

Express

Tight Space, Abundant Ideas

Studio dwellers embrace minimal square footage

By Becca Milfeld January 26, 2012

In the middle of his 400-square-foot studio, in a small space carved out between a bookshelf, sundry chairs and a bed, Jeff Watkinson, who is 6 feet 1 inch tall, balances on a 2 1/2-foot imitation surfboard with a roller underneath it, lurching back and forth across the floor.

“This is a very strong workout; it just mimics surfing,” he says.

His objective is not so much to demonstrate his athleticism as it is his knack for saving space via multifunctional furniture. Having moved into his Kalorama studio 18 months ago, the 32-year-old who works in investment sales has employed a number of tricks to create room for activities like exercise. He stores his clothes in his TV console, he converted his bookshelf into a bar, and he has a gateleg table that, unfolded, seats seven or eight.

Watkinson’s apartment represents one of the most fundamental ideas in small-space living: multifunctional decor. Considering the minimal square footage of a studio, furnishing one requires an inordinate amount of thought.

“Rarely would we design a studio where a piece of furniture only serves one function,” says Jason Claire, the co-owner of furniture and design store [Vastu](#) (1829 14th St. NW; 202-234-8344), which has been fashioning Washington interiors, teensy and grand, for almost a decade.

Mounted bookshelves and glass-top desks are some of Claire’s go-to tricks. “The more molding you can see, and the more you can trace the actual shape of the room, the more open it’s going to feel,” he says. “So if that means hanging stuff on the walls to get it off the floor or using thinner legs on tables, that’s better.”

Brooke Traeger’s multipurpose object of choice is the ottoman. As president of the Washington chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers, she recommends transforming this accessory (which primarily serves as a footstool) into a small coffee table by placing a large, similarly shaped tray on top. Ottomans can also be used as chairs and are often hollow, with space for storage inside. Relegating unsightly belongings to hidden spaces such as these is a golden rule of studio living.

Jamie Little, 30, lives a five-minute walk away from Watkinson and his faux surfboard. As if designed by Traeger, her studio (which employs tips from her architect father and interior designer mother) features an ottoman with a tray as a coffee table. Resembling the type of space generally seen in catalogs, her 425-square-foot Kalorama/Dupont Circle studio took design inspiration from blogs such as [Apartmenttherapy.com](https://www.apartmenttherapy.com).

Little, an elementary educator, divided her long and rectangular apartment into rooms without walls. She created an entryway using the back of her couch, which runs perpendicular to the studio's door and forms a boundary that defines where the apartment's next section — the "living room" — begins. The sitting area is then distinguished from a bedroom area by a square, backless bookshelf.

"Open-back shelving is great because you can put it in front of your windows and display books and knickknacks," Traeger says.

Which brings Little to her least-favorite aspect of the apartment. "Light has been my biggest challenge," she says. "I was house hunting in the winter, and it was dark. I didn't know what was out these windows, and I face walls."

Her open-back shelving allows what little light comes through the one window in the main room to reach as much of the apartment as possible. Several full-length mirrors on opposite walls reflect the light, opening up the space. A wall lamp, directed toward the ceiling above her bed, changes the room's feel. "This kicks up a lot of light, so it's a sun-filled room during the day," she says.

But not all illumination — sunshine or otherwise — is equal. "We usually think of light in multilevels, so there's natural light; there's overhead light; there's table and floor lighting; and then if you're entertaining, there's candlelight," Claire says. "By mixing those different levels, it's usually the most pleasing, complementary light. We usually try to mix at least three of those to provide a warm, inviting space."

One of the only areas fully divided from the rest of Little's apartment is her kitchen, large enough for no more than two people at once. To save counter space, she mounted various things, including her microwave and a dish rack, on the walls. This includes a spice rack, a magnetic knife strip and her pans, which she hung via hooks.

"I was looking for a pot rack forever and I couldn't find anything that made sense. I finally just threw two hooks up there and that made a huge difference for storage," she says.

White dishes and clear cups are other sure bets for the kitchen because of their versatility.

"In a small space, you usually don't have much cabinetry, and [neutral dishware] kind of goes with anything," says Kathryn Bechen, author of "Small Space Organizing" (\$13, Revell). Bechen recommends saving pops of color for small-detail items such as napkins and placemats. Avoiding large pieces with patterns or bright colors keeps rooms

from getting too busy in appearance.

Allie Mann, a project designer at [Case Design](#) (4701 Sangamore Road, Bethesda; 301-229-4600) recommends muted, neutral paint colors, “particularly if the walls or lack thereof do not offer a lot of definition.”

When Mark Tiner came to Vastu in 2007 for help decorating the 325-square-foot studio co-op he had just purchased in Logan Circle for \$200,000, he wanted to base the space’s color palette on a shade of green in a pair of his Pumas.

“We just introduced a splash of color and carried that color through the whole space. Then, we riffed on that, so we did pillows and various textures and patterns that kind of had a little bit of that color,” Claire says.

Tiner’s piece de resistance is his “sofa,” which is only a sofa by day. At night, he takes off the thick layer of throw pillows that line the back and removes the green slipcover, revealing a full-size mattress resting on a sofa frame. Space was so tight when he moved in that he got rid of his queen-size mattress to save the six or so inches in either direction.

“I don’t need a ton of square footage to make me happy,” says Tiner, 43, a lobbyist for a defense company. “What makes me happy is the vibrancy of the neighborhood, interesting people — and that’s more important to me than how big a place is.”

Multifunctional Must-Haves

Trunk

“Trunks work great as coffee tables and do double duty, storing things like extra blankets, photo albums and memorabilia,” says “Small Space Organizing” author Kathryn Bechen. Try one of [Abaca Imports](#)’ (1201 N. Royal St., Alexandria; 703-684-2901) vintage Chinese trunks (\$275-\$750).

Ottoman

Brooke Traeger, designer and president of the Washington chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers, endorses the ottoman as not only a storage unit, but also as a coffee table substitute or an extra seating option.

[Target](#)’s set of four ottomans can be stored away themselves — inside a bench (\$170).

Strategic Shelving

A standard bookcase “just takes up a chunk of the floor space versus something that’s hanging on the wall and [lets you] still see the molding underneath,” says Jason Claire, co-owner of [Vastu](#). He’s partial to the Escriba shelving system (\$1,730 per panel).

Mounted Kitchen Accessories

Kalorama/Dupont studio dweller Jamie Little uses a hanging dish rack (\$25, Ikea.com) to save counter-top space. “Everything is built into the walls, especially in the kitchen,” Little says.

Paint Pointers

Allie Mann, a project designer at Case Design, recommends using muted, neutral paint colors in small spaces. She particularly loves [Sherwin-Williams](#)’ flat sheen shades of colonnade gray (SW 7641), latte (SW 6108) and believable buff (SW 6120) (price per gallon varies). “They’re popular colors pertinent to 2012, but they have a range of flexibility,” Mann says.