

Designing for Small Spaces

Writer Margaret B. Atkinson
Photographer Terry Sweeny



Repurposing an area of the home can be a challenge, but trying to re-designate an especially small space can add an even greater level of difficulty. So, when a Memphis homeowner wanted to repurpose her seldom-used home office into a more inviting area, she called on designer Ami Austin to help her with the task.

Austin used her décor know-how and a few design tricks to turn the former office into a truly enjoyable space, where the homeowner could both relax and display her artwork in a sophisticated way. Here, Austin shares with us some tips for dealing with small-scale design.

Q: In your mind, what is the number one thing to consider when designing for a small space?

A: How the room will be used.

Q: What is your attitude towards color and pattern when designing for a smaller area?

A: I believe the color should flow from room to room. Depending on how you utilize the space, you may go the same shade or one shade lighter or darker than the adjoining room, staying within the same color family. Lighter shades give the illusion of larger space, and using the same color palette creates the illusion that both rooms are larger.

Q: How do you adapt your design approach when dealing with a smaller space versus a larger area? Are there elements that remain consistent?

A: I love the feel of a small room. I believe they can be intimate and cozy. Depending on the need or function of the space determines the actual approach. Creating or honoring an existing focal point is key.

Q: This room features a silver palette that really brings the space together. What are some tips you would offer to achieve a cohesive aesthetic?

A: In the case of this room, we had designated it early on as a sitting room for reading and relaxing. Finding the platinum leather chairs allowed us to build the room from that point with color and texture. We wanted a good view of the patio and a comfortable feel to enjoy the fireplace as well. If the room is designated for sitting and conversation, then stick with that theme.

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Q: Are there any trompe l'oeil design tricks you have learned over the years to make small spaces appear larger?

A: Large pieces really enhance the space and add to the illusion that the room is larger. For example, a large armoire housing a television or a secretary tucked into the corner can add height and dimension. Keep in mind, these larger pieces don't always have to be furniture, they can be paintings or large groupings of paintings. You could mirror a wall to reflect the outdoors or a view from a larger adjoining room.

Q: What are some limitations that smaller spaces present?

A: Going back to the first step, defining how you want to utilize the space should cut down on the limitations. For instance, for many families having a home office might be a good use for a small space. If it is a high traffic area of the house, create hidden storage areas to keep the room from looking cluttered or disorganized.

Q: Do you have any advice concerning artwork and lighting for these areas?

A: Small rooms are a great place to house collections of "like collectibles." You may have a collection that is not big enough to get "the look" if you distribute it throughout the home. Defining a place with a thoughtful display will really accentuate your collection and allow you and others to appreciate what is meaningful for you and your family. For the lighting, I believe, as in almost any room, you should create a triangle effect, perhaps a chandelier complete with a dimmer. I am a huge fan of dimmers, with additional lighting either highlighting art or tables or desktops.

Q: After a project has been completed, are homeowners often surprised by how much enjoyment they can get out of a space they previously deemed unusable?

A: I believe they are because the space is more intimate than other areas of the house. I believe you have an even greater opportunity to personalize a smaller space and add greater impact.