



Life in the Dollhouse

Just because a home is cramped doesn't mean it can't be gracious

BY HEATHER ZIMMERMAN, Metro Almanac

Although I moved about four months ago, I haven't quite settled into my new apartment yet. A stack or two of unpacked boxes is currently the focal point of my living room, and one of them has almost become furniture. My best excuse (or at least my favorite one) for this miniature mountain of boxes is that my apartment is small and I can't figure out where to put everything.

The modest size of my new habitat poses some decorating hurdles that might be familiar to Silicon Valleyites looking to create plush environments in confined areas. So I asked some authorities on arranging space – an interior designer, a professional organizer, and a feng shui specialist – for their ideas on making life more livable in close quarters.

Marie Chan of InterSpace Design in Santa Clara suggests opening up a small room by manipulating the interplay of color and light.

"Try to make it brighter, with lighter colors," she advises. "You don't want something too busy or too patterned." The walls and floor should both be in lighter shades, and this includes the baseboards. Adding extra lighting, such as lamps, can also enhance a small room, especially in a light-colored one, and further open it up. High-gloss paint is a good choice for a small space because, as Chan notes, "if you see more reflections, it makes the room look bigger."

The time-honored trick of hanging up mirrors to increase the impression of spaciousness is always effective, but don't put one on every wall or you'll end up with, as Chan jokes, "a hall of mirrors with reflections all around you."

Professional organizer and personal coach Lynn Gross-Cerf suggests a mix of functional and individual aesthetics when arranging your living space. If you're crammed into a studio apartment, chances are that the usual array of full-sized furniture won't fit, so look at ways to use one piece for two functions.

If you're limited to a single large furnishing or two, there's always the handy sofabed or futon, but Chan also suggests a daybed, which can double as a couch without the hassle of having to make up a sofabed or futon every night and put it away the next morning. Small tables with drop leaves can be expanded to accommodate guests or provide a larger workspace. Similarly, Gros-Cerf suggests topping a folding card table with a large round piece of plywood or presswood (available at lumberyards); cover it with a cloth to create a larger dining table or work area.

And as for preventing the presence of a computer from dominating a room, Chan suggested concealing a computer in an increasingly popular "office-in-a-closet" type armoire. Gros-Cerf also stresses maintaining the integrity of the home office space, making sure "it doesn't become the dumping ground for other stuff."

Whether your home is your second office, a place to put your things, a sanctuary, or perhaps all of the above; it is not, as Gros-Cerf says, "just four walls that you sleep in."

"Look at your house as a metaphor for your own life" Ticoulat says. What this could mean in terms of the stack of boxes presiding over my living room, I shudder to think – all the more reason to start unpacking.