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# Downsizing Diaries

Reduce, Rearrange, Resettle: Four experts give tips on living large in a smaller space.

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Photography by Casey Dunn

Admit it. You've wondered what it would be like to live in the skyline. To look out the windows of your high-rise condo and see the mirror of Lady Bird Lake in the distance or the constellation of city lights twinkling below.

But as the city grows more vertical and its urban density increases, residents used to living in larger spaces may encounter a few stumbling blocks on their way to a more streamlined life. The difference between 2,100 square feet and 1,200 might not seem especially significant at first—at least not until you start moving in and asking yourself, "Now where should this go?"

We talked to three designers and a professional organizer to get their advice on how to make a smooth transition from living large to living small and yet keep what's most important—and add what's most functional—when downsizing from a larger space to a smaller one.

Laura Britt, owner of Laura Britt Design says, "It's almost like a three-dimensional puzzle. Every inch really does count." Britt, who has worked on designs for the 360 Condominiums project, believes that to live in a smaller space successfully, it's essential that you analyze what takes up that space, and be certain that "everything you bring into your home is of not only high functional value but also that it be of high personal and aesthetic value." One way to get the aesthetics right, she says, is to get the scale and proportion right. "For smaller spaces, visual lightness is important."

If lightness is essential in condo design, so is establishing the right focus. Fern Santini, principal designer for Abode, is working on Austin's Four Seasons Residences

project. "You have incredible views, and obviously you don't want to do anything that takes away from the view," she says. To that end, her designs "float" the furniture away from the glass and keep the walls neutral so that nothing competes with arguably the best design element of any condo—the view.

Understanding your space—and how much of it you have—is the place to start for Yvette Clay, a certified professional organizer and owner of the Austin location of firm, Living Order. "The most important thing to know about the space you're moving into is the square footage, the dimensions... and what furniture is going to come into that space." Clay advises using the measurements of rooms and pieces as a way to start the decision-making process of what to keep, what to toss, and what to repurpose.

Unless the laws of the universe change and two objects really can occupy the same space, decluttering is the first, and most important, step, says designer Tracy Curtis, of 3 Fold Design, who relocated from the West Austin house she raised her children in to a Cambridge Tower condo one-tenth the size of their former residence. "When you're downsizing, the main thing you have to do is to get rid of all your old stuff," she says. "We sold thousands of records and boxes of books and gave our children the family antiques." And, she stresses, editing can be a liberating thing. "It is fabulous to live with a lot less. You don't have anything you don't like or don't need anymore."

Clay agrees. "Maintenance is probably 95 percent of staying organized," she says, then adds that the fewer items you own that require upkeep, the better.

**FACING PAGE** Closets with sleek bi-fold doors provide storage without taking up any extra space, allowing the Curtis' the luxury to sit back and enjoy the spectacular view from the ninth floor of their Cambridge Tower condo.





**FACING PAGE:** The Curtis' utilize built-in bookshelves and a drop leaf dining table to maximize their living area. Tracy Curtis and Page Gandy of 3 Fold Design emphasize the importance of scale when living in a smaller space. "You probably don't want to bring in big hulking pieces like you're grandmother's secretary," Curtis says. "It's all about balance." **THIS PAGE:** When choosing which furniture to bring when relocating to a smaller space, Tracy Curtis recommends incorporating pieces with clean lines. "A couple of modern pieces can really freshen up the furniture you've collected over a lifetime."

"Think vertically. Use every square foot the best you can by going vertical. You have to use a design sensibility." — Laura Britt

Of course, decluttering is simply the starting point. So what happens once you've ditched that overstuffed sofa you never really liked and you're still faced with what seems like the square footage of a drink coaster? "Think vertically," says Britt. "Use every square foot the best you can by going vertical." And, she emphasizes, that doesn't mean packing the walls floor-to-ceiling with storage. "You have to use a design sensibility."

She talks about a vertical-space solution for a client who needed extra seating, art display, book storage, toy storage, and a place for the television. "We designed a custom piece of millwork that is basically a cantilevered floating shelf system, both vertical and horizontal," she says. "It solved a multitude of problems they were having living in their home in less than two feet of floor space."

If a cantilevered floating shelf system sounds like a pretty neat trick, that's because it is. The Curtis' gutted their condo and redesigned it utilizing floor to ceiling bookshelves, hidden walk-in closets, and two-foot-deep pull out pantry shelves in the kitchen. "You should incorporate storage into as many furniture pieces as possible," says Curtis. This means that furniture like a coffee table, for example, should have more than one function.

So what other tricks can the would-be condo dweller utilize? Clay the organizer advises her clients to analyze the function of each space to get the layout right. "When we talk to our clients," she says, "we ask, 'Okay, what is this room used for? Do we need to rethink what's stored in the cabinets?'" And, she notes, "the visual aspect is very important. If you can't see it, you're going to forget you have it, and you're not going to be able to find it."

Layering of functionality is also key, says Laura Britt. "In larger homes, we might have spaces dedicated to one function: a media room, a craft room, an art studio." She advises finding a solution that can help

you get the most kinds of use out of a single space. "It may be a furnishing solution, a storage solution, or a location solution," she says.

Santini recommends a few tricks of light for making a small space seem more inviting and atmospheric. "Use light at different levels," she says. She likes lots of lamplight, avoiding overhead lights and making liberal use of candles. Another technique combines reflective walls and soft, low lighting. "In a small space, I love using a high-gloss paint or lacquer," she says. "There is nothing as beautiful as a small space painted in a really dramatic color that reflects light. It gives it such beautiful drama." And sometimes, she notes, you've got to acknowledge smallness rather than fighting it. "You're never going to make a small space look huge, so sometimes it's better to opt for just making it fabulous," she says.

As the condo towers continue to add their spires to the city's skyline, there seems to be no slackening in the demand for smaller, more compact living spaces. Curtis agrees and says she's been happy to find how easy condo living is. For one, Tracy's husband Greg, author and Humanities Coordinator at the Harry Ransom Center, walks to work every day. She also notes that the condo's upkeep is virtually effortless. "We traded constant repairs, lawn maintenance, and increasing taxes for the freedom of living here," she says. And for a couple who loves to travel, condo living couldn't be more conducive. "We don't have to worry about anything while we're gone. We just walk out the door."

So is it possible to be happy in a space in which every inch is utilized to its fullest and you have to get rid of something every time you bring in something new? According to Yvette Clay, the answer is yes. "Simplicity is underrated," she says. "It's beautiful to be able to walk into a living room that has open space, that has no clutter. Because that provides a sense of not only calm and serenity but good energy. It feels good to be able to really breathe in a room." ■