

## A 95-Square-Foot Tokyo Apartment: 'I Wouldn't Live Anywhere Else'

Meet the young Japanese who have decided to live in a shoe box.



By Hikari Hida

Published Oct. 3, 2022 Updated Oct. 4, 2022, 12:42 p.m. ET

TOKYO — At the end of a long day at work in the offices of Japan's professional baseball league, Asumi Fujiwara returned to her apartment and changed into pajamas. She wanted to get in a light workout before going to bed, so she placed her vinyl yoga mat on the floor in front of the toilet, rolling it past the single kitchen burner and the one-slot toaster and toward the foot of her desk.

After a bit of stretching, she stood to get into the warrior position. Instead of extending her arms fully, though, she pulled her elbows into her sides. "I need to modify my poses or else I will hit something," Ms. Fujiwara, 29, said.

Such is life in a 95-square-foot Tokyo apartment.

With its high property prices and the world's most populous metropolitan area, Tokyo has long been known for small accommodations. But these new apartments — known as three-tatami rooms, based on how many standard Japanese floor mats would cover the living space — are pushing the boundaries of normal living.

A real estate developer, Spilytus, has been leading the charge toward ever-tinier spaces. It has been operating these shoe-box apartments since 2015, and with more than 1,500 residents now in its 100 buildings, demand has remained strong.



Asumi Fujiwara has had to alter her yoga poses in the tight space. Noriko Hayashi for The New York Times

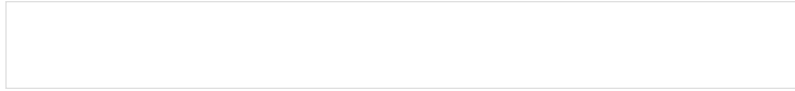
While the units are half the size of an average studio apartment in Tokyo, they have 12-foot ceilings and an attic-like loft for sleeping. They are also stylish, with pristine white floors and walls, and with some efficient arranging, it is possible to squeeze a washing machine, a fridge, a sofa and a work desk inside.

The apartments are not for those on a really tight budget. Cheaper apartments can be found, though they are usually decades old. But the microapartments, which rent for \$340 to \$630 a month, are a couple hundred dollars less than other studio apartments in similar areas. And they are situated near trendy locations in central Tokyo like Harajuku, Nakameguro and Shibuya, which are generally quite expensive, with luxury boutiques, cafes and restaurants. Most of the buildings are close to subway stations — the top priority for many young people.

Over two-thirds of the buildings' residents are people in their 20s, who in Japan earn on average about \$17,000 to \$20,000 a year, according to government data. (Wages in Tokyo are on the higher end.) Some are drawn by the minimal initial fees and the lack of a deposit or "gift money" — a nonrefundable payment to the landlord that can be as much as three months' rent — for many rentals.

The small spaces work for the lifestyle of many young Japanese. In Japan, it is not customary to host guests in homes, with nearly a third of Japanese people saying they have never had friends over, according to a survey by Growth From Knowledge, a data provider for the consumer goods industry.

Ms. Fujiwara has not even had her partner over in the nearly two years she has been living in her apartment. "This space is for me," she said.



Many Japanese, young and old, also work long hours, leaving little time to spend at home. And a growing share of people in Tokyo are living alone, making smaller spaces more desirable. Such people are more likely to eat out, or grab one of the many premade meal options from convenience stores or groceries, so a full kitchen is less necessary.

Yugo Kinoshita, 19, a college student who works part time making beef bowls at a chain restaurant, is among those for whom an apartment is little more than a place to sleep.



Mr. Kinoshita, a student with a part-time job, doesn't spend much time at home. Noriko Hayashi for The New York Times

By the time his shift is over, it is an hour to midnight and he is exhausted. He eats his free staff meal, goes to a "sento" public bath and passes out the second he gets back to his Spilytus unit. His days otherwise are filled with doing schoolwork for his degree in nutrition and seeing friends.

When he does spend some waking hours at home, the box that acts as a TV stand transforms into a study desk and kitchen counter. To clean the floor, all he needs is a lint roller.

Even after having had to bid a teary-eyed goodbye to his collection of Nike Dunks because there was no place for them, Mr. Kinoshita said that at this point in his life, "I wouldn't live anywhere else."

For some residents, the tiny apartments offer a gateway to long-deferred independence.

Two years ago, Kana Komatsubara, 26, started looking for an apartment so she could finally move out of her parents' home in the suburbs of Tokyo.

She wanted a recently built space, easy access to work, and a toilet and a shower in separate rooms (a common request in Japan) — all within her relatively tight budget. She was not necessarily looking for a microunit, but her search led her to a Spilytus apartment.

"Of course, the bigger the better. It never hurts to have a larger space," she said. "This was simply the best option for me at the time."

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Komatsubara, a nail stylist, walked a minute from her nearest subway station in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo, through a narrow alleyway lined with worn-down homes, and unlocked the main door to her apartment building.





Kana Komatsubara, 26, settled on a microapartment after deciding to leave her parents' home. Noriko Hayashi for The New York Times

She walked up three flights of narrow stairs — the buildings have no elevators — to her room, which was behind one of the identical burgundy doors lining the common hallway.

Inside, a tiny “genkan,” or entryway, had enough room for exactly three pairs of shoes. A 20-inch-wide hallway led to the main room, past the kitchen sink, where Ms. Komatsubara leaves a tube of toothpaste and a bottle of mouthwash.

She stores her work equipment, such as blue-light machines for gel nails and mannequin hands to practice on, in the place intended to hold a washing machine. A plastic trash bag hanging off her door knob must be taken out almost daily.

One benefit of small living, she said, is less ice cream. Her mini-fridge lacks a working freezer, so she eats less of it. That, along with her daily boxing routine, means she has gotten into better shape.

Ms. Fujiwara, the baseball league employee, was drawn to her microapartment after the pandemic began. She had been living in a shared house, but not having space to herself while working from home caused stress and anxiety.

Her smaller space has pushed her to live more sustainably, she said. “Small living has helped me think twice whenever I want to buy something new,” she added.

Yet hanging next to her sink is a stack of 40 or so brown paper cups. “I don’t have space to dry any dishes,” she said.



The small apartments are near trendy areas. Noriko Hayashi for The New York Times

She and Ms. Komatsubara both wish they had more space for clothing, which they neatly hang in their lofts. Ms. Komatsubara goes to her parents' house at the start of every season, most recently to swap out her crop tops for sweaters.

Both women gave up having washing machines — they are expected in most Japanese apartments — in order to use the space more efficiently, and they instead go to a coin laundry once or twice a week.

Mr. Kinoshita does have a washing machine, but with no dryer, he hangs his wet clothes on the railing where his curtains should be. He also can't do some of the homework for his nutrition degree at home, because his kitchen is too small.

Ms. Komatsubara has decided to move on from her apartment — because she wants something even cheaper.

"As I've grown older, my requirements, what I want out of an apartment, has shifted," she said.

Hikari Hida reports from the Tokyo bureau, where she covers news and features in Japan. She joined The Times in 2020. @hikarimaehida