



## To stretch a small house

By Bill LaHay/Universal Press Syndicate

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A shallow alcove for the bed, built-in dressers and a shelf pocket between two walls combine to make the most of the storage and living space in this bedroom.

Lately there's been a lot of media coverage about how Americans are discovering the virtues of voluntarily downsizing some aspects of their lives. Some have figured out that with gasoline prices destined to stay above the \$3-a-gallon mark, that behemoth SUV in the driveway might soon become like the dinosaurs who gave us all that underground oil in the first place.

Others face the reality of their new home choice when the monthly utility bills arrive, and the expenses rival the mortgage payment from their previous (usually smaller) home.

This is a normal response when the economy gets uncertain, and when good times return, people often forget that common sense restraint and start thinking big again. But this time it seems like other factors are at work, including demographics.

There are millions of empty-nest baby boomers whose children have grown up and now live under their own roofs. Other folks, paying more attention to the environmental cost of a modern lifestyle, are just looking to simplify so they can treat the planet a little more kindly.

Whatever the specific catalyst, homeowners and first-time buyers are rediscovering the charms of more modest digs. They're realizing that square footage, like any number, cannot tell the whole story about that complex environment we call home. They look for quality over quantity, or even decide to stay put rather than upgrade to that larger place they'd had on their wish list.

Often, this decision keeps or puts people in older homes that might have once been considered spacious at, say, 1,600 square feet, but are dwarfed by today's trends that promote houses twice that size.

There are plenty of reasons to recommend this downsizing choice, but there's also a price to pay. Storage options are often reduced, and the fragmented floor plans common in older homes can make them feel cramped rather than cozy.

If that describes the drawbacks that your small home has, there are several tried-and-true remedies that don't involve financing an addition or other structural renovations. Not only do they cost less than a radical rebuild, many offer the opportunity to custom tailor the house to better fit the way you live.

### **Start with these strategies:**

- **Own less stuff.** This is both the easiest and the hardest part. It doesn't cost anything, but it forces us to jettison things we've accumulated for a variety of reasons over the years.

Start with clothing, shoes, books and other items you own in multiples, and just cull about 10 percent. You'll realize that you manage fine without those things, and each year you can repeat the process.

- **Lighten the look.** Dark colors and heavy textures tend to make any space seem smaller, so don't let them dominate. This doesn't mean you're stuck with an off-white decor. It just means bolder colors and elements should be used as accents rather than main features.

- **Bet on built-ins.** It varies with every floor plan, but many homes have pockets of idle space that can be exploited for storage or a living area. Shallow wall niches, knee-wall cabinets in upstairs rooms and overhead (soffit-style) storage bins are all good retrofit candidates that reduce the need for freestanding furniture, which takes up more space.

- **Open up your sight lines.** Additional windows, skylights, pass-through openings in interior walls -- none of these features increase the literal volume of a space, but each can make a room seem larger because they give your eye room to travel.

For even greater impact, you can remove or reduce the wall area between two or more adjacent rooms, but this is a pricier option that requires professional engineering and/or construction skills. Avoid expansive "great room" designs in otherwise modest or historic homes, though. They'll seem out of place.

- **Take it outside.** This might seem like cheating, but creating outdoor living spaces is a time-honored and very effective means of helping a small home live larger. The traditional sitting porch is a perfect example. Today the same role is assigned to backyard decks and patios, though they typically don't offer the same social interaction with neighbors. This is not a year-round solution in most regions, but that doesn't make it any less worthwhile.

The key to most of these strategies is that they are incremental, tackling the spatial challenges with smaller, focused solutions. This approach is less costly and disruptive than adding a big lump of square-footage, and it often results in a home that's more exceptional, more efficient and more enjoyable.

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