



Fenton

# the little book of **living small**

Laura Fenton | Photographs by Weston Wells

the little  
book of

**living small**



## Small-space secrets and real-life solutions for living in 1,200 square feet or less.

*The Little Book of Living Small* offers practical, everyday advice for managing a tight footprint. In twelve real-life case studies style-savvy, small-space dwellers (from singles to families of four) open their doors and share their design secrets. Highly engaging with lists, tips, and actionable advice, plus inspiring photography, *The Little Book of Living Small* is one that you will refer back to again and again.



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## cook & eat

*I love to cook. I hail from a family of serious cooks who celebrate with food. My childhood home had a large kitchen with a center island, a breakfast table, and a six-burner commercial-grade stove. We had a pantry and a microwave the size of an oven, appliances for days, and a pot rack bursting with every shape and size of pan known to man. It was a Martha Stewart–esque fantasy of a kitchen and it was great. But do you know what it wasn't? Necessary.*

Great meals can be turned out in fifty square feet just as easily as they can be made in five hundred square feet. In fact, I might argue it's easier to cook in a smaller space where everything is close at hand. Having worked two summers for a catering company, I know that you can cook just about anything just about anywhere, with whatever you have on hand. I have prepared meals for fifty on two portable propane burners with the top of a cooler and a lobster trap as my only work surfaces.

I'm not alone in my belief that a small kitchen is not a barrier to fine cooking. Writing in the *New York Times*, where he was once a columnist, cookbook author Mark Bittman relayed a time when a journalist asked him what he considered essential in a modern kitchen. Bittman replied, "A stove, a sink, a refrigerator, some pots and pans, a knife, and some serving spoons. All else is optional."

If you're planning your small space from scratch, you have a lot of decisions to make, from appliances to counter materials. Don't rush. You're unlikely to renovate again, so it's important to get it right. If you're

hoping to renovate an existing kitchen, take the time to observe how you use the space. Make a list of what you like and don't like about your existing kitchen. Observe which places always seem to end up a mess.

### THE BIG SOLUTIONS

#### Dishwasher

Unless you eat out all the time, a dishwasher is an appliance that earns its place in even the smallest of homes. If you don't have the standard twenty-four inches to spare, an eighteen-inch dishwasher can do a day's worth of dishes for most families. Another small-space dishwashing solution is an under-the-sink unit like my family has (see page 150).

#### Refrigerator

Fridges have been getting bigger and bigger in recent years, but you can easily make do with a compact model. The advantages of a small fridge are many. You are much less likely to buy more food than you can eat





current twenty-four-inch stove is ample for any home cooking I do. A separate cooktop and wall oven can open up space-saving solutions, but it will be more expensive than a stand-alone or slide-in range. A two-burner cooktop is also an option, though not one I would recommend for avid cooks. In the most extreme cases, like inside a camper or a tiny house, a plug-in induction burner and a high-quality countertop toaster oven can replace traditional stoves. A microwave is one thing I think you can go without. You can reheat anything on the stovetop or in the oven.

### Sink

A corner sink can take advantage of an often under-utilized area in the kitchen and simultaneously make room for a longer expanse of counter space elsewhere. A built-in drainboard is also a clever way to streamline your sink area. Instead of a clunky plastic tray taking up counter space, you have a built-in place to rest your drying rack or a few dishes.

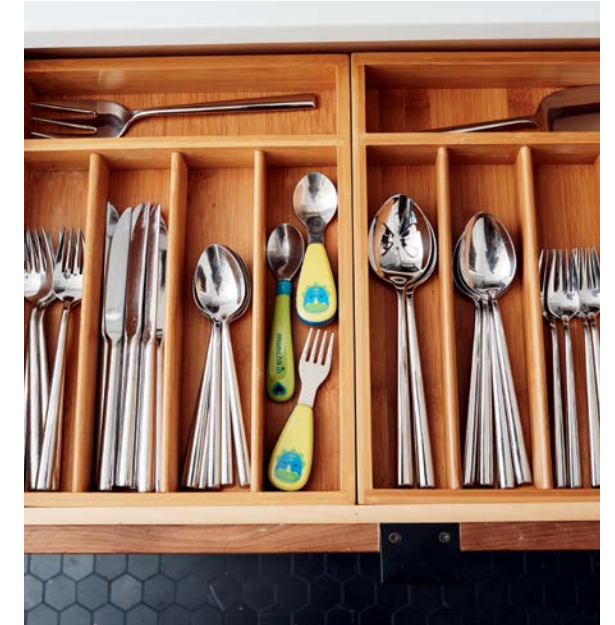
### Cabinets

Cabinets that go all the way to the ceiling greatly increase your cabinet space and eliminate the awkward above-the-cabinet area that usually collects dust. Use the high-up storage for items you use infrequently, such as vases, candlesticks, and specialized tools and appliances.

before it goes bad, and having a small fridge forces you to use up the condiments and other long-lasting items that can crowd a fridge. There are also lots of things that you don't need to store in the fridge. Many types of produce are happy left out on the counter, and there's no need to keep multiple bottles of wine or water chilled at one time.

### Stove and Oven

With stoves and ovens, you have many options. I've cooked on all sizes of stoves, and I can confidently say that a twenty-inch model is just fine for most things (though not all baking sheets will fit inside these!). Our



Clockwise from top left: An 18-inch dishwasher, custom drawer dividers, kitchen cabinets that reach the ceiling, and a Corian counter with a built-in drainboard.



# downsize & declutter

*The fastest, easiest way to make your small space feel more spacious is to declutter. Period. Less stuff equals more space. Whether it's a once-in-a-lifetime Kondo-style purge or a weekend here and there of editing, decluttering is key to living small.*

## THE SMALL SOLUTIONS

Downsizing will not happen overnight, but you can get started down the path to less with creative ways to jump-start the decluttering process.

**Timer/Pomodoro Technique** Set a timer for a period of time in which you go through a room looking for items to throw away, recycle, or donate, as well as items to be returned to their proper places. Don't do anything else (check your phone, get a snack, etc.) while the timer is running. Set it for twenty-five minutes, take a five-minute break, and start again.

**One Item a Day** Commit to getting rid of one item every day for a month (or longer!).

**Gone Boxing** Place a box in every room that needs decluttering and every time you find something that you're ready to part with, place it in the box. At the end of the month, go through and weed out anything that should be put in the trash and take the rest to your local charity.

**20-20-20 Challenge** Locate twenty items to throw away, twenty items to donate, and twenty items to be returned to their proper homes.

**Photographic Evidence** Take photos of your home to gain a fresh perspective on where clutter lurks. Decorator Celerie Kemble once told me that looking at photographs of my home would help me with the finishing touches to my decor, but when I tried it, I found it surprisingly effective for decluttering! Don't believe me? Snap photos of your space and you may be surprised at how untidy it really looks.

**Snowball Method** Get rid of one thing on Day One, two things on Day Two, three things on Day Three, and so on. Aim for twenty-one days of the snowball method for your first effort. If it feels easy, start over with Day One and try a full month next time.

**Buddy System** This is one of the most effective ways to declutter. Choose one of the methods above and agree

< Decluttering will reward you with a sense of calm and contentment. A bedroom like Shira Gill's that is free of clutter and the detritus of delayed decisions is a more peaceful place to lay your head each night. It's also infinitely easier to keep dust-free, another boon to healthy sleep.

on a plan with a friend, then text each other pictures of what you're throwing away or donating each day. My friends and I have done this with the Snowball Method and it is a magic bullet of motivation.

## THE BIG SOLUTIONS

Change your relationship to the stuff. Decluttering and getting rid of excess is vital to living small, but more important still is to change how you think about possessions. To keep your closet from filling right back up after you've edited it down, you need to stop purchasing more clothes. To keep the kitchen from overflowing, you must resist the urge to buy another cute cutting board/tray/tea towel at a home goods store. Here are a few ways to help you adopt a less-is-more mindset.

**Always shop with a list**—and stick to it. It'll help prevent you from overspending and acquiring things you don't need.

**Distance yourself.** Unsubscribe from all the retailer email lists you're on and call to be removed from their catalog mailings too. Stop following brands on social media or, if you're really looking to disconnect, take a break from social media altogether.

“For every minute spent in organizing, an hour is earned.”

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

**Use the 24-hour rule.** If you see something you really think you need, bookmark it or ask a store to put it on hold for you, and then wait a day to see how you feel. Chances are the “need” might be less pressing than you think.

**Use what you've got.** Sometimes the urge to buy something new is really just a desire for a change. You can find novelty in the things you already own. Take a colorful bedspread and drape it over your living room sofa. Open up your closet and spend a half hour writing down new outfit combinations. Take everything off your fridge door—or alternatively, cover it with a few beautiful photos. Move your furniture around—even if you end up moving it all back to its original spot, you've at least experienced a shift in perspective.

**Stop shopping.** If you cut out browsing stores for leisure, you're way less likely to bring home things you don't need. I was never the type to go to the mall or spend an afternoon at boutiques, but I used to go to the flea market every weekend. I still love secondhand markets and thrift stores, but now I limit my trips and try to enjoy the fun of finding things—not actually taking them all home.

**Give differently.** Stop the culture of living large by giving experiences instead of things. Or if you really prefer to place something in someone's hand, make it something consumable, like food, flowers, or special soaps.

**Say no to freebies.** This is where even avowed minimalists can get into trouble. When something is free, it is so hard to pass it up. But even a free object comes with a price tag: it's going to need dusting and cabinet space.

**Edit every day.** No matter how vigilant you are about keeping clutter out of your life, it has a sneaky way of returning. Magazines pile up, party favors creep in, socks go missing, pens migrate home from the office. If you do a sweep each night and put things back in their places, you'll be able to home in on new clutter and keep the pileup at bay.

“The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less.”

SOCRATES





# renovate

*Renovation is intimidating—but customizing your space is one of the most efficient ways to max out a home’s potential. I know this from firsthand experience: I’ve made alterations to all of the homes I’ve lived in. In the pages that follow, I offer solutions for specific areas of your home (such as bedrooms, the kitchen, and home office), but to begin, here is advice that applies to all the parts of your home—whether it’s a rental or your forever home.*

## THE SMALL SOLUTIONS

**Let in the light.** Take down whatever blinds or shades came with your place. Wash the windows (inside and out) and let the light shine in. If you feel exposed without the blinds, try self-adhesive privacy film: you can obscure the view into your home without losing any daylight. Basic options like a frosted glass look-alike are available at hardware stores and Stick Pretty sells sophisticated patterns.

**Create faux built-ins.** Use simple off-the-shelf bookcases as the foundation for “built-in” storage. If you’re handy you can add your own trim, or you can hire a carpenter to finish it for you.

**Upgrade your light fixtures.** Replace your drab overheads. It’s easy enough for a moderately handy person to do, and they can truly transform a space. If you rent, keep the old fixtures and swap them back out when you go. Or simply remove the covers on the existing lights

and replace them with paper globes, which cast a soft, flattering light.

**Assess the true cost of a costly update.** Purchasing a Murphy bed or other pricey furniture piece for a rental may seem foolish but pause to consider the cost over time. If you could save four hundred dollars a month by renting a studio instead of a one bedroom, and a \$1,200 Murphy bed will make the studio livable for two people, think of the investment as the equivalent of three months of the cheaper rent or mortgage payment.

**Talk to your landlord.** If there’s a particular upgrade you’re dying to make to your rental, speak with the owner. Perhaps if you pay for the labor, he or she will cover the costs of the materials. Or maybe you can skip one month’s rent payment if you offer to regrout the whole bathroom. I know one architect who avoided years of rent increases on her affordable apartment by updating

◁ Shavonda Gardner has renovated her kitchen bit by bit over several years, making each improvement as she could afford it and DIYing whatever she could to keep costs down. Decorator tricks like the herringbone tile pattern and the Semihandmade cabinet doors give the space a high-end look.

the kitchen herself. Another friend got the bathroom of his dreams for just the cost of the plumber (he talked his landlord into paying for the new sink vanity and toilet).

## THE BIG SOLUTIONS

Make your space feel bigger—without expanding the footprint. There are plenty of ways to give your home the illusion of extra space. These mini renovations make a big difference in what it feels like to be inside your space.

**Hunt for rooms.** Could your closet become a nursery? Or your dining alcove a small bedroom? Could a built-in desk make your entryway double as a home office?

**Do some detective work.** Find out what's behind your walls. Would removing the dropped ceiling give you a few more inches overhead? Could exposing the brick give just a little more breathing room? Are there non-load-bearing walls you could knock out?

**Expand your openings.** To open up the space without knocking down walls, consider heightening doorways and installing larger windows.

**Aim for the rafters.** Vaulting a ceiling will make your space feel much larger. It's also an excellent opportunity to add skylights to maximize interior natural light.

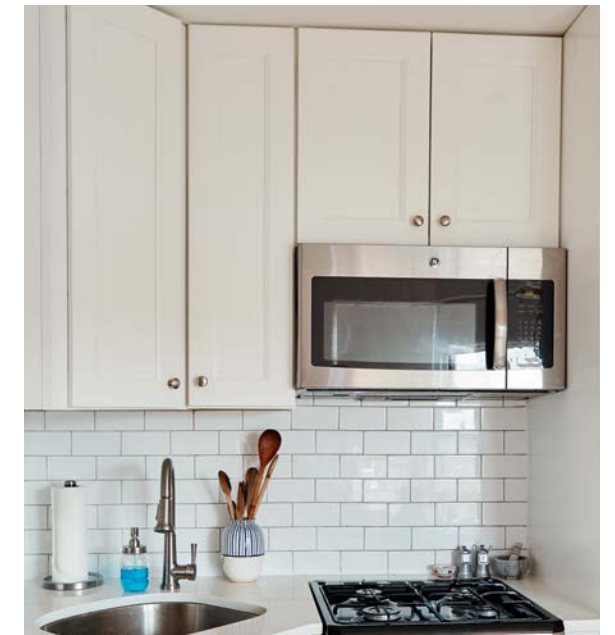
**Sneak in storage everywhere.** A narrow bookcase at the end of a hall, cubbies in the entryway, shelving in a headboard—there's almost no place that's not ripe for additional storage.

## sometimes don't ask, and just do.

I've broken the rules on plenty of leases by painting walls a color (forbidden!) and even painting some particularly ugly kitchen cabinets white, yet I've never been charged a fee upon moving out. In fact, my very first apartment was in such bad shape when we signed the lease that we refinished the floors, spackled, and painted the whole place (thank you to my old roommate's mom, Patricia, for the help!). It was a lot of work, but we knew the rent was incredibly cheap for the location, so it was worth the time and money. Decorator William McLure was even bolder with a former rental, in which he ripped out the carpets (sneaking it out piece by piece in the trash) and painted the subfloors white. You know your landlord best, so proceed with caution.

**Build in flexibility.** When designing built-in bookshelves, opt for ones with movable (rather than fixed) shelves so you can adjust your storage space as needs change.

**Go vertical.** Take bookcases and kitchen cabinets all the way to the ceiling to maximize your storage space. (You'll never miss that awkward space above your kitchen cabinets, I promise.)



Clockwise from top left: A vaulted ceiling makes a room feel large; storage built in on both sides of a kitchen island; a filing cabinet embedded in a banquette seat; cabinets installed with no gap overhead.