

This charming room has been given a multi-functional purpose by using a compact, antique desk and bespoke, built-in bookcases with cupboards below.



DESIGN SOLUTIONS:

## MAKING THE MOST OF SMALL SPACES

With thoughtful planning, designing a small room offers the opportunity to create an exquisite space that is enjoyable both for its beauty and functionality

FEATURE KATHERINE SORRELL



Rooms that are small can seem like a big problem. Even in a large property, such spaces can present a dilemma: how to ensure that a cosy snug, a bijoux bathroom, a child's bedroom or a study does not feel cluttered, chaotic and claustrophobic? And in a country cottage, a city-centre pied à terre or a narrow townhouse, dealing adequately with small-space living becomes absolutely critical. The answer lies in careful planning. Philippa Thorp of Thorp Design explains that she approaches every space, large or small, by considering how it should function and be enjoyed. "It's not necessarily about size," she says, "but about how we use the space and the psychology behind it."

Even the smallest of rooms has the potential to be utterly delightful – and one great advantage is that it encourages special attention to each and every

component. The first thing to consider is whether the space is really being best utilised, however limited it may be. Draw up a floor plan on graph paper and look for areas that could be improved. Something as simple as changing the furniture layout, moving a radiator or re-hanging a door so that it opens the other way, for example, could be an enormous help.

If renovating, further interventions may be possible, such as replacing bulky radiators with underfloor heating, knocking rooms together or even adding a mezzanine floor level. At this stage it really is worth engaging the services of an architect or interior designer, whose years of training and experience will help visualise solutions that might never have been thought possible.

If ceilings are of a reasonable height, then the answer is simple: go up. "Even if you have a small footprint, a



*'It's not about size, but how we use the space and the psychology behind it'*

**PREVIOUS PAGE** This open-plan room only allowed a small area to create an elegant and functional dining area. Violet & George used an array of ideas to ensure the room still felt spacious, including tall built-in storage, integrated lighting and a muted, co-ordinated palette with light-reflective details.

**TOP** Open shelves, both wall-mounted and below the counter, and narrow worktops, rather than deep, solid cabinetry keeps this scullery by Charlie Kingham light and spacious.

**ABOVE** This sitting room by Lisette Voute utilises all available space, making use of either side of the chimney breast for storage, whilst a window seat neatly conceals a radiator, as well as providing another sitting area. The large mirror above the mantelpiece reflects light around the room.

tall room can feel like a big space," says Thorp, who has designed several projects that include bespoke bunk-beds, always sized large enough even for adults to use if necessary, with integrated lighting and storage.

One project included drawers within the steps up to the top bunk. "It's really easy to do when you are having them made anyway. Never leave a space redundant," she says. In a child's room a raised bed could, alternatively, include a desk or seating beneath, thus freeing up the rest of the floor space as a play area. Other ways in which to use the full height of a room include wardrobes, bookcases and kitchen cupboards that extend right to the ceiling, bearing in mind that it will be important to plan in somewhere to store the ladder or stool with which to reach whatever is stored at the very top.

Storage is, of course, vital in a small space. Nicky Mudie of interior designers Violet & George explains that a cluttered space becomes visually 'noisy', whilst one that is tidy and clear feels more relaxed and spacious. Of course, there is a balance to be found between clutter, necessary items that can be stored out of sight, and beautiful pieces for display. "We ask clients exactly what's being stored," Mudie says. "Have they got unusually large books? Do they hang or fold their clothes? Do they have lots of handbags or shoes? You have to think about every little thing. Where does the vacuum cleaner go? Where can clothes be hung up to dry? Do they store skis or gym balls? We measure what's needed and then add more."

It may be counter-intuitive, but sacrificing some floor space in order to build-in storage can actually make a room feel bigger, thanks to its streamlined look. Whether a run of bookshelves and cupboards in the living room; wall-to-wall wardrobes (with clever interior fittings, of course) in a bedroom; floor-to-ceiling shelving in a study; or a tall cupboard in the corner of a hallway – they will all make a small space more functional and, if done with flair, more beautiful, too. Details such as hooks and racks – carefully planned for individual needs – will always help, and do not forget to fit shelving and cupboards into any 'dead' space, too: either side of a chimney breast, below the seat in a bay window, above a doorway, around a sofa, and so on.

A careful selection of furniture will always enhance a compact room, both practically and aesthetically. Simple, slender styles have the least impact in a small space, whilst pale or transparent pieces blend into the background, and anything raised on legs will make the room seem larger because there is more visible floor area. In general, avoid deep upholstery, bulky outlines and fussy detailing.

Folding, wall-mounted or compact furniture and fittings can help – but never sacrifice comfort or function. With a touch of lateral thinking, ordinary furnishings can be turned into dual-purpose ones, such as a chest of drawers that doubles as a bedside table or a coffee table that includes space to store magazines. Where appropriate, bespoke furniture is always a good idea, says Thorp. "Proportion is everything," she explains. "In a smaller room, furniture does need to be smaller, but it's not necessarily a good idea to buy small-scale furniture off the shelf – have something made to fit your room, employ a local craftsman to build something that's exactly the right size – it doesn't have to be terribly expensive, you will love it, and it will last forever." ▶



**LEFT** A bed, a desk, plenty of storage and a comfortable seat – the perfect young girl's bedroom, neatly fitted into one end of a room by Thorp. If ceiling height allows, a raised bed is an excellent solution to finding more floor space in a child's room.

**BELOW LEFT** Even a smaller bedroom can accommodate a four-poster bed. A curtainless design, such as this bed from Oka, does not overwhelm the space, and mirrors hung either side exaggerate the proportions of the room.

**BOTTOM LEFT** This room by Violet & George uses ingenious thinking that transforms it from a library to a guest room. A fold-down bed is tucked up above the wall of shelves.

**BELOW** Beata Heuman has cleverly made use of the space in front of the window to create a cosy cabin-style bed. A false wall allows for the bed to be ensconced with a curtain and shelves provide more storage space than a bedside table.





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
Using bold colour either high up or low down does not interfere with the uncluttered feel of the centre of the room. Here, Anouska Tamony also employs a wall-hung lavatory for unfettered flow of floor space.

A small bathroom can contain a tub if a compact option is sourced. The Tubby Too from The Albion Bath Company is deep and sumptuous.

Custom-made shelving surrounds this sofa in a design by Turner Pocock, neatly solving the problem of where to store books and hang paintings, and it even incorporates a pair of wall lights.

In this slender dressing room, Studio Duggan's use of foxted mirrors on the doors bounces the light and gives the space an open, airy feeling.



**LEFT** In a small room, bespoke joinery is the only way to ensure that you are able to use absolutely every millimetre of space, from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, as in this pale and pretty kitchen by Lisette Voute.  
**BELOW** In this North London apartment, glazed and closed cupboards, fitted floor to ceiling along the length of a whole wall, provide copious storage, leaving enough space for a full-sized Esse range cooker and a double butler's sink. Note the use of pale colours, including a Carrara marble worktop and beautiful, natural floorboards. This is a Real Shaker Kitchen by deVOL.

Attention to light can also make a room appear much more spacious and pleasant. "Bounce light around by using mirrors – it will really open the room up," says Mudie. A mirror positioned opposite a window will distribute the maximum amount of natural light, whilst a mirror near a light fitting will reflect its brilliance around the room. Glass, too, really opens up a home. If having building work done, consider enlarging windows or replacing solid doors or walls with glass, but for quicker, cheaper solutions, glass or acrylic furniture or see-through accessories such as lamp bases, door knobs and vases can be a useful aesthetic resource.

Another means of enlarging the apparent size of a room is with a clever use of colour. Generally speaking, pale colours seem to recede, enhancing a sense of spaciousness, whilst darker colours absorb light and therefore appear more enclosing. A unified, pale colour scheme will always seem more bright and airy than a scheme that involves differing shades of dark colours. Paint radiators, cupboards and shelves the same colour as walls, so that they disappear. However, those who love bright colours of course should use them, whilst the current trend for very dark colours will definitely look fashionably moody – perfect for a room in which to feel cosy and enclosed. Try using pale colours in the centre of the room, with vivid colour on the floor (or even the ceiling) only, or, as Mudie advises, use similar materials and colours overall to create a sense of space. Where a space needs breaking up – perhaps in a multi-functional room – use contrast colours to create a visual 'full stop'.

When in doubt, the formula for a tiny room is relatively simple: more storage and more light, but less colour and slimmer furnishings. Plan for each and every millimetre to fulfil its potential, looking out for clever, off-the-shelf solutions, but not being afraid to commission a custom-made piece to suit your space when necessary. And just remember: small is beautiful. ■

*Plan for each and every millimetre to fulfil a room's potential*



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