

Homeowners must decide on what's too little or too big

By Barbara Mayer

AP Special

Like Goldilocks, you may have trouble making yourself at home in places that seem too large or too small. But you're more likely to get advice on coping with too little rather than too much.

Each January, House Beautiful magazine focuses on decorating small spaces.

"A lot of people don't live in 10,000-square-foot houses, and even those who do have large houses have small rooms to decorate," said Mark Mayfield, editor-in-chief of the magazine.

New York City, a hotbed of stylish decorating, always has been a place of small rooms.

And all over the country people are moving into downtown areas and smaller rooms as old buildings get turned into apartments, the editor said.

The consensus is that it's easier to decorate a room that's a little too small than a room that's way too

big, especially for the do-it-yourselfer. A small room is already intimate and the challenge is to make it feel a bit more spacious, while intimate is a real challenge for large rooms, said decorator Mariette Himes Gomez.

The market is cooperating with those decorating smaller spaces. There is a trend away from over-large furniture, to pieces with smaller proportions.

Now that eclectic mix-and-match interiors are popular and people buy one piece here and one there, manufacturers are offering plenty of pieces that stand on their own.

There's also more furniture for multipurpose uses such as cocktail tables that can be raised to dining height.

The rise of moderately priced fashionable merchandise is a god-send to those decorating small spaces on moderate budgets, said Mayfield.

Yet statistics suggest that the typical new American house is getting

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bigger; so-called McMansions are famous for double-height foyers and living rooms and skating-rink sized kitchens.

"People are attracted to double-height rooms because it's like walking into a cathedral," said Kira Wilson Gould, author of "Big Home, Big Challenge."

Of course, she added, "who wants to live in a cathedral?" People soon discover they prefer to be cozy.

"Decorating a large space requires more furniture than most people are used to having," Gould

She found it was good to have some large-scale pieces of furniture, such as an armoire or oversize bookcases.

But a huge sofa can be a mistake if it's so deep that a short person sitting down finds his or her legs don't reach the floor.

She advises looking at all that wall space as an opportunity to display large-scale art.

It could be a single oversize canvas or a group of smaller art objects placed together. "You can even display your collection of antique iron tractor seats, or whatever."

To get ideas for handling big spaces, Gould suggests hanging out in hotel lobbies and visiting historic mansions open to the public.

Even if these spaces are too formal and you wouldn't want to copy them exactly, you can learn from their approaches.

"Make a list of what activities you want to accomplish in a room," suggested Gould. Big rooms are made for multiple activities.

Besides area rugs, you can delineate spaces by changing the floor level or a ceiling level, adding partial walls and architectural ornament such as moldings. Paint and wallpaper are less expensive ways to create the same kinds of changes visually.

If you want to bring a room with tall ceilings down a bit, make the ceiling look lower by putting up a molding down a few feet from the top of the wall and painting the ceiling a different color from the walls.

The bottom-line on too big or too small? "With small rooms, use bigger furniture sparingly and allow the room to dictate what you do," Gomez said.

"With large rooms, you can't just sprinkle furniture all around. Start with a plan and create compartments that add up to a whole."



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