



HOUSING

Buying and remodeling a small home

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Quick Facts...

The key to small space living is organization; well-designed storage, structured work habits and an efficient use of floor space to make the best use of available space.

Learn how to recognize a well-designed home that offers privacy, livability and ease of function.

Use remodeling plans to create space or an illusion of space; be aware of what improvements will raise property values and property taxes.

Use as few colors as possible to achieve a spacious feeling.

Plain surfaces give a more continuous look, but a room is not interesting enough without some texture and pattern.

The average family is no longer able to afford the three to four bedroom, two-story home of the 60s and 70s. As solutions to achieving affordable housing, many families and singles are considering the options of smaller lots, more compact homes, mobile homes and multi-family units; including condominiums and townhouses. Many of these newly designed homes contain under 1,200 square feet, some as small as 500 square feet.

Challenges of Small Space Living

The key to small living space is organization. Well-designed storage, structured work habits and an efficient use of floor space help make the best use of available space. Families living in smaller dwellings face several challenges.

Develop a respect for the people you live with. Living closely in a confined space can cause many conflicts. Each person in the home needs a personalized space of their own no matter how small it may be. The corner of one room may be sufficient. Also, they should try to have many activity areas so that all family activities need not take place in the same location.

Master the art of storage. Small space living does not allow for disorganization. When there is an extra room that serves as a catch-all, it is easy to pile objects in the room and shut the door. Families must organize storage to the point where everything has a place. Organize closets and cabinets to be more efficient and use wall space to its best advantage. Plan purchases for need and space.

Become a tidy worker. Do not allow objects to be scattered all over the house. Concentrate tasks at work centers and put things away immediately after their use. Plan and finish projects in an allotted time.

Keep things simple. Overdecorated or overcrowded areas seem smaller. Highly patterned or detailed objects consume more visual space than objects with a simple design. To expand space, get along with the essentials. This may mean to give away seldom-used items, alternating accessories and storing others. Look for simple furnishings with plain surfaces and smooth lines.

Small dwellings can be very comfortable and can offer as much livability as some large dwellings. Psychologically, some people even prefer a smaller space because they feel it projects a feeling of closeness and warmth.

Buying or Building a Small Home

Because of market demand, many architects are designing smaller dwellings, some under 1,200 square feet. Many of these new designs make use of every square inch of living space and put the space to its best use.

There are, however, many small homes and residential units that are poorly designed. Learn how to recognize a well-designed home that offers privacy, livability and ease of function.

The first consideration is the lot and outside living space. Since interior space is limited, look at the possibility of expanding the interior space to the outside with large windows or patio doors. Expanded outdoor space should be pleasant to look at and offer privacy. If you want to add on to the house, be sure there is space enough on the lot to do so.

Next, study the home's design and decide if additions are possible in the event they are needed later on. Would an addition distort or take away from the home's appearance?

The dwelling's floor plan should make the best possible use of the allotted space. Extra-wide hallways, closets that are too deep, poorly placed room openings or odd-shaped rooms all waste valuable living space.

For more flexibility, incorporate all living areas on one floor so rooms can be used for more than one purpose. Look for fewer rooms, fewer walled hallways and carefully planned storage areas to make small rooms seem larger. Opening up the ceiling area with cathedral ceilings or sky lights also gives a feeling of space. Sound absorbent materials help provide privacy.

Be sure interior living areas are not broken up by traffic patterns. Plan doorways and openings for traffic to go through one edge of a room rather than down the middle. As mentioned, expand interior areas to the outside with glass. Since large expanses of glass are not very energy efficient, place them mostly on the south to catch winter sun; use exterior shading; make the windows double or triple glazed; and carefully plan window treatments.

Kitchen and Work Area. Not only is this room the most costly to build, but a poorly planned kitchen can be difficult to work in. Actually, a small, well-planned kitchen is more efficient than a large one with scattered work areas.

Plan the kitchen to make the best use of floor space and storage areas. The soffit space above the cabinets can be turned into a storage space for seldom used items.

Design laundry equipment into the kitchen or bath to eliminate the need for a separate room. Minimize plumbing costs by having the bath, kitchen and laundry located near each another.

Dining Room. A separate dining room may become a thing of the past. To make better use of space, look for a dining area that is incorporated into either the kitchen or living room. This arrangement allows either area to be expanded into the other if extra space is needed. If you insist upon a separate dining area, make it multifunctional. Have it double as a guest room, study or hobby room.

Living Room. Choose a room that combines the formal living room and family room. Design this room to allow many different family activities to take place at one time. A well-planned furniture arrangement will help achieve this.

Bedroom. As with the other rooms of the home, the bedroom should be multipurpose. A child's room could double as a play or study area and an adult's room could contain a sitting or desk area. Bedrooms can be smaller when all the storage is built into the wall or closet. This would do away with a need for dressers and other separate storage units.

Bath. Select a compartmentalized bathroom rather than an all-in-one type. It will accommodate two to three people at the same time and eliminate the need for a second bathroom.

Remodeling Ideas for a Small Home

Use remodeling plans to create space or an illusion of space. Incorporate energy conservation measures as you remodel to save fuel costs. Be aware of what improvements raise property values and property taxes.

Major remodeling plans may include an addition or converting unused areas (porch, garage, attic or basement) to living space. Other simple, less costly plans also can expand space.

Lighting and Windows

Try to incorporate more natural or artificial light into the home. Increase artificial light with recessed lights, track lights and other fixtures. Remember, fluorescent lights give you more light at less cost per watt.

Replace an outside wall with a sliding glass door to increase light levels and extend the room's activities to the outdoors. Always consult an architect or contractor to be sure the change will not cause structural problems.

Concentrate on windows with a southern exposure to take advantage of the winter sun. Convert or expand a window area into a greenhouse to increase light levels, expand the living space and provide an indoor garden. Eliminating a small, north window will help gain additional wall space. Cover the window before closing it in to see what effect the light loss will have on the room.

Install higher, larger windows in a bathroom to open up wall space. They will increase light levels and add privacy.

Skylights are also a good way to add natural light. When increasing any glass area, be sure to take the necessary measures to insure energy conservation. Skylights have been used as an entry for burglars, so make sure they are securely installed.

Walls and Ceiling

Enlarging wall openings will open up space and create larger multi-purpose rooms. If you don't want to remove a whole wall, make a large archway instead. Opening the dining room up into the kitchen or living room will increase the use of space. You can even make all three into one large area. Before you eliminate any walls, however, check to see which ones are essential support walls.

An alternative to expanding space horizontally is to open up vertical space. High or cathedral ceilings create a feeling of space. In some home designs, the ceiling can be removed to expose the rafters and roof line. Insulate the ceiling surface to assure efficient energy use.

Kitchen and Bath Areas

The secret to an efficient kitchen is well-planned work space and storage. For minor changes, look into buying some of the space-saving storage devices. Close in the open soffit space above the cabinets and use it for storage. Build in appliances where possible and open the room into another area.

Because of the small size, you may need clever designs and a great deal of imagination to carry off a creative redo in a bathroom. When fixtures need to be replaced, choose streamlined styles in light tones to take up less room. If the bathtub isn't important, remove and replace it with a clear acrylic-doored shower. This will visually expand the room by making the shower area seem a part of the floor space rather than a closed cubicle.

Replace normal bathroom tiles with small 1-inch by 1-inch tiles to be in better proportion to the room's size. Place shelves on free walls and use rounded rather than squared corners on shelves and counter to take up less visual space.

Decorating the Small, Ready-Built Home

Color: Use as few colors as possible to achieve a spacious feeling. If you do use several colors, keep them low key and all the same value and intensity. Bright, dramatic and contrasting colors close in a space.

Since background colors for a small room should be pale and subdued, include bits of strong accent colors and unexpected textures to add excitement (accessories, collections, or plants).

Use cool and light colors to expand space on walls, floors, windows and ceilings. For several rooms, use the same colors throughout the space to help unify the overall area.

Pattern and Texture. Plain surfaces give a more continuous look, but a room is not interesting without some texture and pattern. Use as little pattern as possible and have the pattern blend, not contrast, with the other colors in the room. A large pattern can visually close in a room.

Use textures in moderation since they tend to fill space. Use medium to fine textures to add interest. Glossy or mirror like finishes reflect light and tend to expand visual space (chrome furniture, glossy floors, mirrored walls).

Walls and Windows. Light, pale and cool colors (blue, green and violet) visually move walls outward or recede to make a room seem larger. Use the same color on walls, doors, molding and trim for a continuous look. Avoid dark or contrasting molding because it stops the eye at each intersection and gives a feeling of less space.

Dark paneling closes in a room and the lines divide the wall space into small sections. Paint the paneling to lighten up the room.

Blend window treatments into the background to continue the look. Choose simple treatments, such as pleated draperies or designer blinds, that are colored or closely related to the wall color.

Decorating Floors. Choose a floor color that is the same or similar to the wall color so there isn't a sharp contrast where the floor meets the wall.

Use wall-to-wall carpet instead of area rugs to eliminate breaks in the floor surface. Avoid heavily textured carpets and rugs. Deep shags, heavy sculptures and multicolored carpets fill visual space and make a room appear smaller. Glossy hard floor coverings with a quiet pattern reflect light and expand space.

Home Furnishings

Small spaces need scaled-down furniture in proportion to the room's size. Use a love seat instead of a sofa and avoid using massive antique pieces. Furniture should be simple in design so as not to clutter the room with unnecessary details.

Consider multifunctional pieces such as a sofa bed, wall storage units with a foldout dining table or desk, or end tables that include a storage space. Cover large empty wall areas with wall units that add valuable storage. These units can accommodate a variety of items (TV and stereo) and free up floor space. Other space-saving pieces include: ottomans that store beneath a console table; tables with separate leaves or a drop-leaf design; nesting tables; modular pieces that can be separated into activity groupings; and bunk or trundle beds.

Choose furniture that has little visual and actual space:

- chrome and cane, the open and smooth surfaces are space extenders;
- open designs, such as exposed arms and legs;
- furniture pieces that do not have bulky cushions or fabrics that hang to the floor;
- clear-top tables that seem almost invisible; and
- beds with the head and foot board removed and replaced with cushions and pillows.

Solid-colored furniture that blends into the background is less visible. If you choose patterned furniture, use small designs instead of bold plaids or floral patterns. Smooth textures also are less space consuming than rough textures.

Furniture Arrangement

Free up floor space by using a limited number of furniture pieces. Grouping furniture so that a chair and sofa can use the same table and lamp is one way to cut back on pieces.

Float furniture into the room rather than crowding it around the walls. The open wall space can be put to good use by covering it with a bookcase or

wall unit. Even the wall space in a wider hallway can be put to work with the addition of a bookcase. Usually, furniture placed parallel to the wall gives a more unified look, but you may wish to try a diagonal arrangement to add interest to the room.

Arrange furniture into activity areas so that many activities can take place at the same time. A living room, for example, may contain a TV corner, reading area and hobby area.

Accessories and Lighting

To eliminate clutter, use as few accessories as possible. Bare table tops give a more open feeling. Rotate accessories rather than having them all out at once.

Accessories can be a good place to incorporate color. Small amounts of color scattered around the room add interest.

Lighting is very important in small areas. If light levels are low, the room will feel closed in. When little natural light is available, it is important to plan lighting very carefully. One way to light up dark corners is to place canned lights on the floor and have them point upward through a plant.

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