

Utilizing Small Spaces

A roomful of ideas | By Jenny Quill



Most of us don't live in the sprawling, multibedroom estate of our dreams. Instead, home sweet home may be a vintage cottage, loft or condo that's big on charm, but small on space. And there are many of us living in tight quarters: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the size of new single-family homes is shrinking, from an all-time high of 2,277 square feet in 2007 to 2,169 square feet in 2010.

OK, so anything bigger than 2,000 square feet isn't exactly tiny. But it's indicative of a shift toward smaller dwellings, a trend that a 2010 National Association of Home Builders report attributed to numerous factors, including the recession, more homes sold to first-time buyers and the desire for greater energy efficiency. This means that for a lot of homeowners, the question is no longer "How can I increase my square footage?" but "How can I work with what I've got?" Fortunately, there's a design solution for every challenge, big or—in this case—small.

Thinking Outside the Box

Some things are worth waiting for, as the owners of a Mercer Island, Washington, home discovered. The couple, Rich and Jan, bought their family home in 1985. Once the kids were grown, the couple, both avid cooks, decided to overhaul their '70s-era kitchen, which had original cabinetry and appliances. At about 10 by 13 feet, the kitchen was small and boxed in by obtrusive upper cabinets and narrow pass-throughs. "There's an open flow between the living room, family room, breakfast nook and dining room, so it was essentially one big, barnlike space," Rich says. "Except for the kitchen, which was sort of walled off and really separate from the rest."

By installing a kitchen island and placing most appliances, cabinets and storage against a back wall, designer Faith Sheridan made the kitchen of this Seattle-area home airy, organized and functional.

The couple connected with a local contractor who suggested adding an interior designer to the team. That designer, Faith Sheridan, proposed a radical redesign that opened up the kitchen and incorporated an abundance of space-saving storage while maintaining the original footprint, a decision that saved the expense of moving plumbing lines and redoing electrical wiring. "Most people lose sight of the fact that you don't have to have this mega-large kitchen," Sheridan says. "You can have a kitchen that functions excellently if it's well-designed and organized."

The renovation started with the removal of a nonsupporting wall; this opened up the space to the adjoining living areas, improved the flow for entertaining and captured views of Lake Washington that were previously blocked. "The most significant thing she did was to take down much of the ceiling-based cabinetry to completely open up the views from the kitchen and make it part of the dynamic entertaining space of the dining and family rooms," Jan says.

With a row of upper cabinets eliminated, Sheridan compensated for lost storage with a kitchen island, which accommodates the sink, dishwasher and kitchen gadgets on one side, and on the opposite side, linens, trays and anything else the couple needs for entertaining. Sheridan also honored the homeowners' request to have a kitchen pantry, despite the challenge it presented. "Adding the pantry was the hardest part," says Sheridan. "It backed up to that wall where there was a laundry room and powder room, and it used to be that you walked into the laundry from the kitchen side." To remedy the issue, Sheridan relocated the kitchen entryway, then borrowed space from the laundry room to create the pantry.

With the old doorway eliminated, Sheridan had space to fill, so she incorporated most of the appliances and more storage along the kitchen's back wall. She placed a new, stainless steel Liebherr refrigerator; a Wolf gas stovetop and Zephyr hood; built-in shelves and upper and lower cabinets; and an abundance of small drawers to help keep everything organized.

DAVID MICHAEL MILLER ASSOCIATES



For the owners, who adore their long-overdue new kitchen, it's the little things that matter most. "Things like cabinet doors or drawers that soft-close, we didn't have that," Jan says. "The kitchen was so old—it's the simple things that are special to us."

Above: David Michael Miller replaced a portion of a wall in his Phoenix loft with open shelves, giving his small kitchen a more expansive feel.

Right: Tall bookcases and a paisley love seat help enliven this compact Portland den.

Smaller and Simplified

For newlywed Portland residents Sheila Benson and Rocky Garrison, both in their 60s, downsizing from two single-family residences—hers, an 1,800-square-foot Dutch Colonial; his, a 1,500-square-foot ranch-style house—to a two-bedroom/two-bath, 1,276-square-foot condo in the city's Laurelhurst neighborhood involved numerous challenges. First, there was the need to shed years of personal possessions. "The Goodwill outlet knows me by name," laughs Benson. Then, there was the balancing act of merging their remaining traditional furniture with the condo's much sleeker design. This merging of two distinct styles, not to mention the couple's major downsize, was most evident in the den, a room that forced interior designer Julia Williams to think creatively.

From a space-planning perspective, "the den was the most challenging to design because of its small size," Williams says. The

75-square-foot space, described as a "bonus room," was used as a television room in several neighboring units, and the trio initially considered going that route. "The idea was ultimately nixed because the room is small and windowless, so it might be a bit claustrophobic with the door closed," Williams says.

Instead, the couple, both keen readers, converted the room to a den/library. Knowing that storage was key, Williams lined the back wall with bookcases from Ikea's Hemnes line. "Use shelving to help keep clutter to a minimum," suggests Williams. "Taller bookcases are a good solution because they aren't very deep, but they offer ample space to store reading material and display artwork and collections." A second multitasker is the leather ottoman, which serves as a footrest, provides storage for Garrison's sheet music, and conceals a tray for serving snacks and refreshments. "[It] was chosen for its multifunctional design coupled with a small enough footprint to allow access to both sides of the love seat without having to move it," says Williams.

Williams chose the loveseat—which offers seating for two or ample lounging for one—to keep the scale of the seating small. The paisley fabric adds visual interest to the otherwise pattern-free space while playing off the gray-blue wall hue. The old meets the new in a bench, a cherished antique that was a gift from a friend. "With its open back and shallow seat, [the bench] doesn't overwhelm, and provides a second seating option or more storage and stacking space," Williams says.

For Benson and Garrison, who went from a lot to a lot less, the condo and its smaller spaces allow for a simpler, easier lifestyle, with more time to curl up in the cozy den with a good book.

Lofty Expectations

David Michael Miller, a Scottsdale-based interior designer, knew



JULIA WILLIAMS

that his three-story loft in Phoenix had potential. And there was a lot to like: a unique blend of Sonoran adobe and Art Deco architecture; 1,600 square feet spread across three floors; and a sensible floorplan with common spaces on the first floor, living quarters on the second, an open loft on the third and a rooftop deck.

The loft's main



DAVID FRANZEN

defect was its choppy layout and small, boxy spaces. “The original design had a lot of little rooms and connecting doors, and what I wanted to bring to

the table was an openness and a simplicity, so that by simplifying all the details and diminishing the amount of doors and rooms, I could make the spaces feel bigger,” Miller says. The need for simplification was most evident in the kitchen, an unappealing, cramped corner with a poor layout and a ledge that visually and physically separated the kitchen from the breakfast room.

First on Miller’s agenda: the removal of that awkward partition. Doing so created a more expansive space and an effortless flow between the kitchen and breakfast nook. Miller also removed the upper portion of one wall, opening it up to the stair vestibule and living room. He then ran long, lateral shelves across the gap, a surprising touch that adds visual interest and makes the kitchen feel much grander than its 12-by-12 space.

Cabinetry played a big role in giving the kitchen a sleek, clean-lined look. By installing only upper and base cabinets, and avoiding floor-to-ceiling cabinets, Miller established a clearly delineated horizontal plane that allows the eye to travel from one side of the kitchen to the other without visual interruption. This also meant installing all appliances—except for the Gaggenau cooktop—below the counter, where he tucked away Sub-Zero refrigerator and freezer drawers, an oven, and a full-size dishwasher. Miller is the first to admit that this setup wouldn’t work for everyone.

Marion Philpotts-Miller designed this room to do double duty: first, as a bedroom for her youngest daughter, and second, as a home office.

The kitchen is a textbook case of what can be accomplished when you strip away visual clutter, simplify colors and textures, and stick with clean lines. Less, in this case, is definitely more.

In Transition

With her oldest daughter soon college-bound, Honolulu interior designer Marion Philpotts-Miller knew it was a matter of time before youngest daughter Marée upgraded to her big sister’s much-larger bedroom. Since Philpotts dreamed of one day having her own personal retreat, or “mom cave,” as she calls it, she devised a flexible design for Marée’s roughly 12-by-14-foot bedroom that would allow it to be easily converted from teenybopper central to grown-up home office. “It was one of those room-to-grow concepts where you’re going to be empty-nesting and you want to create spaces that have value down the road,” she says.

Her design called for carving out space from the older sister’s adjoining bedroom by blowing out the old board-and-batten ceiling and eliminating a connecting crawlspace, then reinforcing and reinsulating the work area. This raised the ceiling height, adding approximately 70 more square feet of area for storage and a loft, and allowed for the inclusion of suitcase storage above the closet’s sliding barn door.

“I don’t think people psychologically realize what happens when you have more volume, how much more ethereal the space can be,” Philpotts says. Further taking advantage of the newly created volume, Philpotts installed a loft daybed where Marée’s friends could hang out when they visited.

“Based on my lifestyle, it sufficed, and was enough for me 99 percent of the time,” he says. “The only time it gets you into trouble is if you throw a party, and then you just don’t have the capacity.”

To avoid “a bunch of clunky storage,” Miller installed open shelves on both sides of the kitchen, lining them with white dinnerware and clear glassware; the cabinets are finished in an eggshell-white lacquer. “The fewer interruptions of color, texture or pattern in a small space, the better,” says Miller, “so it all blends together. It’s a strategy of diminishing contrast above the floor plane, so that everything disappears on itself.”

The room's most comfortable spot is the window nook, which was made large enough for an extra-long twin bed and a platform that conceals storage beneath. The nook features built-in shelving and side platforms where a laptop, cellphone and other gadgets can be plugged in, making it as functional as it is cute.

Throughout the design, Philpotts looked for ways to incorporate "learning opportunities" that would lend themselves to future office applications. One example is the barn door, with its writable surface, which turned the closet door into something far more practical (and attractive). "We found the barn door to be an incredible learning tool for her," says Philpotts. "You'd see French vocab words up there or a reminder not to forget her ballet clothes."

Multipurpose furnishings were also key. The bureau in the closet, for example, is on wheels, so it can be pulled out, leaving room for Philpotts to eventually install shelves for design books and other supplies. The room also includes storage solutions from furniture designer Eric Pfeiffer, including stackable perforated-plywood bins, a magazine table that doubles as a laptop stand, and an upholstered bench seat with storage space. "Finding pieces that are multipurpose makes it so easy and makes pieces versatile for a long time," she says. "That bench was in the kids' playroom, and I just moved it. It's timeless."

Philpotts recently took ownership of the room—"We're getting acquainted," she says—and has yet to make any drastic changes. She's considering replacing the window nook with a red lacquer desk; it would change the room's aesthetic—and that, says Philpotts, is the point. "It's important to think about how spaces evolve over time and how tastes change, and create spaces that give you permission to evolve without a lot of cost."

WHEN IT COMES TO HOME DESIGN, bigger isn't necessarily better. Whether you focus on simple changes or you go so far as to remove a wall or two, there are many ways to turn any small space into a grand place. ▲

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