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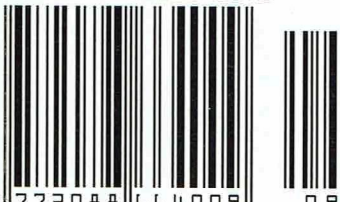
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November/December 2012

ISSN 2088-6640



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Less is More

Clever storage solutions and a brave reconfiguring of space gives a small Hong Kong apartment a new outlook.

Story by Nicole Stock
Photos by Rogan Coles

Project: Apartment-26D
Architect: Michael Ong, MODO
Location: Hong Kong



There's a joke about a kid who has a dollar.

Someone offers him three quarters for the dollar to which he agrees enthusiastically. Someone else then offers him five dimes for the three quarters, and again, the kid does the swap. Finally, someone offers him 18 pennies for the five dimes, and again, the kid happily makes the exchange and heads home to proudly show his parents, saying, "look, those dummies only have one dollar, and I have 18 pennies."

The joke, of course, is that sometimes one is more than three, or five, or eighteen. It sounds ridiculous, but this counter-intuition happens with surprising regularity in real estate. We can be so blinkered to getting more that we often value more, smaller rooms, when we actually end up with less - less useable space, less flexibility, less light or air or style.

Michael Ong from architecture firm MODO in Melbourne, Australia thought carefully about the real value of space when he was approached to refit an existing two-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong. For apartment-26D one of the key alterations he made was to convert the two-bedroom apartment to one-bedroom to free up more living space.

The decision to reduce rooms seems remarkable, however, when Ong looked into how the owners were currently living in the two-bedroom apartment, he saw they had so little storage that the second bedroom had gradually turned into a large storage locker anyway. The apartment was only two-bedrooms in name, not usability.

The apartment's L-shaped floor plan had narrow living areas, deep corridors, and a disconnected, enclosed kitchen and laundry. Within the

The timber 'cube', designed by Michael Ong, is both space divider and storage centre (opposite). While closed-up (top left) the box is simply like a piece of blank cabinetry but when needed, a single bed can be pulled out for guests (top right). An ample walk-in wardrobe is tidied inside the 'cube' (bottom).



The kitchen was rearranged so that it runs along the length of the living area wall making it a social space while also setting up a material palette of rich blacks and crisp whites (above). The timber-lined living area (opposite). The all-around timber treatment makes this space feel more cosy, differentiates it from other parts of the apartment, and draws attention to the view.

small footprint, the available space had become compartmentalised, leaving dull boxes for living in.

Previously, when entering the apartment, you could walk straight past the enclosed galley kitchen. The kitchen has now been reconfigured into a long benchtop that runs along the length of the living space. The cooktop and sink run along the wall, while an island bench intervenes the space and sits in the middle of the room to encourage a communal hub.

This beautifully articulated kitchen also sets up a materiality that continues throughout the small space. Beyond just being a functional zone for preparing meals, the tactility of the luxurious materials used here uplift the kitchen to something more akin to display cabinetry. This is particularly useful in a small space where every centimetre counts toward the overall aesthetic.

Between the entry and kitchen, a narrow island provides yet more storage for the kitchen, but more importantly, it also hides two clever space-saving mechanisms. A pull-out seat and shoe rack allow one to take off their shoes and tidy them away before walking through the apartment. On the other end, underneath the cantilevered benchtop, a dining table can be pulled out to serve a small gathering,

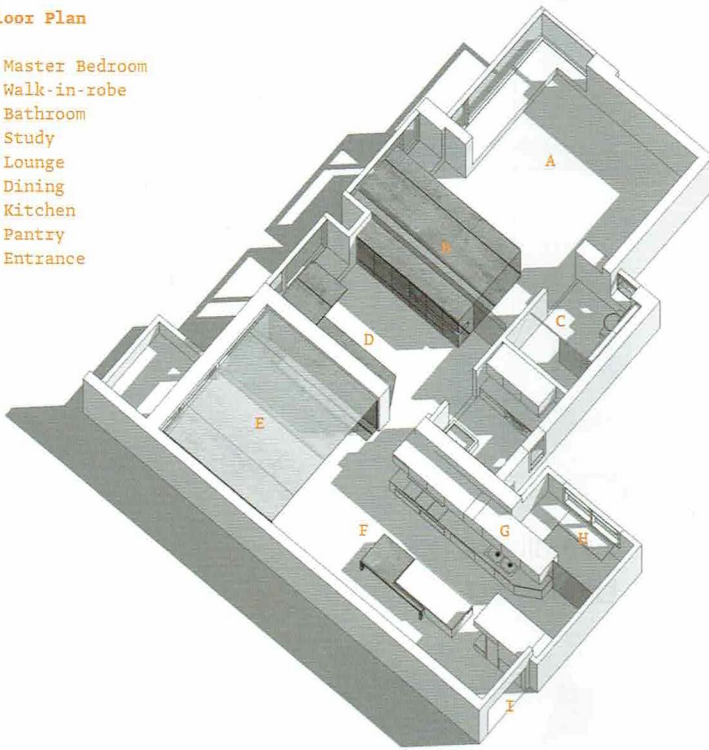
or can be retreated into the island to save space and work for two people. A mirror is mounted to the back of the entry door and adjacent wall, which, when closed, reflects the opposing mountain view and psychologically lengthens the living space. The illusion not only serves to enlarge the feeling of space, it also rebounds natural light into a once-dark spot.

Clever storage solutions were also paramount when it came to finding room for all of the stuff that had taken over the spare bedroom. Ong's solution to remove one of the walls that ran alongside the central, dark corridor, as well as the perpendicular walls creating two pokey rooms, has opened the apartment up immensely. But of course, by getting rid of these rooms, where did the study, guest bedroom and wardrobes go? In some ways, the solution does not look that different to the original plan, but how those spaces were recreated and the way they are able to be employed is the key differentiator.

The internal walls were removed to form one comfortable bedroom, and then a new storage 'cube' was built between the new bedroom and study. The 'cube' is both a centralised storage solution and a space divider with a double walk-in-wardrobe to the bedroom side, and file drawers, shelves, a display shelf

Floor Plan

- A Master Bedroom
- B Walk-in-robe
- C Bathroom
- D Study
- E Lounge
- F Dining
- G Kitchen
- H Pantry
- I Entrance



and a single pull-out mattress for the occasional guest all packed within. What makes this cube of cabinetry different to a typical room, is that the cube hasn't been made full height. Instead, clearstory glazing above the cube allows light to penetrate deeper into the house. Separating the form from the entire volume, allows the spaces flow between each other so that rooms are loosely defined instead of rigidly compartmentalised, which allows the zones to be flexible and overlapped.

In contrast, Ong wanted to clearly define the living room and so designed a floated hardwood timber panel to wrap around the lounge, to mark it out from the other spaces in the house. The timber gives this space a resolutely different feel to the glossy white-and-black kitchen alongside, and the use of the hardwood adds a sense of warmth and luxurious texture. The folded timber lining also creates a framing effect to capture the view of the mountains beyond. As the timber descends down the wall, it folds out to form the entertainment joinery. Recessed LED strip lights at the ceiling fold throw out soft ambient light.

'Less is more' is frequently bandied round in design speak, but this is an apartment that took that adage to heart, reduced the number of rooms squeezed into its small footprint, and made more of the available space. What has resulted is a clever series of insertions that are practical but also immensely beautiful. ■■■

