

Maximizing Space in a Smaller Home

10 surefire ways to live large in close quarters

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This article is reprinted from Log Home Living Magazine, July 2003
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Recently, I had the pleasure of touring a wonderful log home in Telluride, Colorado. I was particularly fond of it because in addition to its rugged charm, the living space was very well organized. When the real estate agent told me the square footage of the home, I was surprised. The place felt much larger than it was because the designer had used every inch of space so effectively.

With efficient planning and some proven design principles, you can maximize your home's space too. And when you're done, the home not only will feel larger, but it will "act" larger. Here are 10 ideas to help you create an open, expansive feel.

1) Make Every Inch Count

Having lived in small cottages, I know it can be wonderful to inhabit a compact, well-designed space. Everything has a logical place and you can live and work easily within the given area.

To design a small home successfully you need to examine carefully how you live and what you live with. Ask yourself which rooms you spend the most time in. Move beyond simply thinking, "What would I like?" to "What do I need?" and "How can I use this space more effectively?" The answers to these questions will help you create workspaces, kitchens and bathrooms that are compact and efficient. For example, to create more space in a small kitchen,

you might extend the cabinets to the ceiling and store rarely used items up high. And to maximize space elsewhere, you might limit the size of your bedrooms. They need not be small but they should not be gratuitously large either.

2) Eliminate Hallways

Perhaps the simplest way to create more usable space is to reduce the number of hallways in your home. You can do this by grouping central entry areas, stairwells and rooms around a central core. This way, you merge isolated living spaces into a cohesive whole. If a hallway is unavoidable, maximize the usable space by designing in a recessed alcove or a built-in bookcase.

3) Add Built-ins

The creative use of built-ins can save space normally occupied by furniture and closets. and take advantage of areas that are otherwise unusable because their size or shape makes furniture placement awkward.

Nooks and crannies can serve functional and attractive purposes. For example, a number of years ago while designing a very small kitchen space, I was given the challenge of displaying a large collection of knick-knacks. As a solution I removed the drywall between the partitions and recessed mirror-backed glass shelving within the stud spaces. It worked perfectly. You can create storage in even the smallest areas, including beneath stairs, above a stairwell, alongside the hearth or behind a false wall.

Custom built-in cabinetry is highly desirable but usually expensive. Fortunately there are a number of high-quality, off-the-shelf cabinet systems that use decorative finishing trim to achieve the look and feel of custom cabinetry at far less cost. Contractors can even use a

combination of mass-produced and custom built-in units to truly accommodate your storage needs.

4) Create Intimate Spaces

Even people who have large homes gravitate toward small cozy spaces. Intimate spaces meet the need for security and give more and varied spaces in which to live, without using valuable floor area. To create a cozy place in your home, consider an alcove for a bed or for reading, or a window seat off the kitchen so that guests can spend time with the chef without getting in the way.

This principle also extends beyond nooks, alcoves and bays to the primary rooms. For example, do you need a formal dining room if you only use it on holidays? Instead, you could design a more intimate eating area that can be expanded to accommodate infrequent large gatherings. Then you won't have an extra, often vacant room to furnish and dust.

5) Borrow Space

With careful planning and proper room relationships, each space can borrow from the one next to it. In the simplest example, you could design an open space that houses the dining room and living room. They'll still serve separate purposes, but each will appear larger than it would if there were a solid partition between them.

Room orientation and furniture placement can take this concept a step further. You might arrange the furniture to extend your dining table into the living room for large gatherings or, conversely, expand the living room into the dining room for entertaining.

6) Integrate Your Outdoor Spaces

Outdoor areas are less expensive to build than rooms inside your home; yet, if properly planned, they can serve as extensions of indoor spaces, giving you more bang for the buck. To integrate the outdoor spaces with the rest of your home, treat them as living spaces without exterior walls. Include several points of entry between indoors and outdoors and choose materials, furniture, colors and lighting that complement the interior spaces and give each its own character.

7) Create Transparency

When you can see from one end of your home to the other, it creates visual interest and makes your home seem larger than it actually is. In design terms, you organize your floorplan so that it has a linear view or “axis,” which can dramatically increase the feeling of space without adding extra square footage. This is called “creating transparency.”

The sense of transparency begins with your home’s entryway. Design your entry so you can see beyond it, rather than breaking your line of sight with a wall. If you’d like to have some sense of separation between your entry and your main living area, you can incorporate half walls or interior portals and openings. For the ultimate in transparency, extend your line of sight toward an outdoor living space and a picturesque view.

8) Vary Ceiling Height

Varying or raising your home’s ceiling height will increase the perceived space by increasing visual interest. Simply raising the ceiling height by 1 foot can give a very different

atmosphere to a room. In open spaces, such as central living areas, you can raise the ceiling even higher. Consider using some of this vaulted space for display shelving or lighting.

9) Vary Scale

If every element in your home's design is of a similar scale, the space can become monotonous to the eye and can seem to shrink visually. Juxtaposing some different scale elements, such as a low ceiling in your entry and a soaring cathedral ceiling in your great room, can make the space far more interesting and more expansive. However, this concept must be used with caution and subtlety. For example, using a huge amount of windows inappropriately may take the room out of balance and create the opposite of the desired effect—it could make your room look smaller rather than larger.

The same theory holds true when furnishing your home. By placing small details against larger elements, you will add visual interest and evoke a perceived increase in space. When working with furnishings, contrasting sizes can help avoid the monotony that sometimes affects small homes. Several prominent pieces make a room seem more spacious; clusters of small items create clutter and discord.

10) Make the Most of Décor

Once you have a plan that incorporates the above principles, finish your rooms in ways that maximize the perceived space. Adding accents, such as lighting and trim details, will make your home feel more alive. As your eye follows continuous design elements, such as flooring, columns, wall panels or built-ins, every space appears larger.

Subtle details will animate your space too. A room without depth or shadow feels lifeless and smaller than it actually is. Add some color and that feeling changes. For example, light colors tend to expand a space, whereas dark colors can provide depth and contrast. To achieve the greatest result, choose a variety of natural, complementary textures for your flooring and walls, as well as your furniture and window coverings.

With trim, colors and textures as a backdrop, thoughtful lighting strategies complete the picture. Accent lighting creates a contrast of light and shadow orienting your eye to specific areas while creating movement. Natural light can play an important role in defining and highlighting spaces and framing views. It can create visual interest and increased expansiveness. A smaller home with quality space planning, features and detailing can be a warmer, more intimate home at considerably less cost. Using simple techniques to increase space, both real and perceived, can maximize space and create a warm and cozy home for you and your family.

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