

New York micro-studios: Living well in 275 square feet

Scott Elyanow makes his tiny space work with 'purges' and clever storage. A New York pilot program signals growing interest in shrinking housing.



Scott Elyanow lives in a 275-square-foot apartment in New York's West Village. He says he enjoys keeping his life uncluttered. (Carolyn Cole, Los Angeles Times / September 18, 2012)

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By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times

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NEW YORK — Scott Elyanow had clung to the red, long-sleeved sweatshirt with the words "Marblehead High School" for 20 years. It had softened with age, like the memory of the long-ago love who had given it to him.

But Elyanow was nearing 40, and what he had gained in years and wisdom he hadn't gained in living space — his apartment measures 275 square feet, including the bathroom, kitchen and an entryway with overhead clearance of 5 feet, 7 inches. So he took a picture of the sweatshirt for a keepsake, then tossed the worn piece of clothing into a "purge" pile, a system Elyanow has adopted during his seven years living in a so-called micro-studio apartment in New York City.

"I really, truly don't accumulate stuff," said Elyanow, a real estate agent with Citi Habitats. He lives and works in Manhattan's West Village, where the crooked, cobblestoned streets are lined with 19th century buildings famous for charming but cramped apartments.

PHOTOS: N.Y. micro-studio

If Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has his way, the city soon will have far more tiny apartments to accommodate a burgeoning need for smaller, cheaper living spaces.

"Today there are about 1.8 million one- and two-person households in the city, but there are only about 1 million studio and one-bedroom apartments. You notice the mismatch," Bloomberg said in July as he announced a competition for designing a building dominated by micro-studios.

The building will be part of a pilot program called adAPT NYC, which could create a new housing model for America's biggest city — showing that small doesn't necessarily mean dark, dismal and musty. The winning design must include apartments no larger than 300 square feet, including a kitchen, a bathroom with a tub, and windows that look out on air, not air shafts.

The city won't pay for the construction, but will provide the space: a city-owned lot on Manhattan's East 27th Street currently used for parking. The winner will be announced later in the year.

Nationwide census figures bear out what New York officials say is a trend toward solo living. In 2010, 28% of U.S. households were single-person; in 1950, it was 9.5%. Los

Angeles mirrors the current national numbers, but in New York City, the percentage of single-person households is 32%.

New York isn't the only city to experiment with micro-units. San Francisco is considering shrinking the minimum for rental units from 290 to 220 square feet. At the urging of Boston's mayor, some new buildings containing that city's version of a micro-studio — smaller than 450 square feet — are being built.

New York's plan has grabbed special attention because of the city's reputation as a place where people already live in minuscule homes, and because of Bloomberg's reputation as a social engineer bent on transforming Gotham from a chaotic metropolis into a more European-style model of civility. He has turned Times Square into a pedestrian mall, replaced precious parking spaces with bike lanes, banned smoking in most public places, and cracked down on trans fats in restaurant and deli foods.

Now comes this, a plan that by virtue of New York's size and influence could prompt other high-density urban areas to address the need for "right-sized housing," as the city's Department of Housing and Urban Development puts it.

"It makes sense to try this out," Bloomberg said before walking over to a mock-up floor plan for one of the New York units and demonstrating the — er — ease with which one might step from bed to bath in a 10-by-30-foot space.

That's only six times larger than the average jail cell, or about the size of some ATM vestibules in Times Square, local media pointed out as they noted the irony of the billionaire mayor, who lives in a spacious town house, singing the praises of diminutive dwellings.

What's tiny to some, though, is grand to people like Ryan Mitchell, who advocates drastic downsizing on his [the Tiny Life website](#) and offers tips on how to squeeze yourself happily into 100 to 200 square feet.

"I realize that is an extreme," said Mitchell, 28, of Charlotte, N.C. He currently occupies what he calls a "normal-sized" home while he saves to build himself a tiny house there that will have 130 square feet of living space on two levels.

"I don't expect and I don't think the majority of us will get to a point where we're living in that type of dwelling," Mitchell said. "But I think it's important to show there's an alternative to McMansions."

Mitchell came to embrace the concept of tiny living after a job loss in 2008. He found another job, but unemployment made him averse to debt. Like many small-living fans, Mitchell also wanted to reduce his carbon footprint. He plans to build his tiny house in the fall and has been steadily weeding his belongings.

"I'm pretty lean in terms of what I have. That said, I'm going to have to get a little leaner," said Mitchell, who calls his de-cluttering system the "box method." He puts items into a box and revisits it after six months. Whatever hasn't been used is thrown or given away — kitchen knives, clothes, dishes, pencils.

Elyanow purges every six months with the help of a friend, a professional de-clutterer who goes through his closet as Elyanow watches. Whatever hasn't been used, doesn't fit or is out of style gets thrown away or donated to charity, sometimes after being photographed for the memories. Four years ago, Elyanow finally shed the Marblehead High School sweatshirt.

"I'd kept it because it was comfortable, and I didn't want to throw it away because of sentimental value," said Elyanow, now 42, who has also used the picture-taking approach with old T-shirts from Grateful Dead shows.

He has even taken pictures of pictures with his digital camera, to replace snapshots with space-saving computer images.

"It's not as much fun as looking at snapshots in a photo album, but at the same time, how often do you go and dig up your albums?" said Elyanow, whose apartment is on the ground floor of a brick building constructed in 1840. Mirrors, tall French windows, a high ceiling and lack of clutter give the illusion of more space in the apartment, where everything doubles as storage.

There are drawers beneath the bed; ottomans open to reveal storage hutches; big pillows on the bed hide a wall closet. Shoes go into the laundry hamper, and dirty clothes are taken every few days to the laundromat to keep the closet and hamper from getting too crowded. They aren't picked up again until he has a new batch of laundry to deliver. Pots and pans stay in the oven. The only thing Elyanow keeps in storage are winter coats.

"I have plenty of space to do yoga, stretch and exercise," said Elyanow, whose furniture is arranged to leave the center of his living room clear. That avoids the need for awkward maneuvering as Elyanow walks the roughly five steps from bed to bathroom, where the door is a step from the nearest chair and roughly the same distance from the kitchen.

It helps that Elyanow is neither tall nor wide, allowing him to move easily within his apartment — even in the kitchen, which is so narrow that getting more than one person into it involves walking single file. The bathroom is also thin, but long enough to house a bathtub.

He's divided the main room into four distinct spaces: the bed, the mini-sofa, the soft, white leather chair and a desk. Fold-up chairs in the building hallway provide additional seating for the regular parties he throws. He says a dozen people fit comfortably.

About the only area that even looks crowded is the kitchen, with its tightly packed shelves resembling a tiny, overstuffed grocery store. But Elyanow eats out most of the time. "I don't think I've used the oven since I moved in," he said, underscoring what tiny living fans say is key to success: making the outside world a natural extension of your home life.

That's easy in New York, with its countless cafes, bars, parks, cinemas and museums, and it explains why even the tiniest studios in desirable neighborhoods remain hot property. "If my apartment ever came up for sale, I would absolutely buy it," said Elyanow, who rents his place.

A few blocks away, S. Hunie Kwon, a broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman, showed off a 275-square-foot studio on the market for \$339,000. It would fetch more if it didn't require walking up five flights of stairs.

"By the time people get up here, the general reaction to the place is 'wow,'" said Kwon, noting the raised ceilings, wood-burning fireplace, built-in bookshelves and a folding table that disappears into the wall. It rents for \$2,400 a month, which Kwon and Elyanow acknowledged might shock non-New Yorkers.

"They'll say something like, 'My master bathroom is bigger than this apartment!' I'm like, 'We know, we know, we know,'" Elyanow said.

But the fact that people continue to clamor for such property shows that size doesn't matter if the location is great, said Rick Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Bell supports the mayor on the micro-unit proposal and once lived on a 200-square-foot houseboat on the Hudson River, where his luncheonette table could be lowered and used as a guest bed.

"People would rather have a small apartment in a great place than a huge house in the middle of nowhere," said Bell, who predicts that older people whose children have moved on will be just as drawn to micro-units as recent college graduates or young professionals moving to New York for their first jobs.

"The cultural shift toward minimizing is not just about cars or cellphones," he said. "It's about the idea that super-abundance is a kind of selfishness our country can't afford anymore."

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