

## Why people are choosing to live in smaller spaces and are happier for it

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Great design is making a big difference for those living in small spaces.  
Picture: Nexus Designs, Earl Carter *Source: Supplied*

**WHEN most people picture their dream home it's hard to go past the six bedroom McMansion with seven bathrooms, home cinema and an acre of benchspace in the kitchen.**

While it's easy to get caught up in the cycle of wanting that bigger place, with the spare bedroom, bigger yard, study or airy dining area, an increasing number of people are waking up to the fact that instead of enjoying the extra space, having more room often means you just buy more stuff to fill it up.

And this clutter is not making people happier.

Founder of *LifeEdited*, Graham Hill explored this idea during a 2011 TED talk called [Less stuff, more happiness](#).

Hill had a tiny 39sqm apartment in New York. To give you an idea of its size, the floorspace just exceeded the size of two disabled parking spots.

In Australia, his apartment is so small it [would not meet the minimum 50sqm size requirement for a one bedroom flat in Sydney](#).

But in a video tour Hill demonstrates how his apartment had enough room to host 10 people at a sit down dinner, to use as a home office and could even be converted to sleep an extra two people in a separate "room".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYV0qATsyts>

While not everyone has the resources to convert an apartment to this level of sophistication, many people have been inspired to try living in a smaller space. Not only that, they are choosing this lifestyle over living in a bigger house.

Sydney business owner Sarah O'Neill lives in an even smaller flat than Hill's, her studio apartment is just 29sqm.

She made the decision to downsize about five years ago, prompted by the clearing of the family home and wanting to buy her first property.

Like many 'downsizers', she wanted to live a more sustainable and less stressful life.

"There is a very definite and growing trend toward living in smaller spaces," O'Neill told [news.com.au](https://www.news.com.au), adding that this could be seen in the number of blogs, books and even a film, *Tiny*, that have emerged in recent years.

O'Neill only expected to live in her apartment for a couple of years but almost five years later she is still happy and comfortable. She said some of the advantages included spending less money on electricity, maintenance and cleaning as well as having less debt.

Her low key home also gave her the financial freedom to start her own business, a shop called Small Spaces in Redfern, which she opened after realising that Ikea was the only retailer catering to the specific needs of people in this growing market.

Over the years she has noticed that many of her customers also downsized for practical reasons, to save money and time, or to reduce their responsibilities or environmental footprint.

But after trying it, many chose to maintain the lifestyle, "for the pleasure and simplicity it adds to their lives".

For an increasing number of people, living in a smaller space is a deliberate decision.

Even though it may be a frightening thought to some, the simplicity seems to come from having less possessions.

"A common misconception about living in a small space is that it will be difficult to give up the space and material items, when in fact it is quite liberating," another small space enthusiast, Nicole Alvarez told [news.com.au](https://www.news.com.au).

"I get so many emails from retirees that are downsizing and are always so much happier after the transition. You are making the intentional decision to improve your lifestyle, how could you not be happier?"

Alvarez is an architectural designer and the founder of the blog [intentionallysmall.com](http://intentionallysmall.com). She said one of the joys of small living was the attention to detail. When space is precious, people are more careful about what objects they keep, which can lead, ironically, to less clutter.

“I’m fascinated by how a well-designed space can improve happiness and support a lifestyle,” Alvarez said.

Thought goes into how items are stored or displayed, and how the apartment itself is arranged to provide the most functionality. Possessions that make the cut are usually cherished items.



Nicole Alvarez in the studio apartment she lived in for two years in Raleigh, North Carolina. Picture: [intentionallysmall.com](http://intentionallysmall.com) Source: Supplied

House cleaner and home organiser Bethany Clayton said while it could be difficult and time-consuming to keep everything organised and neat, having clutter around could impact people’s mental and emotional energy.

“I think that it is ultimately better to have to look at – and assess – the things you own on a regular basis than to shove it all away in cabinets and closets only to realise one day that you are stuck in a huge house packed with junk you haven’t thought about in years,” the founder of Happy Home Solutions in the US told *news.com.au*.

“It seems to me that the overwhelming amount of clutter and disorganisation takes its toll on mental and emotional energy. I much prefer knowing everything I own, where it is and how it serves me. Otherwise, I get rid of it.”



When space is in short supply people take more care choosing what they keep. Picture: Nicole Alvarez, [intentionallysmall.com](http://intentionallysmall.com) Source: Supplied

Clayton said she had also seen first hand why downsizing had become so popular.

“People are getting tired of huge houses that aren’t particularly well-built and cost a fortune in mortgage payments and maintenance. As modern families are getting bigger houses, they are also falling deeper into debt and less satisfied with life.”

There is also growing evidence that the modern focus on materialism may be impacting people’s wellbeing.

In a talk in Brisbane this week, a prominent Britain-based mental health commentator Gregor Henderson [noted the alarming rise in people being diagnosed with depression and anxiety around the world](#). While economic growth has increased, people’s satisfaction and happiness was flat at best.

“You begin to recognise that there may be a link between the way our modern world is structured and the elements of emotional and psychological distress we are seeing,” he said.

“If we keep putting such a high value on economic product, this is based around the need to produce and consume. This leads to materialism, consumerism and individualism, and these are mostly short-term benefits.

“In these circumstances, people are going to question the big picture if they are not happy. People are already asking why they seem to be doing all the things expected of them but still something is missing.”



Bethany Clayton's home. Picture: Nicole Alvarez, [intentionallysmall.com](http://intentionallysmall.com) Source: Supplied

That's not to say small living does not have its drawbacks. Common obstacles are having enough storage and being able to host guests.

O'Neill said it was also tough sometimes to let go of things and this could take time.

"Most importantly (you should) stay clear about the benefits ... if there are possessions you are not ready to part with when you first move put them in storage and give yourself time to understand why you need to keep them," she said.

"This is a very personal philosophical journey that will be different for everyone. It took me two years to get rid of a small storage unit I used for this purpose."

But the increasing availability of quality multi-functional furniture is helping to get around the limitations and having less possessions does not mean you can't be surrounded by beautiful things.

## SMALL SPACES CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

Small living actually frees up money for more discretionary spending.



Graham Hill demonstrates how a small table can extend into a large one. *Source: YouTube*

“Needing less possessions means you can afford better quality. This is true from the quality of the fittings and finishes of the dwelling to furniture etc,” O’Neill said.

Designers such as Fritz Hansen are making beautiful furniture that is also functional, including his ‘Little Friend’ table that can be adjusted to the height of a coffee table or a desk.

“I think there is a great liberation in stripping things back and having just a few things that are well designed, multi-purpose and perfectly suited to a modern lifestyle,” interior designer Sonia Simpfendorfer said.

Simpfendorfer is creative director at Nexus Designs and said there was an enormous gap in the market for quality small houses.

“I’d chose a well-designed, smaller home with excellent orientation any day rather than a larger one that crowds the site (thereby reducing outdoor living) and has space that isn’t well used,” she said.

“Bigger houses are more expensive to build, cost more to heat and cool and can still lack fundamentals like great storage and clever planning.

Oversized kitchens are inefficient to use, with vast expanses of blank walls.”



Nexus Designs. Picture: James Geer Source: Supplied

Living in a smaller place also means people can also afford to live where they want. For Alvarez, 28, and many other young people, it supports the urban lifestyle they want.

“Personally, my priority is for an urban lifestyle – walkability, activity, engagement – therefore this is a major draw for me to live in a smaller space,” Alvarez told *news.com.au*.

“Especially since the recession (in the US), people have been reassessing budget and lifestyle

“The tiny house movement is empowering – people are building their own tiny houses and eliminating the burden of a mortgage.

“It’s an exciting time, where lifestyle values are being reconsidered.”

As Graham Hill suggests in his TED talk: “Take a second and ask yourselves, ‘Could I do with a little life editing? Would that give me a little more freedom? Maybe a little more time?’.

“Maybe, just maybe less might equal more”.

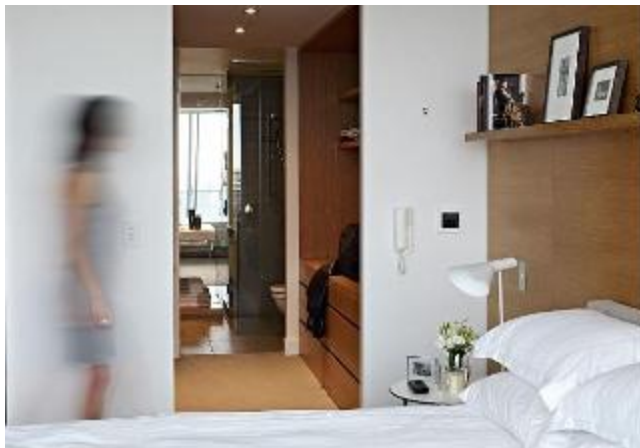
## **HOW TO LIVE SMALL**

*Tips from interior designer Sonia Simpfendorfer*

\* When it comes to an apartment, anything under 50sqm is considered very small. There is more flexibility with a house which can feel bigger if well planned. Bedrooms should have a clear floor space of 3m x 3m not including robes, and living areas are most workable if they are 4m x 4m.

\* When decorating limit the colour palette of the finishes. If the kitchen and bathroom tiles meld seamlessly with the colour of the carpet the spaces will feel bigger. Use the

same colour paint throughout the house, and match the timber veneer for shelves and wardrobes.



Keep colours and timber the same. Picture: Earl Carter *Source: Supplied*

\* Use finishes to the full height of the room. Tiling a bathroom from floor to ceiling makes a space feel larger and calmer. Full height on wardrobe doors and other cupboards also works.

\* Find two ways to use one space. A dedicated study can be a luxury so put a power point inside a tall cupboard for the technology that doesn't need to be accessed all the time. Get a laptop and use the dining table as a desk.

\* Recommended furniture shops include Cult, Space Furniture, Jordan, Anibou and Zuster, as well as Euroluce and Artemide for lighting.

## FULLY ADJUSTABLE

*Tips from Small Spaces owner Sarah O'Neill*

\* Light and air flow are critical.

\* Quality is important as furniture and rugs will get more use than usual.

\* If you can afford it hire a designer or architect, Hannah Tribe and Nicholas Gurney are two Sydney architects doing some fantastic work in this area.

\* The quality of the development is important as are the facilities, common areas for entertaining, gardens, rooftop terraces, pool, vicinity to shops, cafes, parks etc.

*Tips from house cleaner and home organiser Bethany Clayton*



\* Keep one area sacred: Make sure at least one room (such as the bedroom) is simple and relaxing, not full of dressers and shelves. This provides a place to escape to if the house is cluttered or messy.

\* Get out: Spend some time outdoors in a yard or nearby park.

\* Make everything multi-functional: To make a ottoman more practical, remove the top cushion, add a bottom and some castors and put the top back on as a “lid” so that it can store linens and seasonal items inside.

\* Never waste space under or above furniture: In a couple square feet, it was possible to fit a sewing desk, craft storage and a dog crate.



Bethany Clayton adjusted a wardrobe to house a sewing desk storage and dog crate. Picture: Nicole Alvarez, intentionallysmall.com Source: Supplied

*Blogger Nicole Alvarez*

\* Take charge of how you light your space, which can [completely change how it feels](#).

\* Get crafty about how you solve your storage needs while creating “functional decorations” like the [cork accessory organiser](#).

*Tips from Ikea Australia interior design manager Tiffany Buckins*

\* It’s OK to have a large scale piece of furniture like a sofa but make sure that you have some room around it.

\* Invest in chairs that will work both inside and out, preferably ones that are also stackable.

\* Look at hidden opportunities for storage. Underbed storage is great, you are maximising space you can’t see.

\* Think about what activities you like to do as a family. If you enjoy games night, take those activities back to functional needs.

\* Consider dual purpose or two-in-one furniture items. For example the APPLARO/TOSTERO outside wooden bench that doubles as a storage box, the classic VILASUND sofa bed. The NORDLI chest of drawers were designed by Ola Wihlborg to be modular and can be put together in at least 19 different ways.



The NORDLI chest of drawers were designed to be customisable. Picture: Ikea Australia. *Source:* Supplied

\* Think vertical when it comes to storage. In the kitchen opt for high cabinets with shelves and in the bedroom look for vertical wardrobe solutions such as the ALGOT upright wire baskets.

\* When buying storage items, fill them with existing items. Try to avoid filling new storage solutions with new items ... otherwise you are still left with the clutter!