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## Furnishing Your First Apartment: Big Ideas for Small Spaces

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By Susan Johnston

When I graduated from college, I couldn't wait to move into the real world and into a real grown-up apartment. I was through with sleeping on an extra-long twin bed lofted three feet in the air and of sharing a tiny dorm room with an almost-stranger. Unfortunately, living in an expensive city, I found myself living in a room with square footage that was less than my old dorm room. And did I mention it didn't have a closet? Oh, the irony!

But after hanging curtains and creatively positioning my furniture (kinda like a game of Tetris), the room gradually began to feel more livable, cozy even. From sublets to studios, high-rises to single-family homes, my friends and I have experienced the gamut of urban real estate and picked up a few pointers along the way. Here are a few common housing situations and their decorating solutions.

**Situation #1: You've finally moved out of the dorm and into your very own apartment. Well, technically, it's a studio with a kitchenette, and it's about the size of a shoebox. Houston, we have a problem...**

Solution: Look on the bright side, at least with limited space, you won't have to buy a ton of furniture and use up every penny from graduation (you've probably spent a big chunk on security deposits). What you need are a few small, space-efficient pieces to make your shoebox feel like home.

Repeat after me: futons are your friend. They are the perfect starter bed, because they're cheap and space-efficient. One caveat, though: do not buy the cheapest, lumpiest 12-inch mattress you can find. In this case, saving money could result in a raging case of insomnia that not even industrial strength sleeping pills will soothe. Try out different brands and thicknesses of mattress to ensure a decent night's sleep. Then when you want to have friends over, just fold up the futon, rearrange your throw pillows, and lounge on your comfy couch. For extra seating, you can pick up a few folding chairs and store them in a corner until company comes. Padded slipcovers will transform those secondhand chairs from drab to fab.

Now onto that kitchenette. Check on what appliances are included (and how much counter space you have) before you buy anything extra. If you can't live without your coffee maker and food processor, look for smaller models instead of the one that brews enough coffee for a small army. Once you move into a bigger place, you can buy that super-deluxe caterers' version and resell your pint-sized appliances to some one else in a studio.

If you're short on cabinet space, then put up wall hooks for your pots, pans, and other cooking accouterments. This makes it easy to find everything you need for dinner instead of rummaging around in the drawers and cabinets. It also gives your kitchen a real gourmet cook's decor, which you can play up with some fancy bottles of olive oil and spices.

**Situation #2: That cozy, but cute, studio fell through, and now you're stuck squatting on your best friend's brother's coworker's couch.**

Solution: Depending on how long you plan to live in limbo (or if you're sharing a one-bedroom in

Manhattan, it might be a long-term living situation), you may or may not want to invest too much time and effort in decorating. Then again, you don't want to be constantly reminded of your squatter status by the pile of clothes draped over a suitcase and boxes in the corner. Do yourself a favor and throw a funky piece of fabric over those boxes. If they're sturdy, they can serve as a makeshift table. Stack a few plastic crates next to your bed/couch for an instant nightstand/shelf unit. Remember that futon you bought? It fits perfectly into this new set-up: couch by day and bed by night. Put a few plastic crates under the bed with extra clothes, and you're good to go.

If the room is big enough and you'd like some privacy, buy a folding screen to partition off your sleeping area from the rest of the room. You can also reposition the screen to block any unsightly piles of clothes and other messes. But for roommates who enjoy late-night movies or Playstation in your "bedroom," the only solution I can suggest is earplugs.

**Situation #3: You've finally left your best friend's brother's coworker's apartment, moved out of the shoebox-sized studio, and into an apartment with more than one room. Launching your own business sounded like a great idea, until that dot-com started taking over your bedroom. Or maybe you've decided to use your living room as a Pilates studio.**

Solution: Maintaining separate spaces are essential to maintaining your sanity. Having a mountain of invoices and half-empty coffee mugs staring you in the face will give you just as much insomnia as that cheap futon mattress. And no one wants to trip over your Pilates gear during an Oscar party.

Home workstations that fold up at the end of the day are space-efficient, but often expensive. If it's not in your budget, then find a desk that has as much storage as possible. Ditto on the other furniture. Once you run out of floor space, it's time to start thinking vertically. Mount some floating shelves on your wall or buy a small filing cabinet to use as a printer stand. And if you must have file folders and piles of paper out in the open, at least buy some in a funky color or pattern. Add some stacking letter-boxes to maximize surface space, and you're in business.

For a dual-purpose living room, coffee tables with extra shelves or drawers rock. If you're going for an eclectic or exotic look, then you might opt for a steamer trunk instead. They're sturdy, inexpensive, and you can stash all your winter sweaters or work-out gear inside.

Ottomans can also offer extra storage and flexible seating arrangements. Or buy a second-hand piano bench. This super-versatile invention stores extra magazines and works well as a side-table or as additional seating. It also helps to have your TV and other electronics on wheels so you can maneuver them around for workouts or parties. Utilize all your square footage with a small, skinny bookcase that hugs the corners of the room. Invest in practical, dual-purpose pieces, and you're on the right track.

*Susan Johnston [[1] <http://www.susan-johnston.com>] is a freelance writer and a recent college grad who has lived in a variety of roommate and apartment situations, some good, some not so great. She prides herself on her ability to pull together a room with a few pieces of furniture and a lot of creativity.*

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