any remaining divots, Dick spray-painted the bed in place with a coat of oil-based primer followed by two coats of satin oil-based paint. He kept the overspray to a minimum by tenting the bed and using a high-volume, low-pressure sprayer.

Guests don't want to leave now—The best feedback about these whimsical beds comes from overnight guests. Delighted to be hopping up onto beds that are a little too tall, protected from the big, bad world, guests of all ages become children again. They want cookies and milk and bedtime stories. They want to be tucked in and wished pleasant dreams. Best of all, they want to return for another visit. □

Based in Langley, Washington, architect Jean Steinbrecher, A. I. A., specializes in residential design. Photos by Charles Miller.



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