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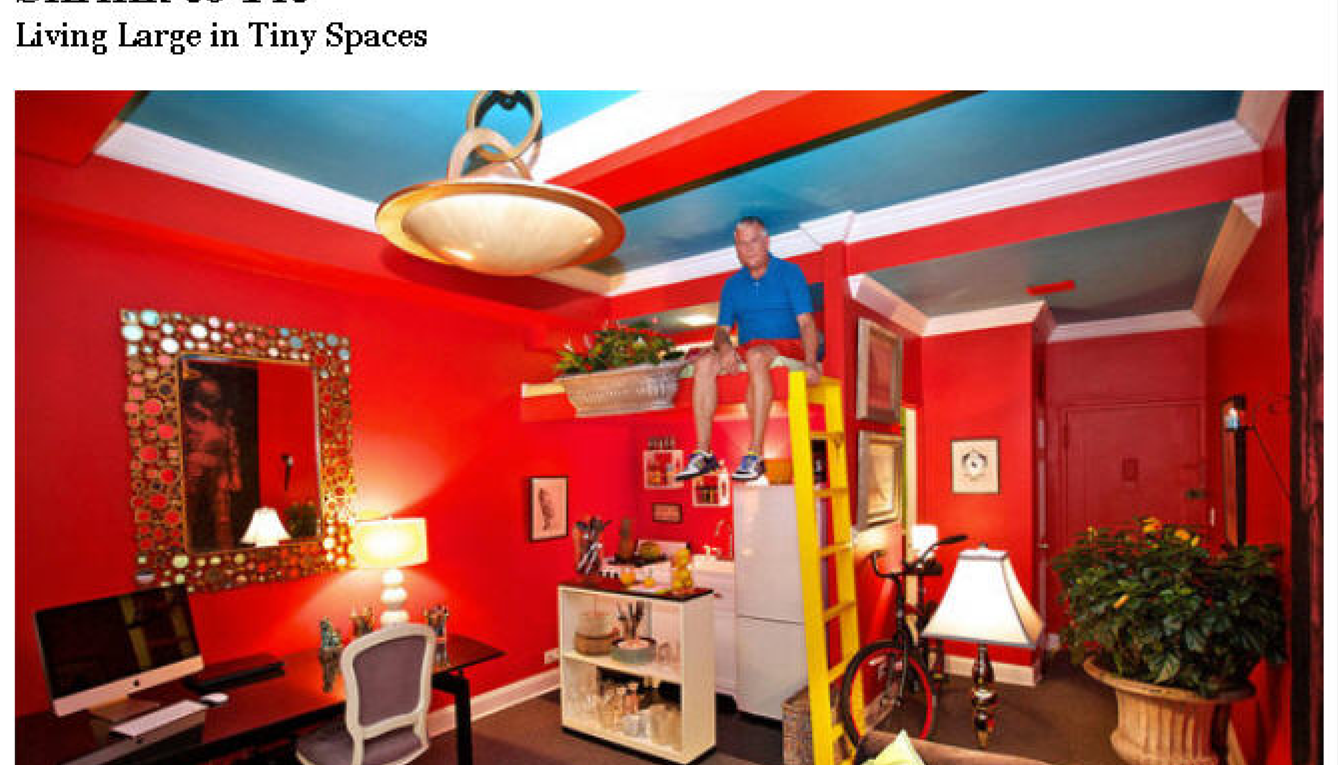
Living Large in Tiny Spaces



Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

ORGANIZATION MAN J. Michael Moore, an interior designer, lives and works in a 225-square-foot studio in the East 50s.

By JAN HOFFMAN
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IN July, when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced his competition to create a building of residential "micro-units" in Manhattan, each ranging from 275 to 300 square feet, the plan ignited the imagination of countless architects and developers.

It also gave many New Yorkers a joltingly fresh perspective. For those who already consider themselves space-starved, quarters that are even more cramped seemed inconceivable. Yet to others, an apartment of that size sounded crazy-huge.

Consider Gab Stolarski, who happily renewed the lease for her West Village studio apartment— all 170 square feet of it.

As she welcomes a visitor to her fourth-floor walk-up, Ms. Stolarski, a manager in the digital sales group at Condé Nast, recites the stock reaction to her pinkie toehold in Manhattan: " 'Oh! Ohhh. It's ... cute! And you have a bathroom, too!' "

Plus 35 pairs of shoes.

Although her charming aerie has a working fireplace and a courtyard view, here is what Ms. Stolarski's apartment does not have: a couch; tchotchkes; specks of dirt; paperwork ("I'm 25," she shrugs. "I'm a digital girl."); food.

Yet the studio, which was represented by Prudential Douglas Elliman, perfectly matches her priorities. A clotheshorse who doesn't cook, she stores sweaters, not soy sauce, in her kitchen cabinets. She covers her stove burners with a cutting board — not for serving cheese and crackers, but as a counter area to dump sunglasses and her purse du jour. More important, she lives in her favorite neighborhood, near transportation, and for a rent that is almost bearable: $1,745 a month (Manhattan one-bedroom rents have inched over $3,300). As for entertaining guests? Like many others with no space to spare, she usually meets friends at bars and restaurants.

"The city as living room is key," said Susanne Schindler, an architect with Team R8, a design group that contributed to Making Room, an initiative of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, which explores designs for diverse housing options, including micro-units.

The allure of living in New York City, particularly for young singles, is as inexorable as the cruel math of making it happen. With rents heading in one direction only and more people wanting to live here, it's a good bet that most people who move to the city will get considerably less space than they had hoped. But after they work through all the mental moves required to justify their choice to the dumbfounded — "You're paying that much for this?"— comes the real adjustment: nesting in a space scarcely bigger than a bird's nest.

For newcomers, that mental realignment can take considerable effort. Yes, large wall mirrors are a venerable design trick. The overstuffed couch can find its way to the street. But how do you fit your brain into the tight corset of your new home?

That is the challenge to renters that the Bloomberg administration set up with its competitive bid for architects and developers. The goal, said city housing officials, is to help singles remain in New York, contributing to its financial and creative lifeblood. According to the mayor's office, the city has 1.8 million one- and two-person households, but scarcely half the available housing scaled to fit — only one million studios and one-bedroom apartments. The need for smaller housing will only increase: planning officials project that by 2030, the population will grow by 900,000, most of whom will not be in traditional nuclear families.

The administration is trying to jump-start a model for small-space affordable housing before the mayor leaves office in January 2014. (Officials declined to put a specific dollar figure on "affordable.") Earlier this month, the city received 33 proposals, from as far afield as London and Amsterdam, for a building of at least 50 micro-units on East 27th Street, replacing what is now a parking lot. The winning proposal is expected to be announced in December, with groundbreaking planned, fingers crossed, for December 2013.

For the new building's potential renters, worry not. There is extensive precedent for living tiny and tranquilly in Manhattan.

As Ms. Stolarski and others who live in studios smaller than the mayor's minimum can attest, the experience can be liberating. If you downsize your stuff along with your expectations of square footage, you really can do more with less. And surely you can do more with less rent.

"I thought I'd crave more space," said Lauren Applebaum, 30, who used to live in a 700-square-foot Toronto apartment. In January, when she started graduate school at New York University, she and her Yorkshire terrier moved into a 200-square foot studio on West 75th Street. But after her broker, Citi Habitats' Rory Bolger, a studio man himself, showed her tips to expand the room — a cubbyhole divider to screen off her bed; furniture that does double duty, like a dresser-TV stand — "I think that extra space would be unnecessary."

In June, J. Michael Moore, an interior designer, traded a 700-square-foot one-bedroom plus a storefront, both in the East 70s, for the 225-square-foot studio that is now his home and office on East 55th. He pronounces his budget healthier and himself happier, with only one regret: his queen-size bed. "I'm 6-4," he said, "and it's different to crawl on a loft."

Living small in New York becomes an exercise in craftiness, and discovering multiple uses for a surface. What others may see as deprivation, Mr. Moore and others have reframed as pride, with Shaker-like design values of simplicity and utility.

But not necessarily Shaker celibacy. In 2009, Kittie Lonsdale, a small-space designer, left behind a 4,500-square-foot home in Dallas and moved herself, her business and her "microsize dog," a 10-pound Shih Tzu whose raincoats, treats, leads and sleeping box "take up more real estate than anything else," into a 225-square-foot studio in Tudor City. Ten days a month, her husband joins her from Dallas, the headquarters for his private investment firm.

"We think of the apartment as a haven," Mrs. Lonsdale said. "We don't go out much: we work, work, work, and at night, all we want is each other."

"But living here as a couple, it's like a dance: you both have to know the steps. You have to orchestrate your moves." Accommodation and compatibility are critical: "On Saturdays, if we both get work calls, one of us has to take theirs into the bathroom."

Leonard Koren, who writes books about design and aesthetics, said that for a relationship to thrive in close quarters, the couple must acquiesce to the constraints of the space, which could otherwise grind them down.

In the early 1990s, he and his then-wife lived in a 240-square-foot Tokyo apartment. It included a washer, a dryer, a bath and a shower.

"It was a learning curve," said Mr. Koren, who now lives in Point Reyes, Calif. "What is essential is that the place can't feel like a prison. You have to have some natural external light and preferably a view that you could construe as pleasant, so you can project yourself onto a borrowed landscape that extends the psychological space."

It requires work to live small, Mr. Koren added. Clutter is more glaring and emotionally disruptive. Food trash has to be disposed of immediately, the futon tucked into its slot every morning, each object stored after use. "The psychological wear and tear on us was very much evident the first year and a half we lived there," he said.

But when they looked at larger apartments, they decided to stay put: "We had modified our behavior," he said. "Our apartment became cozy as opposed to oppressively small."

At that time, Mr. Koren recalled, Japanese businessmen who had moved to New York were returning to Tokyo after the burst of the economic bubble. Reporters would sometimes ask them whether they missed their large Manhattan apartments. "They said: 'They're great, but Japanese abodes are more convenient. You're not searching all over the place for stuff. You don't need an intercom system to find each other.' "

Neither claustrophobia nor loneliness was mentioned by the studio dwellers. Mrs. Lonsdale, who prepares elaborate meals with a hideaway induction cooktop and a slow cooker, says she feels catlike in her retreat. Ms. Stolarski treasures the quiet and solitude, not least because she doesn't spend much time at home. She has a crowded, noisy life outside, exploring the city, and gathers with friends for hours in Washington Square Park, "having an awesome time, looking at the people," she said. They consider the park their communal living room.

As for the startling concept of the affordable, minimal apartment, New York is an arriviste. San Francisco, Seattle and Boston have micro-units in various stages of planning, construction and completion. Cheekily marketed as "micro-suites," "aPodments," "solos" and "inno (as in innovation) units," they vary in amenity levels, square footage and rent, but are smaller and cheaper than market-rate apartments.

Jim Potter, a Seattle developer, has been building small-unit housing since 2009. Although the tiniest measures about 90 square feet, most have about 200, in five-story buildings that average 55 rooms. One project is in Redmond, Wash., biking distance from Microsoft's offices. The rents range from $600 to $800, much cheaper than typical one-bedrooms nearby that rent for about $1,500. Each room includes a bed, a table, a chair, Internet access and a "convenience center" — microwave, minifridge, sink.

The buildings have full kitchens that can be shared by residents of every eight rooms, but they are used so rarely that Mr. Potter faulted the Bloomberg requirement for full kitchens as a waste of money and space.

Moreover, he added: "We don't do closets. Our customers say they don't need them," preferring racks and open shelving. "We don't do cars. We are big on bikes."

His buildings, he said, are always at 100 percent occupancy. He offers three-month-minimum leases. But the "customers" (a term he prefers to "tenants") are more diverse than the solo 20-somethings for whom similarly sized dwellings in, say, Boston are being envisioned.

The customers range in age from 18 to 72: students, baristas, the newly separated, scientists hired for short-term research projects, truck drivers, an elderly couple from North Carolina who visit a grandchild who is undergoing several brain operations.

Patrick C. Kennedy, a Bay Area developer, is building 300-square-foot units — SmartSpaces — in a San Francisco neighborhood. He expects that rents will start around $960.

"We want to find the optimal size to satisfy the needs of most individuals," Mr. Kennedy said. He believes this to be 220 square feet — although San Francisco zoning codes require 290. Mr. Kennedy, who built a 160-square-foot prototype to experiment with furnished, prefabricated options, says those needs include large windows, a full bathroom and built-in furniture that will allow the tenant to have "cocktails and dinner for four."

ADD Inc, a Boston architecture firm, has been gripped by the potential for small apartments for the city's "innovation district" and has also entered New York's competition. While designing models for "inno units," the firm organized focus groups of young professionals, showing them elegant examples that, for example, hid beds and transformed tables for multiple uses. Designers asked which elements were essential for small-space survival.

"They said, 'This is for architect nerds,' " said Tamara Roy, an ADD Inc architect. " 'We want it to be flexible and cheap. We can fill it with Ikea.' "

What did they require individually, and what could they share?

"They wanted a bathroom, a bed and a microkitchen," Ms. Roy said. "The living room could be outside, a party space they could share with others in the building. They would much rather have that face-to-face social networking."

And, of course, a city they could afford to work and play in, just outside the building's front door.

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