

# Reclaiming every nook and cranny

These out-of-the-box renovations make the most of unusual spaces.

By **Madeline Bilis** Globe correspondent, Updated March 5, 2025, 12:31 p.m.



Chaitan Raman, 12, and his sister Prema, 9, read in their skylight nook above the home's kitchen wall in Somerville. BRETT PHELPS/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Houses in New England are a special breed. Plenty of them are more than 100

years old, while others make the most of narrow floor plans on tiny lots. Historic districts, zoning restrictions, and other guardrails can add layers of red tape while renovating or expanding these homes.

To work around some of these rules, builders and architects have had to get creative — whether that’s carving out additional storage space from some unused corner or transforming an oddly shaped nook into something more useful. Ahead, find three unique home projects that maximize each home’s nooks and crannies.

## The Skylight Nook

When Rajiv Raman set out to convert the garage of his 1870s Somerville home into another bedroom, he knew he might encounter a few challenges. For one, working within the home’s small footprint would be complex, and removing and adding walls was likely to affect other parts of the house.

That was the case in Raman’s small kitchen, which needed to be expanded to connect the garage to the main house. The problem? The only wall offering natural light into the space needed to go. “We knew that we would have to get rid of the bay window in our kitchen, but we didn’t want to just wall it off,” Raman said. “We wanted to create some other source of light in the kitchen.”

So he brainstormed with his architect, Patrick Rettig, to find a unique solution: Building a “skylight nook” as an additional lounge area for his two kids, with rows of windows to let sunlight into the kitchen. Now, this 5½-foot-tall bump-out is a place for the kids to play games, kick back with their Nintendo Switch or iPad, and do homework.

Since the three windows on the wall looked directly out to their neighbor's roof deck, Raman attached window clings to create a frosted effect for privacy. For added customization, he ordered carpet fragments to cover the back of the built-in bench below the nook.



Chaitan and Prema Raman read in their skylight nook above the home's kitchen wall in Somerville. BRETT PHELPS/GLOBE STAFF

“There’s also this company on Amazon where you can just send them exact dimensions of very odd-shaped benches, and they’ll custom make a cushion,” he said, so he plopped the custom cushions on the bench to complete the new dining area created by the nook. The built-in bench and accompanying table freed up precious square footage in the kitchen, too.

“Now we have a kitchen you can actually walk around in,” Raman said. “It really opened up the space by Somerville standards.”

## The Under-the-Stairs Solution

Renovation projects located in historic districts naturally come with constraints. For his clients who lived in a half-Cape in Provincetown, Chris Brown, principal and founder of [b Architecture studio](#), knew the challenge was optimizing the home's original footprint without expanding it.



Chris Brown, principal and founder of b Architecture studio, modified the Provincetown's home's central staircase, building full-depth drawers below them for shoes and other mudroom accessories. DAN CUTRONA PHOTOGRAPHY

The first floor, in particular, was in desperate need of creative storage solutions. To find a place for everyday essentials, Brown modified the home's central staircase, building full-depth drawers below them for shoes and other mudroom accessories. Two triangular and two rectangular drawers are now equipped with heavy-duty drawer glides, allowing them to hold considerable weight.





The architectural team in this Provincetown half-Cape built an appliance storage cubby on the remaining underside of the staircase. DAN CUTRONA PHOTOGRAPHY

Just around the corner, the team also built an appliance storage cubby on the remaining underside of the staircase. Each cubby was custom-sized and built to fit both the coffee maker and microwave, effectively preventing them from cluttering the countertops.

“And then we still had a little bit of leftover space, and the clients asked ‘What about a small wine fridge?’” Brown said. He devised a way to squeeze an eight- to 12-bottle wine fridge in the remaining nook. Now, Brown reasoned, the clients can enjoy an ideal use of that space.

“Maybe half of our projects, sometimes more, are dealing with at least some existing conditions, and certainly zoning and square footage constraints,” he said. “We love doing these types of creative, fun built-ins that let us think a little differently about what that space could be.”

## The Relaxation ‘Pit’

While expanding their primary bathroom, the owners of a duplex in Charlestown were presented with a small conundrum: They needed to encroach into the floor plan of the adjoining guest bedroom — unevenly.





In the Charlestown home, a small space was converted into a “pit” for reading and relaxing, as well as additional sleeping space for visiting children. GREG PREMUR PHOTOGRAPHY

“It became an odd footprint,” explained Dennis Duffy, principal of [Duffy Design Group](#), since the expanded bathroom left an angular “hole” in the bottom section of the wall.

At the same time, Duffy said the clients were keen to have a place where their guests could relax on their own, either to watch TV or read. The solution then materialized: The extra space could be converted into a “pit” for reading and relaxing, as well as additional sleeping space for visiting children. (Later, a TV was installed in the nook.)

“[The clients] loved the solution of the modular ‘pit,’” Duffy said. They enthusiastically agreed to a graphic treatment off the interior wall, featuring strips of wood and offset disk light fixtures.

As for what to relax upon, the team selected a layout with cushions inspired by [Roche Bobois](#)’s iconic [Mah Jong collection](#), a modular sofa that can be converted into countless different shapes.

The result is a cozy relaxation pit balancing equal parts comfort and style.

“Having begun my career in New York City, I’m used to working with small spaces,” Duffy said. “I learned early on to try to find the best functional solutions for spaces like this, as long as it stays on message with the concept and adds functionality.”

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