

Don't be neutral about using color

by Christine Brun / Small Spaces
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I am immersed these days in "Downtown: My Manhattan," a wonderful book by Pete Hamill that has me thinking about city living and the history of Manhattan. Hamill describes living "over New York" in 1958 in a third-floor apartment at 307 East Ninth St. His rent was \$54 a month for an apartment shared with two others! New Yorkers like Hamill are pros at small space living. I suspect they could teach a lot to the rest of the country, which will soon be witnessing the shrinking of American housing.

TINY, AFFORDABLE HOUSING

By the looks of things, we could soon be headed back to the post-World War II residential model of tiny, but affordable housing. For folks living in modern suburbs, who until 2008 felt that to be hip you needed a four- or five-bedroom home, this downsizing is going to be a shock. Interior designer Patricia O'Shaughnessy has a lovely hand that tastefully blends together elements to make the most of a small space. In the photo, we see her design for an in-kitchen dining area in a solid prewar apartment building on New York City's Upper West Side. "Like many apartments of its day, most of the rooms are off the main, interior, skinny hallway, which runs like a spine down the apartment," explains O'Shaughnessy. "We did a number of things to make the hallway seem larger, wider, grander and brighter than it actually is. "To make it appear like it gets natural light, even through there are no windows in the hallway, we lit it with overhead spots, painted the walls a deep, warm pumpkin and gold. We used the walls like gallery space, hanging artwork that reads well up close. As you progress along the route there is much to see," she continues. "We opened up the kitchen to the hallway which visually increased the size of both the kitchen and the hallway."

NO FEAR OF COLOR

O'Shaughnessy is not afraid to use color. She does a great job of introducing interesting combinations via painted furniture, fabrics and artwork within a neutral shell. "Much of the design of this home has to do with playing with scale." O'Shaughnessy said. "There is an economy of furnishings, but every piece has a big shape, big pattern or big color. This is obvious with the large-scale pattern used on the decoratively painted walls, the colorful dining table and the large-scale stripe on the runner in the hallway. Use of oversized coffee cups is at once whimsical and bold enough to command attention from the other end of the narrow hall. In this setting, a light-colored wall need not be safe and boring. The large yet subtle pattern accomplishes a lot, yet is easy on the eyes. It is reminiscent of traditional damasks, which are commonly printed in tone-on-tone colors, such as blending two or three tones of cream or tan.

HARD TO COMMIT

Understandably, it is often difficult for people to commit to the bold color scheme O'Shaughnessy has fashioned. Without guidance, most people feel safer with light and neutral palettes. But there can be a great payoff in taking risks with color in a small space. It allows for drama with just a few strokes. Another way to accomplish the same dramatic effect might be with a floor-length table skirt in a dashing color. That way, the tablecloth can be removed if you get scared. Just keep in mind that one reason to hire a professional designer is that they can bravely serve as your guide through unfamiliar territory. As one of O'Shaughnessy's clients said, "She knows that in a New York City apartment there is never enough space, never enough light, and never anyone who can hang a picture when and where you need it. She knows what's worth a splurge and what can be done on a shoestring."



Photo by Steven Mays

The bold use of a bright red table with dark green chairs by designer Patricia O'Shaughnessy gives an expansive feel to a petite dining area.