



space case

Make the most of your home by customizing your spaces to your lifestyle. BY WANDA URBANSKA

Architect David Maurer was recently asked to draw plans for an addition to the house of a Raleigh, North Carolina, couple who wanted a larger eat-in kitchen to replace their tired, cramped model. Upon careful examination of Fred and Catharine Staleys' home and needs, Maurer steered them in another direction: instead of adding on, why not reconfigure existing space?

The Staleys bought into his vision by moving the laundry room from the kitchen to the upstairs, expanding the breakfast room to accommodate all meals (including holiday feasts) and transforming the existing formal dining room into a his-and-hers home office. It didn't hurt that nixing the addition shaved \$75,000 off of the original \$100,000 estimate. "It was a no-brainer when we looked at the numbers," Fred says.

Until the recent downturn, adding on almost always made economic sense. "It was all about resale," Maurer says. Today, with a sluggish housing market, additional square footage does not necessarily translate into enhanced salability. As new house size shrinks and family budgets are stretched thin, reconfiguring what you already have has become the go-to remodeling option. Not only does working inside your existing footprint generally save money up front, but smaller homes are cheaper to heat, cool, furnish and maintain. What's more, with the installation of energy-efficient appliances, water-saving plumbing fixtures, and high-performance insulation and windows, most remodels double as state-of-the-art greenovations.

Built-in shelving can help you rework your home in many ways, providing storage and display space in large rooms and decluttering smaller spaces so you can use them more effectively. A combination of open shelving and cupboards with doors is ideal; you can exhibit beautiful books, baskets or décor on open shelves, and stash seldom-used items such as spare linens, holiday decorations or camping gear behind closed doors. Choosing furniture that perfectly fits your spaces and doubles as storage also helps maximize space.

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RECONFIGURE IT OUT

If you're thinking about reworking your space, begin by analyzing how you really live in your home. Walk through with a notebook and a critical eye. Does anyone ever use the formal living room? Is the basement game room twice the size it needs to be? Does everyone always seem to be in the kitchen? Look for high-use zones that call for enhancement and underperforming areas that could better serve your needs.

Don't avoid customizing your space by trying to second-guess the resale market. "A lot of people are hesitant to do something that might be too particular and rob themselves of enjoying a restorative lifestyle in their own home," says architect Matthew Schoenherr, author of *Remodel: Great Home Makeovers from Connecticut to California*. Unless you're moving out next month, allow yourself a home suited to your own needs and desires. Once you determine your priorities, you can start on your creative remix. We've compiled a few ideas to help inspire you, but the possibilities are endless.

Opening up a small kitchen by combining it with adjoining rooms is a smart home reconfiguration. Here, a small, underused sunroom became a bright and functional part of the kitchen.



CARVE OUT A HOBBY SPOT

If you enjoy a hobby, it makes good sense to dedicate a space in your home to support it. Experts say hobbies enhance creativity, sharpen focus and boost positive thinking by stimulating the brain's "feel-good" zone. Hobbyist and certified financial planner Lisa Zywicki recognized her need for a dedicated at-home hobby room to escape number-crunching and worrying about other people's finances. "My job is cerebral but not creative," she says. Her outlet: sewing and jewelry-making. The upstairs hallway alcove Lisa had been sharing with her 11-year-old daughter no longer made the grade. In this limited space, Lisa was forced to bring out and put away her projects every night, effectively putting a damper on her pursuit. Lisa and her husband, John, decided to recast a seldom-used downstairs guest room as her home office/crafts center. They will replace the queen-size bed that currently dominates the 13-by-12-foot room with a compact, pull-out sleeper sofa for the occasional guest. The focal point in the reconfigured room will be an oversized L-shaped desk with ample storage from which Lisa can whip out her sewing machine, patterns, fabric and notions. Beads, strings and other fixings for jewelry-making will also be close at hand. Lisa is excited at the prospect of being able to leave her works-in-progress out for days, even weeks, without cluttering the main living area. Take a button out of Lisa's box, and consider enhancing your passions with a dedicated hobby zone.

DESIGN AN ALL-INCLUSIVE KITCHEN

We all need a kitchen, and one of the upsides to our recent economic downturn has been a renewed focus on at-home meal preparation. Whether you're hosting a dinner party or just making dinner, today's kitchens serve a multitude of functions and cry out for hands-on participation. Take a cue from the Staleys and think about ways you might rework your kitchen to serve you better. If you live with others or host friends regularly, make sure your kitchen can comfortably accommodate two (or more) cooks. This may entail installing a second prep sink for helpers to scrub potatoes while the chief cook works the command sink or buying a kitchen cart to provide a second work surface. A cart with wheels can also be rolled out to hold appetizers before a dinner party or act as a buffet station for holiday meals.

Simply opening up a wall may help your kitchen flow better with the rest of your home. And in this case, a minor remodel that makes your home function better will pay you back if you sell in the future: Opening up a small kitchen by combining it with adjoining rooms is among the most common kitchen reconfigurations today, and Maurer predicts the trend will continue to gain traction in coming years.



A cleverly designed garage garden nook provides a work surface, storage shelves and bins, wall-mounts for tools and a convenient spot to store tall items—in the rafters where they can't get knocked over.

GIVE YOURSELF A GARDEN SPOT

Whether you're already an avid gardener or you want to become one, consider creating a gardening center to keep everything organized and accessible. Though outbuildings have their uses, musty, mildew-prone sheds are simply not the best place to stow seeds and catalogs, not to mention your gardening reference books and journals. Search inside your home for a dedicated space in which to track your gardening goals and benchmarks. Good candidates include a mudroom, an underperforming sun room or a nook in your kitchen. The garage might even work, provided it's dry and decently lit. If possible, create an accessible space with hooks, pegs and open shelving to keep your gardening accessories organized and in view. Schoenherr recalls a project in which his clients, a talented topiary artist and her supportive spouse who live in Wilton, Connecticut, created a floating rack containing the basic elements for her creations. The rack, which he recalls overflowing with drying hydrangeas, hung on pulleys, and she would hoist it up toward the ceiling when not in use. "She understood her passions and created something that was personal, idiosyncratic and unusual," Schoenherr says.

When you're customizing a space for one (or two), you have license to do exactly as you please.

CUSTOMIZE UNUSED SPACES

Whether you live alone or are a couple whose children have flown the coop, here's the good news: It's all about you! Farewell to group decisions; hello to honoring that still spirit within (well, sometimes it's that capricious spirit within). When you're customizing space for one (or two), you have license to do exactly as you please. Where is it written that you're required to have a guest room? If you're a single clothes-horse living in a two-bedroom cottage, go ahead and turn that spare bedroom into a giant walk-in closet. If your boomerang children come home for extended stays, putting them up on the couch may sharpen their job-hunting skills! Take another lesson from the Staleys, who plan to add their laundry area to the college-age kids' upstairs hang-out room. The room may take a hit in the "cool" department, but this change puts the needs of the primary residents first.

CREATE A HOME THAT GROWS

If you're reconfiguring your home to accommodate growing children, create templates that are suited to change. While an adults-only household can remain static (and sometimes stagnant) for years, the beauty of living with kids is that they ensure homes are constantly in flux. Toddlers become children who become teenagers, all with an ever-evolving mix of possessions and needs. In a child's bedroom, for instance, you may wish to install a pegboard wall that allows kids to change out pictures, posters and collectibles easily. Young people tend to spend more time in their bedrooms than adults, with their rooms wearing multiple hats (sleeping, playing and studying), so provide space for these many functions. To open up a tight space, consider building a loft bed under which you can install a sizable study center. Outfit kids' rooms with space-saving bunk beds or a trundle to put up overnight guests.

To keep clutter at bay, invest in storage systems, whether built-in shelving, wall units or under-bed bins. Invite your kids to become decluttering agents by designating a box in the closet where they can deposit cast-offs for donation or resale. And let your children's real-life habits dictate what comes and goes in the more public parts of your home. If Ryan isn't playing the piano and Chelsea has no interest in it, send it on its merry way. The takeaway is to keep your home alive, reflecting actual use.



TOP: You pay the mortgage, so put your own needs first! Convert a rarely used guest room, a former child's bedroom or a junk-accumulating spare room into an area with a specific purpose that suits your lifestyle—be it a craft room, a workout studio, or a reading and writing space.

RIGHT: Design children's rooms with neutral walls, shelves and flooring so the space can evolve as kids' tastes change. Personalize with impermanent items such as art, décor and toys. Keep in mind that children use their bedrooms for sleeping, studying and play, and try to assign specific areas for each activity.

WANDA URBANSKA is a sustainability expert and author of nine books including *The Heart of Simple Living: 7 Paths to a Better Life*. Her series, *Simple Living with Wanda Urbanska*, can be viewed at hulu.com/simple-living-with-wanda-urbanska.



Is Rental Right for You?

Whether you need companionship or extra income (or both), renting out a piece of your place might be a perfect option if you have excess space and don't want to move. "If you have a detached garage you're not using, that presents a terrific opportunity and a starting point," says Michael Litchfield, author of *In-laws, Outlaws and Granny Flats: Your Guide to Turning One House into Two Homes*. Most detached garages are solidly framed, with exposed studs and level floors, making them easy to convert to an accessory dwelling unit. The most common in-house candidate for a rental unit is the basement, but it must be dry and provide ample headroom, says Litchfield, who also writes the blog cozydigz.com. Other

possibilities include capturing unused attic space or carving out a space in your existing home and adding a separate entry. Most accessory dwelling units will require, at minimum, a kitchenette, bathroom with shower and a comfortable area for sleeping and relaxing. Check your local zoning laws to be sure such units are permitted; if they're not, let your city planners know that progressive communities are rewriting the codes to legalize this form of affordable, eco-friendly housing. Tips to make renting a positive experience? Soundproof the walls; charge a rent that's slightly below market rate to promote longevity; and select a tenant who shares your lifestyle and values. Who knows? You might just meet your future best friend.