

We all have objects – books and knick-knacks, drawings and paintings – floating around our lives. They are by-products of time spent as living, breathing members of society. As we bounce around the mortal coil that we all call home, we acquire items that inspire, awe, or astound. We stuff these trinkets into our closets, display them on our shelves or prop them on the mantle.

Steven Heller, however, has a different idea of what to do with the treasures he's collected. The design legend, who served as an art director at *The New York Times* for 33 years and now works as a co-chair of the MFA Designer's Author programme at New York City's School of Visual Arts, rents an entire apartment in Manhattan devoted to his assemblage of stuff. It's the ultimate storage library for the ultimate chronicler of design.

"I have a lot of objects from books that I've produced. A mini-manikin collection of figures no taller than 24 inches. I have lots of heads. There are files galore of designers and design phenomenon. Boxes of slides. Hundreds of rare books related to design, or at least art that coincides with design movements, trends and fashion," the author of more than 140 books says.

"It's become a repository, like one huge closet that has a couch, a kitchen and a bathroom – neither of which work – skylights, and a fireplace."

The apartment lies a floor below the one in the brownstone Heller shares with his wife, graphic designer Louise Fili. They had a library, but needed more room when their son was born. As luck would have it, the downstairs neighbours moved out, and Heller snatched up the flat. "I figured I would turn it into a very usable library," Heller says.



TEXT: NOAH DAVIS // IMAGE: ANNIE SCHLECHTER'S PROJECT: NEW YORKERS AND THEIR BOOKS/GMAIMAGES

Good intentions, yes, but ones that he never got around to acting upon. Twenty-three years later, the space is packed with paraphernalia and piles of books. A cleaner comes by "every so often," but that's the extent of the preservation efforts. "What it requires, and what it's never going to have, is organisation," Heller admits.

And really, there's no need to worry. It's simply stuff. Or, in Heller's words, "It's just a place. It's really not all that interesting when you come down to it." Except that, you know, it is. Vitally so. Heller's library highlights the vastness of the design world, a chaotic maw curated by one of the discipline's best minds.

Chinese spaceship figurines and Mao figureheads give way to Used Car penants from America's past. Bodiless models, decorated with make-up styles from the 1950s, feature three shelves above lightbulb boxes for Edison Mazda Lamps. A picture of two men in Shriner's hats smoking cigarette sits to the right. And the books. There are books everywhere.

Heller denies the importance of the space, but it has real value. A few years ago, the School of Visual Arts displayed some of the author's collection, including a replication of the library. 150 images of the apartment were shot, and workers created the room in a gallery. The packed space became a work in itself.

Over the years, the designer has got rid of some items, and some he sends to libraries around the world. Most of it, however, he keeps. "They are all favourites," he says of the tens of thousands of items. Well, maybe not quite that many. "I do know there's a waterbug living there because I saw it yesterday." The insect is getting quite an education. ■

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