



75° F



No Surprises Mortgage®



Rates guaranteed in writing.



Classified

- Find a job
- Find a car
- Find real estate
- Rent an apartment
- Find a mortgage
- Dating
- Pets
- [Place an ad](#)

Search:

chicagotribune.com ▼

Go

Shopping

- [Sales & Deals -- New](#)
- [See newspaper ads](#)
- [Yellow pages](#)
- [Grocery coupons](#)

News | Opinion

- [Local News](#)
- [Nation/World News](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Corrections](#)

Weather | Traffic

- [Skilling's forecast](#)
- [Chicago-area radar](#)

Business | Tech

Sports

Travel

Health

Education

Leisure

Food

Entertainment

Today's Paper

- [In the Community](#)
- [Registration](#)
- [Subscription](#)
- [Contact us](#)

Special reports

Living large

Making the most of a diminutive domain

By **Barbara B. Buchholz**

Special to the Tribune

Published June 23, 2000

Build it and they will come – and buy, if the quick sales of small houses are any proof.

While many homeowners think big when it comes to houses, small ones, generally defined as 1,200 square feet or less, according to real estate agents such as [Honore Frumentino](#) of Koenig & Strey's Deerfield office, have a very loyal following.

And a growing plethora of glossy coffee-table books and how-to articles also reflect the popularity of these abodes, whether they be freestanding houses, apartments or townhouses.

Who's buying them and why? A varied group of homeowners for a varied group of reasons, experts say.

First, size, like wealth, is relative. A home that may seem small to you or me may appear spacious to someone moving out from under their parent's roof or no longer sharing a bedroom with a sibling. Small often appeals to the first-time homeowner, strapped for cash and with few furnishings. Others for whom small can be beautiful include vacationers and retirees simply wanting a little place to call home in a different locale.

For still others, the details that bring a place to life matter more than square footage. "I think the color, personality and polish of a room are more important than its size," says author Dylan Landis, who has written six books on the topic of small spaces, including *Designing for Small Homes* (PBC International).

Her favorite room in her apartment is 11 feet square, dark and faces an air shaft. But she cleverly furnished it to "work bigger" as a dining room-





[Forensics under the microscope](#)

[Iraq after the election](#)

[A look back at 1955](#)

[Battle for the skies](#)

[All special reports](#)

Top news stories

[City workers charged in drug ring](#)

[Drink allegedly started fight](#)

[Stanley Kubrick's Chicago](#)

[Dad, son charged in terror link](#)

• [Man with chain saw let into U.S.](#)

[Controversial judge confirmed](#)

cum-library and to be charming. She used black chairs, a black table, stained the floor black and painted walls violet with white trim. "The last thing you notice is its size," she says. "You feel as if you've stepped into a cloud. We can't get people out of the room."

And you may not either, if you consider the following baker's dozen guidelines to make your small nest more enjoyable. None involve costly architectural changes.

1. **Don't overtax a room's functionality but make it work efficiently.** Because of space constraints, every small room and small house probably won't be able to meet all your needs, so your overall purpose should be to prioritize, says Chicago designer David Kaufman of Kaufman Segal Design. "You may not have room for a sitting area in your bedroom or a separate office, but a dining table can occasionally function for work," he says.
2. **Declutter.** Many of us have become pros at accumulating too many furnishings and accessories, so often any home, even large ones, may seem small once piled with possessions.

To make small spaces seem less so, purge before you move in, then do so on an ongoing basis, says organization expert Monica Friel of [Chaos To Order](#) in Park Ridge. If you already live in a home, consider taking everything out of each room and slowly bringing objects back, says Landis. "When you love the way it looks, you're done."

Also, place possessions so that you can get at things you use most frequently, put away other things in less accessible places. Use the full height of rooms since people often only use what's at eye level or below, Friel says.

When it comes to work areas, papers pose the biggest dilemma to getting and staying organized. Establish a workable filing system with cabinets, baskets and folders for different categories such as "bills to pay." When mail arrives, open it, throw out junk and file accordingly. Avoid stacking papers since that takes up more room than necessary. Keep desks and counters free, Friel says.

3. **Organize closets.** Closets pose a major challenge since they're often limited in number and size in small homes. Even before you move in, hire a closet company to study what you own and how best to store and get at possessions, or buy accoutrements (baskets, containers, bins, drawers) at container stores and do the organizing yourself.

In addition to making closets efficient, California Closet Company design consultant Stephanie Peach recommends non-closet solutions: decorative boxes you leave out, screens behind which objects can be placed, underbed storage, tables with drawers, and pretty wall hooks for coats and hats.

4. **Illuminate.** One of the best ways to make a room feel larger is to light perimeter walls uniformly and make the ceiling seem brighter, says Jim Baney, project lighting designer at Schuler & Schook, architectural lighting consultants in Chicago. You can achieve good results by installing recessed wall washers, hanging a chandelier, installing low-voltage track systems, and placing torchieres around a room. While torchieres have been blamed for starting fires in the past, models today with shields are safe, says Joe Ray-Barreau, director of education for the American Lighting Association in Dallas.

Whatever type of light and lamp you choose, have three watts per square foot evenly distributed, so that a hypothetical 12-by-12-

~~\$379~~ **\$298**
Desktop after
 \$75 mail-in rebate,
~~\$699~~ **\$549**
Notebook after
 \$150 mail-in rebate
 from Dell Home.

Offer ends 6/8.

► [CLICK FOR DETAILS](#)



foot room has at least 432 watts of light, says Ray-Barreau.

5. **Color correctly.** Don't rush to paint everything white to make your space seem larger. Experts like Landis think white walls contrast too greatly with furnishings and end up visually shrinking a room. "White works best when it's part of a color scheme that layers a range of shades," she says.

If you insist on white, tone it down to a softer hue such as pale cream, which isn't as reflective, says Chicago decorator and feng shui expert Margaret Harris.

Some other advice in selecting a palette:

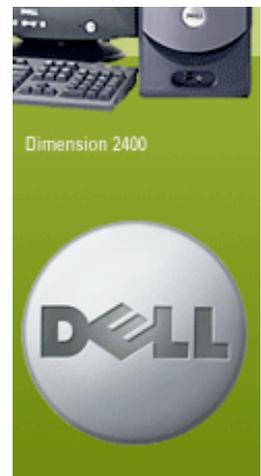
- Paint all rooms, including trim, the same color for continuity and to avoid chopping up the home into small components, Harris says. If you can't stand the idea of just one shade, at least cut the amount of contrast, Landis says.
 - Choose colors so their values match a room's daylight hue, says New York City-based color expert and author Donald Kaufman. A light colored room gets a light color; a dark room a dark color. Sometimes, you can accentuate the feeling by making walls dark and lightening the color of the ceiling and floor. The perimeter then expands visually beyond the room's boundaries and the floor and ceiling reflect light back and forth, Donald Kaufman says.
 - When selecting colors, little paint chip samples appear different once applied to large areas, so paint big samples, as large as 5 feet wide and in an area with good light. Also, a finished color will appear twice as light as the color sample in your hand so pick colors that are grayer and darker than you think, says Donald Kaufman. In addition to the color, choose the paint type wisely, he says. The flatter the finish, the more recessive walls appear, so the room seems larger. One downside: flat paint is less practical.
6. **Select the right scale for furnishings and arrange pieces to maximum advantage.** There's lots of disagreement whether it's better to use smaller-scaled pieces or a few large ones, but the bottom line is to buy what you love since if it's a first home you're likely to take furnishings with you if you move.

Chicago designer Leslie Stern suggests going for smaller- scaled, less fussy pieces when in doubt. "Consider a 54-inch loveseat instead of a 72- or 80-inch sofa if the room is small or use two loveseats," she says. "Go for an armoire that's 36 inches, a 6-by-9-foot rug, and a smaller scaled arm on a sofa."

Chicago designer Shelly Handman feels that larger scaled pieces are fine, as long as you don't overcrowd a room with too many. Author Landis agrees with Handman and thinks small scaled furniture has the opposite effect of what is often intended. "It's almost as if you're apologizing for having a smaller space. If you use a few large pieces and wider molding it changes a room's dimensions and makes elements seem more significant," she says.

Chicago designer Cindy Christensen takes a middle-of-the road stance and says it's not the scale as much as how pieces are placed. In a small living area, she likes to use two round coffee tables in front of a sofa and float chairs on either side but eschew end tables that break up the space.

She and others also suggest avoiding placing furnishings so you walk into their backs when entering a room, which makes it feel



[How to advertise](#)

smaller. Harris also recommends leaving enough space around pieces, preferably a minimum of 4 feet.

7. **Expand space through mirrors.** Used judiciously rather than on every wall, mirrors gracefully extend space. Some options from Chicago designer David Kaufman's repertoire: a large framed mirror resting against a wall, a mirrored backsplash in a kitchen, a mirrored wall in a bathroom that extends fully, from the counter to the ceiling and from end to end.
8. **Frame and install art and collections wisely.** Take time to frame and install your favorite artworks. If you hang just one piece of art on a wall, use a semi-large frame of about 2½ to 3 inches in width, suggests Gary J. Haller, president of Artistic Pictures Frames Inc. in St. Louis. To hang the work, place it at a point where your eye hits or is level with the top third of the work. "Most people hang art too high," he says. If you hang a group of artworks, use the same frame and possibly similar mats. The frame should measure between ¾ and 1 inch and the mat between ½ and 2 inches or in general twice the frame's size, Haller says.
9. **Choose patterns carefully.** Again, there's disagreement about using patterns. Designer Stern recommends staying away from busy patterns or large oversized ones. Handman thinks a single pattern can transform a room into a cozy, nurturing retreat. Vertical stripes in particular can create an illusion of height.
10. **Let in light.** Less is more is the favored advice for windows, with favorites being simple blinds, valences, cornices or airy curtains. The overall goal is to let in as much light as possible. If hanging curtains, install them above the window casing and down to the floor to play up height as well, says Handman.
11. **Unify floors.** Whether wood, tile or carpeting, try to use the same material throughout to avoid a choppy look. The exception is if you can shut a door and isolate a space.
12. **Accessorize smartly.** More important than scale, says Landis, is a "rich look" that comes from having quality accessories and details. "A few good pieces spread quality to everything else," she says. Examples: one good rug, good fabric for pillows, good lampshades, a good built-in, good drawer pulls and knobs.

To display collectibles, organize objects of the same genre together rather than spread them out, says Harris. "Put books together; put statues in a grouping. It shows off the whole and individual parts better and creates less of a cluttered look, which creates less of an energy drain," she says.
13. **Add something living/breathing.** Be sure to have something alive in every room whether it's a flowering plant, fresh flowers, a large tree, a fish tank. "It introduces life and color, which expands any space," Handman says.

Copyright © 2005, [Chicago Tribune](#)

>> Save 54% off the newsstand price - [Subscribe to the Chicago Tribune](#)

Chicago Tribune
SUBSCRIBER ADVANTAGE

Subscribers, did you know you can have free access to the last 365 days worth of Chicago Tribune stories by joining [Subscriber Advantage](#)?



Chicago Tribune
SUBSCRIBER ADVANTAGE