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Will tablets force bookcases to go the way of the TV armoire?

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By RICHARD MULLINS | The Tampa Tribune
Published: June 09, 2011

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TAMPA -- Jody Haneke remembers those long-ago times of last year, when he had books in his life, or paper, or a pen or a bookcase. Now, he's gone paper and book free, and wouldn't go back.

He switched his paper bills to online payments. He ditched his day planner for online scheduling. While he runs a design company, he left behind sketchbooks, and instead uses digital tools like Penultimate for iPad to scratch out notes and he uses JotNotPro to scan images with his phone. He only buys digital books.

"All of this means I need less furniture to store all this stuff," Haneke said. "It feels great to have less clutter, that's for sure."

Which leaves the fate of one humble object in doubt: The bookcase. Will it disappear the same way the flat-screen killed off the TV armoire and Netflix killed off the DVD rack? Will the bookcase as a display of the well-read go the way of the photo album – replaced by the digital picture frame?

Admittedly, Haneke represents the leading edge of the digital trend. His Tampa-based Haneke Design builds mobile apps, so he's inclined to go all-digital wherever possible. But he's not the only one noticing a fateful shift that spells doom for the bookcase.

Stores like Sears and JCPenney killed off their bulky catalogs, and Verizon no longer hands out free phone books to every customer. Ikea still sells bookcases, but more often with doors to make them into basic storage.

Last September, Clearwater High School handed out 2,200 Kindles to students to replace textbooks. Every student and teacher at Hillsborough County's new all-boys and all-girls middle schools could get an iPad to use when the schools open this fall.

In perhaps the worst note of doom for the physical bookcase, this Spring, Borders booksellers filed Chapter 11 and Amazon crossed a significant threshold; it now sells more digital books than both hardback and paperback versions combined.

Charles Armstrong, chief executive of Spark Labs doesn't even own a desk at home anymore since he works on laptops and iPads.

His home "junk drawer" no longer has calculators, batteries, calendars and address books, since his phone does all that. For the same reason, he has no entertainment center – just a TV on a wall and the iPad.

"My bookshelf has dwindled down to one of those small cabinets above the refrigerator," he said, mainly for cookbooks. "Meaning, my books are never to be seen again."

He thinks cosmically and predicts the counter-intuitive idea that homes in 20 years may look more like they did centuries ago. No visible TVs, no bookshelves, and furniture changing as people needs change.

"The human urge for simplicity may finally be attainable," Armstrong said.

Fixed furniture like bookcases have had a nice long run in people's homes and offices. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first few references to the "Bookcase" as "articles of domestic furniture" to the fifteenth century.

"I don't think people with any level of erudition are ready to get rid of books after they've been around for 500 years," said Thomas Moser, the founder of his namesake Maine-based wood furniture company. Book lovers may love their Kindles, but "This is not about functionality. Let us use the word aura. There is no aura to a Kindle. It is cold, lifeless and of itself, pure efficiency."

The fading bookcase would only join other objects forcibly eliminated by technology and fashion.

Omate spinning wheels used to be common in homes as people made their own thread but vanished with manufactured clothing.

The same with butter churns, slate writing tablets, chess sets, whisky flasks, cigarette cases, corded telephones in wall nooks – and even home land-line phones altogether.

"I think there will be room for both books and technology," said Genevieve Gorder, a New York-based designer and HGTV personality.

Though she uses her iPad, Gorder keeps her large design books around because they display better. And she'll print out photos to give clients, so they have a tangible object to hold – rather than just an image on a screen.

Then in design projects, she'll embrace a client's books to display their meaning. "They can be a wonderful display of who we are, where we've been and what we're going to do."

Books also have great texture and structure, Gorder said, so if a client has no books, she'll go buy them by the yard. "I don't believe in my heart, books or bookcases will go away," she said, "maybe because I don't want to believe it."

Other designers are seeing bookcases forced into new roles in home life, just like other types of furniture that had their time.


"People are getting rid of their tea and coffee tables," said Sandra Espinet, a designer who specializes in large second and third homes. "People aren't inviting people over to sit down with formal tea anymore. Life's changing."

Her clients now ask for bookcases to display sculptures, and they must have scores of power outlets to plug in their digital picture frames, cell phones, printers, iPads and Kindles.

Personally, Espinet still keeps a few cookbooks around in the kitchen. But perhaps not for long.

"I have an iPad in my kitchen," Espinet said. "I pull up Food Network and watch a video of how to make something. I have a feeling I may be getting rid of the rest of the cookbooks."

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