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Size Matters

Only not the way they say. The first part of the green 3R mantra is “reduce,” and reducing the size of our living spaces is one of the best examples.

The average American house is over 2300 square feet. Compare that to half the size in the 1950's and 1700 square feet in 1970. And that 2300 foot house is tiny next to the 10,000 foot plus houses that are not uncommon in some areas. The term “McMansion” has become part of the general language.

But more recently, many people have started to question what this has gained us. Are bigger houses better? Do double height foyers and “great rooms” that are largely unused really make for better homes?

From an environmental point of view, the answer is obvious. More space requires more materials to build, more furniture to fill it with and, perhaps most significantly, more heating, cooling and lighting.

Advocates of this “right sizing” movement – Sarah Susanka’s book [The Not So Big House](#) was the flashpoint for the movement – say we can make homes that are smaller AND better. Through good design, we can make less space do more and, with the money saved by building a smaller footprint, incorporate better materials and detailing.

Apartment dwellers, out of necessity, are great at this. In our 1000 square feet here, we house two people, one dog and three businesses. To do this (and do it affordably) we got inventive with storage under the bed, room divider storage units and even Craftsman tool cabinets for the kitchen. But the results are fun and make for both a functional and unique home.



So if you're a DIYer contemplating an addition (or maybe even a whole house), take a hard look at how you will really utilize the space. Is that large cathedral-ceiling living room really more comfortable than a cozier space that encourages your family to be closer? For that matter, do you even need a living room? Most families hang out in the kitchen or family room. (Hmm, why call it a living room if no one's ever in it?)

How many bathrooms do you really need? (Fewer bathrooms means less to clean, too.) How about that 42" frig? I can see it if you have a large family or if you're a serious cook, but too many of the choices we make in designing our homes are based on what people feel are good resale choices (who defines those anyway?) rather than what actually makes sense.

He may not have been talking about houses, but the eco economist E. F. Schumacher wrote years ago that *Small Is Beautiful*. What do you think? Do you have any projects or ideas that can help fuel the post-McMansion era? We'd love to hear.

David Bergman
Columnist, Going Green Blog