Affordable Housing:
MAKING SMALLER HOMES SEEM LARGER
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For the past three decades the size of new homes has been increasing. The two-bedroom, one-bath houses of the postwar era had 1,000 square feet or less of living space. In the 1950s, the larger three-bedroom ranch house became popular. It was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by three- and four-bedroom two-story Colonial or bilevel homes, many of which had 2½ baths and a family room. In addition to more rooms, increased living area, and larger, landscaped lots, the newer homes included a number of amenities such as patios, fireplaces, air conditioning, two-car garages, built-in intercoms, and a full array of kitchen appliances.

Today the price of housing is soaring, surpassing increases in family income. Families are finding it increasingly difficult to purchase a home. They are also being confronted with high mortgage interest rates, mushrooming energy costs, increasing property taxes, and rising maintenance and repair costs.

More and more families are spending at least 30 percent of their income on housing. This percentage will most likely continue to increase unless our expectations about our homes are modified.

Living in less space is one way we can obtain affordable housing. Instead of the traditional four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house, families will need to consider options such as smaller lots, more compact homes with multifunctional spaces, condominiums, mobile and manufactured homes, and multifamily structures such as duplexes and townhouses. All of these types of homes are less expensive to purchase and maintain, and most of them require less energy to heat and cool. Some predict that the physical and technological characteristics of our homes will change more over the next 20 years than in all the years of home building since the Egyptian era.

The single family home on its own lot surrounded by a white picket fence will probably not disappear. However, this type of house will not be typical of new homes in the next 20 years.

Learning how to live and manage in less space is a challenge more and more individuals and families will have to face. But we must be careful that we don’t overlook our human space needs and those of our children as we contemplate living closer together.

Individuals who have spent most of their lives in more spacious homes may have to make psychological adjustments. Visual and acoustical privacy become especially critical concerns in smaller homes. Insuring privacy and maintaining individuality while living closer together will require careful planning and more effective use of a family’s resources.

For example, if a family needs a larger amount of land with its dwelling, family members will have to consider the compromises they must make in other dwelling features to obtain the extra land. Providing space for a garden may mean giving up a bedroom, an extra bath, or some other space that the family wants. If, on the other hand, a family wants all the appliances currently popular in the kitchen — a microwave oven, dishwasher, trash compactor, crepemaker, and the like — family members must consider what sacrifices they will have to make in the number of rooms or total amount of living space.

Living in a smaller home can be satisfying and enriching. However, the home and furnishings must be carefully selected so that space is not wasted but used wisely. The total amount of space, the way it is divided, the layout of rooms or areas, and the flexibility in the use of space are all important considerations. When the house is scaled down, the quality of the design must be scaled up to compensate. In this circular we will provide some ideas on how to design a new home to seem more spacious and how to take full advantage of the available space in an existing home.
Planning a New, Smaller Home

In planning a new home, you can make the space more functional while maintaining privacy if you follow several basic principles of design and use. Incorporating all living areas on one level increases flexibility by making it possible to use rooms for more than one purpose. Fewer rooms, fewer walled hallways, and carefully planned storage areas will make small homes seem larger.

To take full advantage of available space, plan traffic areas and door placement so that rooms are not cut in half by traffic flow (Figure 1). Ill-placed openings also waste valuable wall and floor space. Avoid unnecessary openings.

Plan the house to have distinct heating zones so that you can easily close doors to seldom-used areas and not heat or cool them when they are unoccupied. Coordinate your plans with the heating-cooling contractor for maximum energy savings.

Extend the amount of visual and usable space by coordinating the interior of the house with its exterior. Patios and decks can add outdoor living space where certain family activities can take place when weather permits.

When there isn't much outdoor space, light and air can do much to make a small floor plan seem to grow. For example, enlarging a room with a greenhouse extension, framing an important view with a strategically placed window, or letting light pour in through a skylight can make a home seem bigger by breaking the barrier of its four walls.

Place windows carefully so they do not reduce valuable wall space. Avoid a boxed-in feeling by clustering windows around a corner instead of spacing them far apart. Corner windows make a room appear larger by eliminating the corner as a point of reference for determining size. They also save wall space for furnishings.

"Volume space" sometimes can be created at little additional cost by using a cathedral or raised ceiling in the main living areas of a home (Figure 2). Be aware, however, that heating and cooling costs will be increased.

The following sections offer some ideas to help in planning specific areas of your new house.

**Kitchen and work areas.** Reducing the amount of space in the home you build will result in considerable cost savings, particularly if the reductions are in the kitchen and bath areas. A small, well-planned kitchen will be more efficient than a larger good traffic plan. People can move easily from the entrance to the desired room and from one room to another along direct paths.

C. In another modification of the same house, the living areas are interchanged with the work areas to create a good traffic pattern. One with appliances widely scattered. Eliminating one or more of the less essential built-in appliances will lower costs and provide more storage space. Consider using the space between cabinet tops and the ceiling to store seldom-used items such as chafing dishes, baskets, and large pots and bowls. Or consider extending the wall cabinets to the ceiling. To cut building costs, locate laundry equipment in the kitchen or bath areas rather than in a separate room. Always try to minimize plumbing costs by locating the kitchen, baths, and laundry near each other.

**Dining areas.** To make the best use of space, combine dining areas with other rooms such as the kitchen or living room. An eating area in or near the kitchen and living area — and large enough for family and guests — can eliminate the need for a separate, seldom-used dining room. For times when the family wants a more formal eating or buffet space, one end of the living area can accommodate a dining table, especially one of the drop-leaf or folding type. If a dining table is located within another living space, the area around the

![Figure 1](image1.png)

A. When the traffic pattern in a home is poor, pathways between rooms are long and indirect. Often traffic cuts through other rooms, decreasing privacy and interfering with effective furniture arrangement.

B. Moving the front entrance door creates a plan that people can move easily from the entrance to the desired room and from one room to another along direct paths.
Bedrooms. Bedrooms can be made smaller when built-in units and closets are used effectively by compartmentalizing the space. Children's bedrooms can double as play areas. If two or more children are to share a bedroom, consider letting them have the master bedroom in a home to accommodate their sleep, dressing, study, and play needs. Or use partial room dividers such as tall bookcases to divide the space and provide privacy. For adults, a master bedroom may double as a sitting room, study, or office area.

Baths. A compartmented bathroom that accommodates two or three people at the same time can eliminate the need for a second bathroom, especially in a one-story house (Figure 4). Privacy need not be sacrificed if the compartmented bath is well planned. A practical arrangement is to place the bathtub and toilet in one compartment and the sink in another.

Lot. Houses are generally built in the middle of the lot with a small amount of space on all four sides. With a "zero-lot-line" arrangement — especially useful when the lot is small — the house is located off center with one wall along the side property line, leaving a larger open area on the opposite side (Figure 5). The wall straddling the property line usually contains no windows because it serves as the privacy wall for the house next door.

Living area. One living area or family room may be adequate to meet family needs; you may not really need both a family room and a separate, formal living room. Some builders are constructing homes with an open area called a "great room" or multipurpose family living center (Figure 3). If your home will include an area of this type, be sure it is designed to accommodate several simultaneous activities and still preserve as much visual and acoustic privacy as possible. Even in limited space, each family member needs some private area.

You may want to consider using sound-deadening materials for the walls, floors, and even ceilings in this area. Carpeting and fabric are better choices than smooth materials that reflect and thus seem to intensify noises.

Table becomes a visual and usable part of the other space. The table can also be used for many activities other than dining; it can serve as a work surface for hobbies, sewing, or the home office.
Making Existing Homes Seem Larger

If some areas of the home you are living in — or one you are about to move into — seem overcrowded and other areas underused, reassess your use of space. Explore new and different ways of making space function better for your needs. Some changes can require costly remodeling or decorating, but others can be achieved with minimal purchases, simple rearrangement of furniture, and changes in the way the rooms are used.

**Major changes.** Consider changing an existing room arrangement to create an open "country kitchen" area for cooking, eating, family living, and informal entertainment. Opening the kitchen in this way allows the cook to join in conversations with family and guests, an arrangement that may improve not only the social occasion but also the attitude of the cook. However, do not remove any walls before consulting an engineer or contractor to determine whether the walls are load bearing. Removing a load-bearing wall could seriously weaken the structure of your home. It isn’t always necessary to remove a wall completely to make a room more spacious. Removing even a small part of the wall can add visual space.

You can extend the amount of space you have by creating a private outdoor living space adjacent to the indoor living area. A patio or deck can provide a good area for relaxing or entertaining. Decks can be built at either the first- or second-floor level, depending on where the added space is needed most.

Even a small patio, if carefully landscaped to provide visual privacy, can help to extend living space to the outdoors.

Even a small section of fence and a few shrubs can provide visual privacy in a small yard (Figure 6). Treat outdoor space as a continuation of the indoor space, not as an adjunct to it. Adding a window or sliding door is much less expensive than building a whole room and can make a small space appear larger.

Eliminating a small or awkward window in a room will increase wall space and, if the window faces north, will also lower heating bills. Keep as many windows as possible on the south side of the house because they capture solar heat. Before you remove a window permanently, cover the opening to see if the reduction in light and ventilation is acceptable. If possible, add a skylight to a room or hallway to open up the ceiling, let in light, make the interior space more usable, and give the area a more spacious feeling.

You may be able to gain living space by converting less-used spaces in the home — attics, garages, porches, and basements — to year-round living space. Don’t eliminate storage space, however. Luggage, lawn furniture, and other equipment must be kept someplace. In some houses, you can build a loft into the corner of a high-ceilinged room in such a way that you gain another level of living area while the space below remains as useful as ever (Figure 7). Or perhaps you can open the ceiling of the room to the roof of the house and gain some visual space.
Decorating and furniture changes. To create a feeling of spaciousness and continuity, plan the decor for the entire home as a unit rather than treating each room separately. Carry wall and floor colors from room to room; change textures rather than colors to achieve variety. Blend simple window treatments with wall colors to make rooms seem larger. Pale walls that reflect light tend to make you feel less closed in than dark walls that soak up light. Avoid using dark paneling and furniture because they will make the room appear smaller.

In planning furnishings for a room, keep the purpose of the room in mind. Furniture takes up a large amount of space, so it is important to plan furniture arrangements carefully to make the best use of space. Use only as much furniture as is needed, leaving as much open space as possible. Limiting the amount of furniture also helps traffic flow from one room to another by keeping doors and passageways open.

Select small furniture with simple lines. Choose multipurpose pieces such as sofa beds or drop-leaf tables when selecting or replacing furniture. Avoid large, triple dressers and massive chests that require a lot of wall space and limit your options in arranging furniture. Several small stacking chests and cabinets will be more flexible. Consider using built-ins and clustering items such as a television set, stereo system, bookshelves, and storage cabinets in a wall unit to help eliminate clutter, increase floor space, and add interest to your room (Figure 8).

The placement of furniture defines and separates areas for different activities such as eating, sleeping, and watching television. Group furniture to save space. People sitting in a chair and sofa placed at right angles to one another can share a single table and lamp. Placing furniture with its lines parallel to the walls usually gives a feeling of greater unity than positioning pieces diagonally. Place large furniture against walls to leave as much space as possible in the center of the room.

Furniture can be used to divide larger spaces into smaller areas for different activities. Back the dividers with a material of the same color or pattern as the walls to make them seem less bulky. Tall bookcases make good use of available wall space and can be used to store many items. They also add a feeling of height to a room.

You can gain valuable space by modifying a guest room or extra bedroom to double as a study, television room, sewing room, or hobby room. A bedroom can be made available for other uses during the daytime if conventional beds are replaced by daybeds with bolsters. Using trundle or bunk beds will save on floor space. If a double bed is used, remove the headboard and footboard to increase the feeling of spaciousness.

Figure 8. A multipurpose wall unit can add storage space, help eliminate clutter, and save floor space.
You can expand space visually by the use of mirrors — for example, on the long wall of a narrow room to make it appear wider. If possible, hang mirrors so that they reflect the outdoors.

To gain maximum use of limited storage space, compartmentalize your closets' storage areas. For example, because children's clothing is usually short, a child's closet can usually have double clothing bars, one above the other. Don't overlook the storage possibilities of doors and floor areas — racks on the backs of doors and storage containers under beds, for example. Inexpensive storage devices can be purchased or made to help you use space more efficiently.

Additional lighting can also make a room seem larger. Select light-colored shades for lamps. Undercabinet lighting from fluorescent tubes will add life to a small kitchen.

In general, eliminate unnecessary furnishings and bric-a-brac. Beautiful objects need space around them to be fully enjoyed. Remember that people need "eye room" as well as elbow room.

Summary

As our homes become smaller and communities become closer, more efficient, and more cohesive, we will experience a greater feeling of togetherness. Smaller homes require less upkeep, they take less energy to heat and cool, and they permit a more leisurely life-style.

You will be able to live successfully in less space if you make efforts to maintain privacy for all family members. You don't need a lot of space for privacy, but remember that privacy doesn't just happen — you must consciously plan for it. You will need to think carefully about space arrangements in your home. Every dwelling and every room offers space waiting to be used. Sound design principles coupled with some creative imagination can do wonders to make limited space livable, inviting, and comfortable.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Planning a Home, by Sarah Faulkner. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1979. (An introductory housing and interior design text that includes all the basics needed to plan and design a home.)


New Shelter, a monthly magazine published by Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania, that presents current information on a wide range of housing topics.

Nontechnical circulars on a variety of home planning and construction topics are available from the Small Homes Council — Building Research Council, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1 East St. Mary's Road, Champaign, Illinois 61820. Write for a free list.