

OPINION

Living With Less. A Lot Less.



Maxwell Holyoke-Hirsch

By GRAHAM HILL
Published: March 9, 2013 | 332 Comments

I LIVE in a 420-square-foot studio. I sleep in a bed that folds down from the wall. I have six dress shirts. I have 10 shallow bowls that I use for salads and main dishes. When people come over for dinner, I pull out my extendable dining room table. I don't have a single CD or DVD and I have 10 percent of the books I once did.



Tom Sewell for The New York Times
Graham Hill cleaned the inessential items out of his life.

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I have come a long way from the life I had in the late '90s, when, flush with cash from an Internet start-up sale, I had a giant house crammed with stuff — electronics and cars and appliances and gadgets.

Somehow this stuff ended up running my life, or a lot of it; the things I consumed ended up consuming me. My circumstances are unusual (not everyone gets an Internet windfall before turning 30), but my relationship with material things isn't.

We live in a world of surfeit stuff, of big-box stores and 24-hour online shopping opportunities. Members of every socioeconomic bracket can and do deluge themselves with products.

There isn't any indication that any of these things makes anyone any happier; in fact it seems the reverse may be true.

For me, it took 15 years, a great love and a lot of travel to get rid of all the inessential things I had collected and live a

bigger, better, richer life with less.

It started in 1998 in Seattle, when my partner and I sold our Internet consultancy company, Sitewerks, for more money than I thought I'd earn in a lifetime.

To celebrate, I bought a four-story, 3,600-square-foot, turn-of-the-century house in Seattle's happening Capitol Hill neighborhood and, in a frenzy of consumption, bought a brand-new sectional couch (my first ever), a pair of \$300 sunglasses, a ton of gadgets, like an Audible.com MobilePlayer (one of the first portable digital music players) and an audiophile-worthy five-disc CD player. And, of course, a black turbocharged Volvo. With a remote starter!

I was working hard for Sitewerks' new parent company, Bowne, and didn't have the time to finish getting everything I needed for my house. So I hired a guy named Seven, who said he had been Courtney Love's assistant, to be my personal shopper. He went to furniture, appliance and electronics stores and took Polaroids of things he thought I might like to fill the house; I'd shuffle through the pictures and proceed on a virtual shopping spree.

My success and the things it bought quickly changed from novel to normal. Soon I was numb to it all. The new Nokia phone didn't excite me or satisfy me. It didn't take long before I started to wonder why my theoretically upgraded life didn't feel any better and why I felt more anxious than before.

My life was unnecessarily complicated. There were lawns to mow, gutters to clear, floors to vacuum, roommates to manage (it seemed nuts to have such a big, empty house), a car to insure, wash, refuel, repair and register and tech to set up and keep working. To top it all off, I had to keep Seven busy. And really, a personal shopper? Who had I become? My house and my things were my new employers for a job I had never applied for.

It got worse. Soon after we sold our company, I moved east to work in Bowne's office in New York, where I rented a 1,900-square-foot SoHo loft that befit my station as a tech entrepreneur. The new pad needed furniture, housewares, electronics, etc. — which took more time and energy to manage.

AND because the place was so big, I felt obliged to get roommates — who required more time, more energy, to manage. I still had the Seattle house, so I found myself worrying about two homes. When I decided to stay in New York, it cost a fortune and took months of cross-country trips — and big headaches — to close on the Seattle house and get rid of the all of the things inside.

I'm lucky, obviously; not everyone gets a windfall from a tech start-up sale. But I'm not the only one whose life is cluttered with excess belongings.

In a study published last year titled "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century," researchers at U.C.L.A. observed 32 middle-class Los Angeles families and found that all of the mothers' stress hormones spiked during the time they spent dealing with their belongings. Seventy-five percent of the families involved in the study couldn't park their cars in their garages because they were too jammed with things.

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Our fondness for stuff affects almost every aspect of our lives. Housing size, for example, has ballooned in the last 60 years. The average size of a new American home in 1950 was 983 square feet; by 2011, the average new home was 2,480 square feet. And those figures don't

provide a full picture. In 1950, an average of 3.37 people lived in each American home; in 2011, that number had shrunk to 2.6 people. This means that we take up more than three times the amount of space per capita than we did 60 years ago.

Apparently our supersize homes don't provide space enough for all our possessions, as is evidenced by our country's \$22 billion personal storage industry.

What exactly are we storing away in the boxes we cart from place to place? Much of what Americans consume doesn't even find its way into boxes or storage spaces, but winds up in the garbage.

The Natural Resources Defense Council reports, for example, that 40 percent of the food Americans buy finds its way into the trash.

Enormous consumption has global, environmental and social consequences. For at least 335 consecutive months, the average temperature of the globe has exceeded the average for the 20th century. As a recent report for Congress explained, this temperature increase, as well as acidifying oceans, melting glaciers and Arctic Sea ice are "primarily driven by human activity." Many experts believe consumerism and all that it entails — from the extraction of resources to manufacturing to waste disposal — plays a big part in pushing our planet to the brink. And as we saw with Foxconn and the recent Beijing smog scare, many of the affordable products we buy depend on cheap, often exploitive overseas labor and lax environmental regulations.

Does all this endless consumption result in measurably increased happiness?

In a recent study, the Northwestern University psychologist [Galen V. Bodenhausen](#) linked consumption with aberrant, antisocial behavior. Professor Bodenhausen found that "Irrespective of personality, in situations that activate a consumer mind-set, people show the same sorts of problematic patterns in well-being, including negative affect and social disengagement." Though American consumer activity has increased substantially since the 1950s, happiness levels have flat-lined.

I DON'T know that the gadgets I was collecting in my loft were part of an aberrant or antisocial behavior during the first months I lived in SoHo. But I was just going along, starting some start-ups that never quite started up when I met Olga, an Andorran beauty, and fell hard. My relationship with stuff quickly came apart.

I followed her to Barcelona when her visa expired and we lived in a tiny flat, totally content and in love before we realized that nothing was holding us in Spain. We packed a few clothes, some toiletries and a couple of laptops and hit the road. We lived in Bangkok, Buenos Aires and Toronto with many stops in between.

A compulsive entrepreneur, I worked all the time and started new companies from an office that fit in my solar backpack. I created some do-gooder companies like We Are Happy to Serve You, which makes a reusable, ceramic version of the iconic New York City Anthora coffee cup and [TreeHugger.com](#), an environmental design blog that I later sold to Discovery Communications. My life was full of love and adventure and work I cared about. I felt free and I didn't miss the car and gadgets and house; instead I felt as if I had quit a dead-end job.

The relationship with Olga eventually ended, but my life never looked the same. I live smaller and travel lighter. I have more time and money. Aside from my travel habit — which I try to keep in check by minimizing trips, combining trips and purchasing carbon offsets — I feel better that my carbon footprint is significantly smaller than in my previous supersized life.

Intuitively, we know that the best stuff in life isn't stuff at all, and that relationships, experiences and meaningful work are the staples of a happy life.

I like material things as much as anyone. I studied product design in school. I'm into gadgets, clothing and all kinds of things. But my experiences show that after a certain point, material objects have a tendency to crowd out the emotional needs they are meant to support.

I wouldn't trade a second spent wandering the streets of Bangkok with Olga for anything I've owned. Often, material objects take up mental as well as physical space.

I'm still a serial entrepreneur, and my latest venture is to design thoughtfully constructed small homes that support our lives, not the other way around. Like the 420-square-foot space I live in, the houses I design contain less stuff and make it easier for owners to live within their means and to limit their environmental footprint. My apartment sleeps four people comfortably; I frequently have dinner parties for 12. My space is well-built, affordable and as functional as living spaces twice the size. As the guy who started [TreeHugger.com](#), I sleep better knowing I'm not using more resources than I need. I have less — and enjoy more.

My space is small. My life is big.

Graham Hill is the founder of [LifeEdited.com](#) and [TreeHugger.com](#).