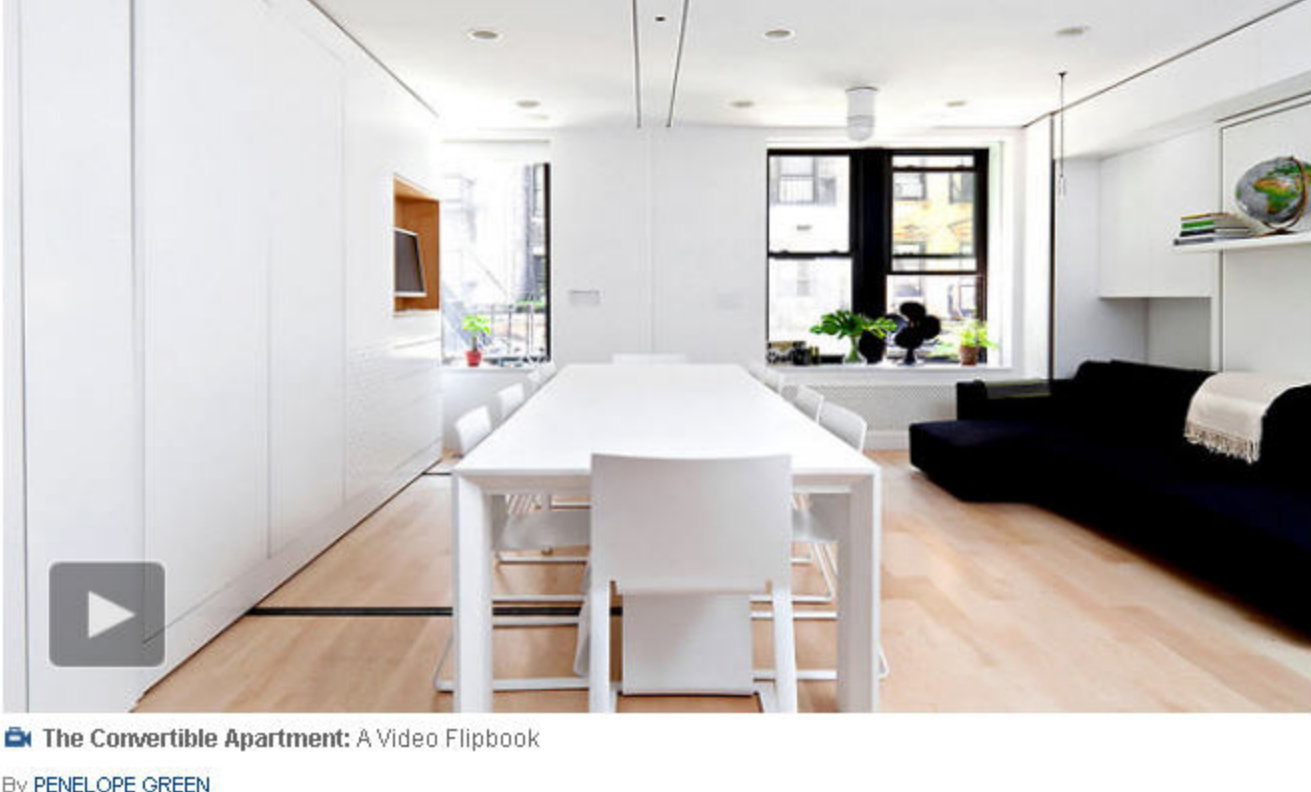


Selling the Pared-Down Life

The Founder of TreeHugger and His Apartment of the Future

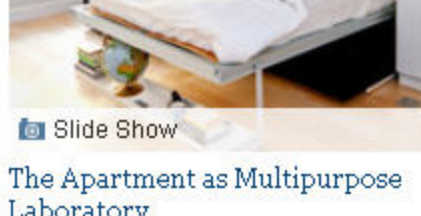


 The Convertible Apartment: A Video Flipbook

By **PENELOPE GREEN**
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IT may be that the house of the future is an apartment — at 420 square feet, a very small apartment — in a century-old tenement building on Sullivan Street. Shiny and white, it has movable walls that allow it to morph from one room into six, as well as expandable furniture and filtered, or “country,” air, as the owner, Graham Hill, put it recently while showing off the apartment’s convertible tricks like a modern-day Bernadette Castro, dressed neatly in a black merino wool polo shirt, black pants and black Vans.

Multimedia



 Slide Show

[The Apartment as Multipurpose Laboratory](#)

This laboratory, as Mr. Hill calls it, for small-space, sustainable and — it must be stressed — high-end living is the first tangible product from his fledgling company, LifeEdited. It comes with an awkward manifesto that nonetheless manages to gather an armful of social and economic trends and philosophies, including happiness research, the booming field of collaborative consumption (which uses new technology to share resources like cars, toys and books, on the Zipcar model) and data on the proven efficiencies of cities.

This is a medley of new-old systems that will be familiar to habitués of recent TED conferences, where Mr. Hill has been a featured speaker, and to frequenters of the self-help section of bookstores and even old-school urbanists and Buckminster Fuller fans.

“Design your life to include more money, health and happiness with less stuff, space and energy,” as the manifesto reads, is both a mouthful and a paradox for an enterprise that hopes to be in the business of selling, well, lots of stuff, in much the same way the come-ons of the latest miracle diet promise weight loss if you gorge on all your favorite foods.

Yet Mr. Hill, the 41-year-old founder of TreeHugger, a Web site that made environmentalism attractive and aspirational by promoting a global, modern vision of sustainable design (think architectural chicken coops, green roofs and “ethical” condos), has shown that he can profit from his own very sincere idealism and good taste. After all, he sold the site in 2007 to Discovery Communications, the company that owns the Discovery Channel, for \$10 million.

Mr. Hill, who is Canadian, is trained as an architect and a product designer. TreeHugger, which went live in 2004, was his second Internet venture. His first, a Web design company, was sold in 1998 for \$10 million as well, clearly his lucky number.

“Graham is a rare breed, a pragmatic idealist,” said his friend Nick Denton, founder of Gawker media. It was Mr. Denton who offered up Gawker’s blogging platform as a template for organizing TreeHugger in its infancy. In return, Mr. Hill gave him a piece of the business.

“He’s shied away from tokenism and from empty idealism,” Mr. Denton added. “I think it’s kind of cool for Graham to come up with a sustainable way of living in cities instead of showing million-dollar solar panels on houses in the Napa Valley, which is not the way most people live.”

“It’s always been about bobos in paradise, hasn’t it?” he continued, referring to the TreeHugger demographic, now primed to be customers for LifeEdited. “Those wealthy urban types yearning to get in touch with themselves and the planet, and who are actually rather more effective than their hippie ancestors. I always liked the name TreeHugger, which was like taking a word like ‘queer’ that’s been used as an insult and reclaiming it. It’s postmodern-ironic, but not so ironic as to be devoid of principle.”

Sort of like Mr. Hill, whom Mr. Denton described as “this Maui-New York surfing-TED person spewing carbon into the environment, even though he pays for it,” referring to the way Mr. Hill mitigates the impact of his constant air travel by buying carbon offsets. “I always joke that my footprint is lighter than his, because the only place I travel is from my apartment to my office.”

Indeed, the kite-surfing, skateboarding Mr. Hill has been mostly camping for the last decade, running his business out of a series of hotel rooms and small apartments in cities like Buenos Aires, Bangkok and Barcelona, Spain, to name just a few, as well as from a trailer on the Baja, a garage in Maui and even a bunk on Plastiki, the boat-mission made from 12,500 plastic bottles and captained by David de Rothschild, the banking-heir environmentalist.

It was these experiences, Mr. Hill will tell you, which required culling his stuff to fit into one small rolling suitcase, that made him seize on the notion of “small” as a business plan.

“Small is sexy,” he says in his six-minute TED talk. A YouTube hit, with 1.3 million views as of this week, it also includes these aphorisms: “Transfer ownership to access,” “Own as little as possible so you don’t have to store too much” and “Editing is the skill of this century: editing space, media consumption, friends.”

Mr. Hill is certainly not the first to trumpet the benefits of a pared-down life. There’s a straight line from Buckminster Fuller to Sarah Susanka, the architect and author of “The Not So Big House,” published in 1998 at the height of the country’s McMansion expansion, and to the Tiny House folks, the D.I.Y. builders of microhouses.

There are the clutter people and the simplicity people and authors like Dave Bruno, who wrote a book about editing his possessions down to 100 things. Barbara Flanagan, an architect, product designer and writer, did Mr. Bruno two better, with her 2008 book, “Flanagan’s Smart Home: The 98 Essentials for Starting Out, Starting Over, Sealing Back.”

Still, “one of the things the TEDsters embrace is not that the idea needs to be new, but the idea needs to be heard,” said Katrina Heron, a former editor in chief of Wired magazine who is now an editor at large at Newsweek and The Daily Beast, describing the hyper-voluble idea mavens who flock to the TED conference and others.

It’s easy to make fun of those who would conflate consumption with environmentalism, but this is the poignant place we find ourselves as a capitalist country in the 21st century.

In 2009 and 2010, Mr. Hill bought two apartments in a tenement building on Sullivan Street: a 420-square-foot cube for \$287,000 and a 350-square-foot cube for \$280,000. He camped in the smaller one, and held a competition to design the larger space, with a brief that included the need to seat 12 at a dinner table and have guests sleep over, among other efficiencies.

There were more than 300 entries, and Catalin Sandu, a Romanian architecture student now employed by Mr. Hill, won for his transformer-style apartment, in a crowd-sourced selection process promoted by the TreeHugger site.

Friday was Mr. Hill’s first night in his new apartment, and he slept well, having arrived on the red-eye after a weekend of boar hunting in Texas followed by four days in Las Vegas, where he was pitching an investment in LifeEdited to Tony Hsieh, the billionaire chief executive of Zappos, the online shoe company. It was his second visit there: he and Mr. Hsieh met at this year’s TED conference, and Mr. Hsieh drove him back to Las Vegas on his Happiness bus.

Mr. Hsieh runs his business like a summer camp with its own songs and bonding rituals that are either horrifying or invigorating, depending on your personality. He is the author of a motivational book, “Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion and Purpose,” and is much taken with the work of the Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, whose writings promote cities as incubators of creativity and profit and who proposes an ideal density-to-productivity ratio of 100 people per acre.

(Mr. Hsieh looks for books with any variation of the word “happy” in their titles, he said, and Mr. Glaeser’s best seller, “Triumph of the City,” has the subhead “How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier.”)

Armed with these ideas, as well as a passion for a Las Vegas bar called the Downtown Cocktail Room, Mr. Hsieh is investing \$350 million in the area surrounding the bar to build a corporate campus for Zappos, as well as mixed-use developments that will incorporate a LifeEdited apartment building created by Mr. Hill and his new team, which includes Mr. Sandu and Guerin Glass, an architecture firm in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn.

This is where LifeEdited gets really interesting: Mr. Hill’s group has proposed apartment buildings designed around large, open courtyards with units ranging from 300 to 600 square feet. It is quite something to promote studio-apartment living in a state that has so much housing stock available at such a steep discount. (Nevada still leads the country in foreclosures.) Later this month, Mr. Hsieh will try it out for himself, when he comes to New York to stay in the LifeEdited apartment.

“It sounds great in a TED talk,” Mr. Hsieh said. “But it’s one of those things you just have to see.”

Mr. Hill, whose possessions run to athletic gear and vitamins, has domesticated the apartment with objects belonging to his girlfriend, Kumara Sawyers, a massage therapist and yoga instructor. He chose a globe, an antique camera, an antler and a potted plant, along with a few books like Mr. Glaeser’s. There were also products bought to illustrate LifeEdited principles, like a heavy fork that was supposed to do double duty as a knife (“a knork,” Mr. Hill said) but didn’t work very well.

In the closets, there is a tiny wardrobe of merino wool, which Mr. Hill said needs less washing than other fabrics. The showstoppers were the Murphy bed and the expandable dining table, designed by Resource Furniture, a Manhattan maker of convertible furniture that is now a LifeEdited sponsor. The movable wall was pretty neat, too.

But Mr. Hill fretted over what he saw as the fussiness of the white surfaces.

“LifeEdited is about having less to worry about, and I’m already worried about a couple of things,” he said. “We need to make things that are cheaper and tougher, with more patina, that can handle wear and tear. That moving wall is too expensive.” (Its hardware cost about \$4,850, and was produced by a maker of library stacks.)

“How can we build a cost-efficient wall that’s safe and works well?” he continued. “It’s all too expensive, but it’s also a lab. I’m used to that with TreeHugger. We had expensive stuff at the beginning. There’s a role, and a good role I think, to be played by early adopters and people with money. Which helps get things out there, and gets the volume up so prices can come down.”

All in, the renovation of the apartment cost about \$365,000, \$50,000 of which went toward the accelerated deadline Mr. Hill gave his builders. Since a goal is to offer LifeEdited apartments that save people “significant money,” Mr. Hill suggested this calculus as a way of taking the sting out of the Sullivan Street price tag. He added up the square footage of the “rooms” created by the apartment — kitchen, bathroom, living room, dining room, office, master bedroom and guest bedroom — to 1,100 square feet.

“Looked at this way,” he wrote in an e-mail, “you’re getting the functionality of an apartment almost triple the size. Granted, you can only use one space at a time and this requires a transformation but still ...”

SULLIVAN STREET is a special ecosystem, a micro-neighborhood of century-old brick tenement buildings and hipsterish cafes like Local, which serves farm-to-table sandwiches and has built a mini-park in a parking space out front. The “remarkably well-preserved examples of turn-of-the-century Italian immigrant life in New York City,” as Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, said recently, are the reason he is working to get the area, south of Washington Square Park and known as the South Village, designated a historic district.

And the building on Sullivan Street, where Mr. Hill is working out his ecotopia and brand laboratory, “is not your standard tenement,” Mr. Berman said. “It is a very interesting place, a model tenement built in 1911 by a fraternal organization of Italian immigrants for the explicit purpose of creating housing that was more humane, cleaner, airier and brighter than the surrounding tenements, which were built to cram as many people as possible in there as the law would allow.”

There are ironies here, of course, not the least of which is the idea of turning working-class housing into luxury apartments for moneyed, childless global nomads like Mr. Hill. On Saturday, one of Mr. Hill’s neighbors, Angela D’Arcangelo, stopped by to inspect the finished construction. She said she was turning 102 in June and that she had lived in the building since she was 6. She peered through the door. “Very nice,” she said finally.

Could Mr. Hill imagine living here as long as Ms. D’Arcangelo had?

He looked horrified. “I don’t think in decades,” he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 17, 2012

An earlier version of this article misidentified Catalin Sandu, an architecture student, as Hungarian. He is Romanian.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 17, 2012

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of Guerin Glass, an architecture firm. It is not in Manhattan.

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