

+ Saturday, June 15, 2013
telegraph.co.uk



weekend

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Concepts for compact city living

When downsizing your spacious family home in the country for a compact house in the city, less can be more, says **Dominic Lutyens**



The myriad charms of living in the countryside can wear thin for a growing family. It's not only the cost of running a large household – not to mention the multiple vehicles necessary for rural living – that can fall. There are also the necessities of work and schools to consider. So what happens when a family relocates from a house in the country to an urban location?

First comes acceptance: you are very unlikely to be able to afford a similar-sized property in the city. Downsizing is the obvious solution and – with a little work and imagination – a smaller home can be a happy and efficient one.

But, undeniably, the act of downsizing brings with it certain conundrums.

Is there enough space for the children to play with their toys or knuckle down to do homework? Can parents find somewhere to unwind when the kids have gone to bed? Will everyone be tripping over one another? And can parents of toddlers prevent the living areas becoming an obstacle course of toys scattered pell-mell?

Yes, downsizing might seem daunting. Yet there's no shortage of ideas for how to make this transition as painless – and economical – as possible.

The consensus among design experts is to plan ahead – even before moving. "One of the first things I'd suggest for a family is to do an audit of all their possessions," says Gilly Chance, principal designer at London-based interior design firm Stavedene, which has created many schemes for downsizing clients.

"People often hoard. So if they have less storage in their new place, it's important they don't take things with them they no longer need."

Among her recent clients was a couple, Peter and Judy. The pair were already working in London but wanted to move their family from a spacious Victorian barn in Sussex to a smaller, detached property in Wimbledon.

"Country living has so much going for it – not least the space," explains Peter. "But the commute can be impractical for those with demanding careers. So we decided to sell up and move closer to work."

"It quickly became clear we'd have to exist in less space than the barn afforded us and we needed help with creative ideas for how to adapt to our new home. Gilly approached our move highly methodically. She first audited what we had, then visited our new property before coming up with a draft plan. Going through this, we soon realised that moving house would be the perfect opportunity to declutter."

"Gilly came up with two clever ideas which gained us instant space. Judy and I love wine and one wall in our barn was lined with bottles. The solution was simple: build a cellar. We opted for a spiral one, accessed by a trapdoor. She also created a mezzanine level, providing extra space for a study and saving us from using up one of the precious bedrooms."

One potentially problematic aspect of downsizing is the matter of how different family members negotiate the use of communal spaces. "It's really important to consider how the family's timetable impacts on the space available," says Alan Hughes, vice-principal of London's Inchbald School of Design. "If everyone leaves for work and school around the same time, an extra bathroom or a shower will stop tempers fraying. It's money well spent to find the space for an ensuite or shower cubicle in a downstairs cloakroom to combat a potential early-morning bottleneck."

"Another way to alleviate pressure is to install washbasins discreetly hidden in cupboards in teenagers' bedrooms. These provide extra space for teeth-cleaning and make-up applying."

Families who are currently house hunting would be well advised to look for a home that's more adaptable to downsizing, says Nicholas Burwell, a director at London-based Burwell Deakins Architects.

"A listed building in a conservation area, without a garden, is difficult to make additions to, especially in a way that could ease the transition from country to city. But properties in less restricted areas have the



Downsizing tips

● **Minimise clutter** when you move from a large house to a smaller one. There are countless ways to do so, says interior designer Gilly Chance. "Most beds have storage underneath, though the best have mattresses that lift on a frame revealing a big space. Plenty of children's beds

now come as bunks with storage on the bottom level, such as chests of drawers and desks. It's also best to fit wardrobes with double-height rails to maximise hanging space. And it's a good idea to store clothes worn only occasionally in vacuum packs, which lie flatter in tight spaces."

● **Lighting** can help create contrasting atmospheres conducive to different family activities, suggests Paul Nulty, head of Paul Nulty Lighting Design. "Pre-automated light settings make a small room more multifunctional. By day, keep it bright for children. At night, create a cosier setting

with contrasts of light and shadow. Control systems today aren't too expensive – they start at around £200 – and can be operated remotely from a mobile phone or laptop. The latest systems even monitor your energy consumption and give you a figure for your next electricity bill."

● **Cut costs** by daylight harvesting. "This means controlling the balance between natural and artificial light in a room," explains Phillip Pini, systems design engineer at Crestron UK. "Sensors track how much daylight there is in a room, then gauge how much artificial lighting to use. So if

the sun goes down, levels of artificial light go up. If it's daytime and blinds are open, the artificial lighting turns off. This saves money and energy. The system can also be automated to sense when someone's in a room. So if you want it to turn lights off when the person leaves it, you can."

potential for creating extra space, for example, an economic, well-insulated summerhouse in the garden."

Sue Timney, president of the British Institute of Interior Design, also believes in capitalising on the space offered outdoors. "I've designed sheds in London gardens," she says. "These can offer a children's play room, office space or chill-out area for teenagers. And they're often cheaper to build than a conservatory."

Outbuildings are now covered by permitted development rights, which allow them to be used for any purpose "incidental to the personal enjoyment of the main house" – this would then exclude bedrooms – without requiring planning permission. So ensure you check the planning development rights first.

"Look for every opportunity to create extra space," counsels interior designer Sophie Mills. "In a house where it is very tight, one way grown-ups and children can harmoniously share a room is to equip it with dual-purpose storage."

"I once designed a bench incorporating pull-out boxes on castors to store toys. When these were pushed under it, you couldn't tell they contained any clutter and the bench looked like a grown-up piece of furniture," she explains. "I've also reclaimed a garage to create a kids' games and music room."

Meanwhile, Chance suggests toys are put

in large nets that can be hoisted up to the ceiling on pulleys to free up floor space.

But what about parents or grandparents, who would like their own space to relax? Where there may have been ample space for adults to dominate in a larger country house, such an area doesn't, at first, seem practical in a smaller urban property.

Hughes disagrees. "One solution is to make the kitchen or dining room more informal and adaptable enough to include a sofa or TV for use by the children," he says. "This leaves the sitting room free for grown-ups to claim some quiet downtime."

For those with a more generous budget, one option is to add an extension into the garden. Architect Jonathan Tuckey did just this for a family who recently moved from a sprawling house in the West Country to a neat London mews.

"I built an extension on two floors," he explains. "This made the house much more spacious. We also made the existing windows much larger, as the broader views – as well as allowing far more daylight – made the house feel bigger."

Families looking to downsize, adds Tuckey, might consider digging down to create a basement. He also recommends reducing the scale of rooms. "A smaller space is more intimate and efficient. Everything is within arm's reach and you don't need an industrial boiler to heat it." For downsizing clients, he has carved

up rooms with curtains, screens and shelves that slide into cavities in walls.

One automatic benefit to downsizing, of course, is the smaller utility bills. Even so, there are ways you can reduce these further. Says Timney: "A simple way to save money – and help save the planet – is to ensure doors and windows fit exactly, without gaps that cause draughts."

Chance says: "Providing good insulation drastically cuts heating bills – though there's a cost to installing this and savings are rarely seen for several years." She also recommends installing underfloor heating in bathrooms, supplemented by dual-fuel radiators. These are connected to the central heating but also work independently of it, so are useful for drying towels in the summer when the central heating is off.

"Underfloor heating creates a low-level heat without the need to crank up radiator temperatures," agrees Timney. But beware: it can be less efficient in certain rooms. "Large pieces of furniture cover large areas of floor, so you don't get the full benefit of the heat," cautions Chance. "I'd recommend using wall-hung radiators instead – they're far less bulky than they once were and more efficient to boot."

Affordable, efficient and no need to compromise: downsizing from country to city might be a big move, but it doesn't have to change your landscape for good.

The Volkswagen up!

Whether you're downsizing your home, your garden or your car, small can equal efficient. The cleverly compact Volkswagen up! perfectly encapsulates the benefits of scaling down and simplifying your life, all without the need to compromise.

Cutting costs, not corners

Just as moving to a smaller home comes with more palatable running costs, the Volkswagen up! is adept at saving money. From the outset, it has been designed to be as efficient as possible, both in day-to-day running and intelligent use of available space.

Its lightweight and efficient three-cylinder 1.0-litre engine is key to this. Like a cleverly placed item of furniture or carefully thought-out wall partition at home, Volkswagen's designers and engineers have located the car's engine as far forward as possible to maximise the interior space.

Dr Ulrich Hackenberg, member of the board of management, Volkswagen Brand Development, explains: "At a length of 3.54 metres, the up! is one of the smallest four-seat cars. Yet its interior is a giant among small cars. And that's no wonder: one of the longest wheelbases – together with a compact engine mounted far forward and new running gear designs – result in exceptionally good space utilisation."

Extending storage space

The compact dimensions of the up! belie the interior. The car is comfortable for a family of four, while the boot has enough space and flexibility to carry all those daily essentials and occasional large loads, too (it can extend from a capacity of 251 litres to 951 litres).

That efficiency of space and economy of ownership are reflected in every element of the driving experience – from the simplicity, clarity and ease of operation of the instrumentation and controls to the intelligent packaging of all your information and entertainment needs.

The Maps & More infotainment system (optional on some models) combines mapping, audio control and Bluetooth connectivity presented in a removable, touch-screen interface.

Thinking for you

Maps & More also offers driving tips via the optional ThinkBlue Trainer. Monitoring the use of the accelerator, gear shift and brakes, it helps you understand your driving style and allows you to become more eco-friendly, keeping trips to the filling station as infrequent as possible.

The Volkswagen up! offers official combined fuel economy figures in excess of 60mpg and CO₂ emissions from 95 to 108g/km. And the Move up! BlueMotion Technology achieves 68.9mpg and 95g/km.

The 1.0-litre three-cylinder engine sips fuel. It might be parsimonious but it still offers plenty of performance to keep up with the cut and thrust of traffic in and out of the city.

Not just efficient to run, then, but inexpensive to insure and tax, as well as easy to park. The car's focus on economy and efficiency is absolutely core to its appeal, making it the perfect choice if you're looking to downsize your life but aren't prepared to accept second best.

Compact luxury

The Volkswagen up! contains all the big-car luxuries you could want in a compact footprint. Isofix child seat fixings deliver maximum safety for your most precious passengers, while optional heated seats and cruise control maximise comfort up front.

It all adds up to one thing: downsized doesn't mean downgraded, just better organised and refreshingly free of clutter in your life. So you have more time to enjoy what's actually important.



Downsizing is daunting, yet there's no shortage of ideas to make it painless

For more information and details of the Volkswagen up! visit telegraph.co.uk/volkswagenup



Das Auto.

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brage on the bottom level,
ch as chests of drawers
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