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Architecture of inches: Intelligent use of space makes the smallest condos livable



Resource Furniture's LGM Tavolo wall system (\$10,500) rotates from a five-foot table and 35 linear feet of shelving to a queen-size bed.

By Suzanne Wintrob
Special to National Post

Stephen Mooney doesn't ask for much from his living quarters, as long as it's stylish and functional. In fact, the 27-year-old café store manager is clearly excited to be downsizing from a rented 330-sq.-ft. condominium in the Yonge-Eglinton neighbourhood to a newly-purchased 289-sq.-ft. suite downtown at Queen Street West and University

Avenue because it promises an intriguing and efficient transformable design that's sure to wow his friends.

“This new kind of edgy thing hasn't been done before in Toronto, combining the micro-home movement of living with a super-functional space and beds that fold up into the wall,” says Mr. Mooney about Urban Capital's Smart House, a 25-storey, 250-suite condo project set to begin construction in November (smarthouse-toronto.com). “If you can have your guests over and have them go ‘Ah!’ or watch their jaws drop [and see] how cool and how thought-out the little tiny things are, I think that makes up for it being a little bit smaller.”

A tidy guy by nature, Mr. Mooney likes the fact that he'll be able to move into his new pad with not much more than his clothes and a few groceries, kitchen utensils and bedding. That's because the suite comes with dual-duty furnishings — a bed that tucks into the wall to become a sofa or desk, kitchen counters that expand and retract, a dining table built into the kitchen island, niche shelving and moveable partitions. And the fact that he can clean the place from top to bottom in 10 minutes is an added bonus.

“You can repurpose the bedroom into a living room or office,” he says. “It's designed as a space in which you can entertain or where you can live on your own quietly. The multi-function of it is really ideal.”



Free-flowing possibilities with Bosa Properties include a dining table that pulls out from the kitchen island.

As developers continue to scramble for parcels of land to turn into sought-after residential towers, transformable living appears to be a growing trend in the increasing number of small spaces. Resource Furniture is an early practitioner of small-space solutions. It's all about creativity, with moveable walls and furniture that either stacks into itself or serves multiple purposes. The concept is popular in such cities as New York, London, Hong Kong and Vancouver and now it seems that Toronto is catching up.

“This isn’t new,” says Dan Menchions, partner at II BY IV Design, Smart House’s interior designer. “This is probably the way going forward. The most important thing is teaching the purchaser that normal-sized furniture doesn’t fit in these types of units.”

Mr. Menchions compares today’s small spaces to long-term-stay residences or hotel rooms, where it’s “like being confined in a clever space.” Purchasers may be students, first-time homebuyers, and empty nesters or businesspeople seeking a pied-à-terre, yet everyone has the same needs when it comes to efficiency. For instance, Smart House’s small kitchen by AyA Kitchens and Baths, features a two-burner stovetop, a pull-out fan under the overhead cupboard, a pull-out cutting board within the countertop, a convection oven, and a European-style washer-dryer combo. In the bathroom, pipes are off to the side for added shelving and storage.



Rize's Wave Homes in Surrey, B.C., feature flexible walls that can close off bedrooms and den from the living room.

Sliding walls and mobile storage also add to the allure. Developer Rize Alliance of Vancouver (rize.ca) has introduced flexible concepts at several of its high-rise residential projects. A 600-sq.-ft., two-bedroom-plus-den suite at Wave in Surrey, B.C., for example, has sliding walls between the bedrooms and the den. With the walls closed,

they are three separate rooms, but with the walls open, the unit becomes one big studio for a more airy ambiance when alone or entertaining. Bedroom closets can be moved freely throughout the suite to suit the dweller's storage needs.

“What we've found through our market research, as well as from input from Europe and Asia, is that adaptability is critical in the short term and the long term,” says Chris Vollan, Rize's vice-president of development.

“Adding more utility to a space is what our purchasers really want. The sliding wall system and the moveable storage are very much in response to that.”

Daryl Simpson, senior vice-president at Bosa Properties (bosaproperties.com), says many developers across Canada are building small spaces because they're simply more affordable for purchasers. The problem, though, is that “true liveability and functionality get sacrificed.” So Bosa spent more than a year brainstorming ways to keep primary rooms a fair size without compromising functionality.

“We wanted living rooms that breathed and opened into bedrooms, bedrooms that opened up and breathed into living rooms, and a dining area that evolved out of the kitchen,” Mr. Simpson says. “We wanted all of these three spaces to morph and even flow into each other ... You ultimately get more real estate out of the real estate you've bought.”

The result is BosaSpace, or what the Vancouver developer calls “the world's first fully transformable homes.” It boasts suites with a bed that becomes a loveseat, sliding walls to separate living and sleeping areas, a kitchen storage island that converts to a desk or an eight-seater dining table, and a TV/entertainment area that transforms into a home office or an extra bed. There's also storage for eight stackable dining room chairs.

The idea has proven so popular at its University District project in Surrey that Bosa plans to roll it out at another two B.C. residential projects.

“It really shows you how much more you can live in a space that's really quite affordable,” Mr. Simpson says. “It's a philosophy, or an approach, to transformational condominium living.”



A cross-section rendering of a River City 3 unit showing how the cube fits in to the suite.

Still, transformable living doesn't have to mean small. Nine 1,000-sq.-ft. suites at Urban Capital's 29-storey River City 3 (rivercitytoronto.com) tower in Toronto's West Don Lands have no interior walls. Rather, separations are created with a central curtained bedroom pod by Graham Hill (lifeedited.com), allowing dwellers to tailor the rest of the unit to their needs or change it up on the fly. The cube-within-a-cube design hails from the micro-living pundit who preaches how to make do with less space and less stuff. Mr. Hill's own New York apartment packs 1,000 sq. ft. of functionality into 420 sq. ft. of space thanks to transformable furniture and moving walls. As he puts it: "Anyone can edit his or her life. It's not a matter of resources, but intention."



One of the nine 1,000-square-foot unit at River City 3 that has a cube-within-a-cube bedroom pod.

Graham Hill on breaking our old-school need for possessions and large spaces:

Edit ruthlessly

Clear the arteries of your life. Cut the extraneous and stem the inflow. Think before you buy—will it truly make you happier?

Small is sexy

Why have a six-burner stove when you really only use three? Any new things you buy should nest, stack and digitize.

Multi-function rules

Choose a toilet-sink combo, a dining table that becomes a bed, a side table that stretches to seat 10.