

They're real big - on style

Rating top small apts.

BY CAITLIN KELLY
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER



Brolin for NEWS

A view of Clove Galilee and Jenny Rogers's studio.



Warga NEWS

Creative use of paint did wonders for Kellen Hassell and Brianna Hvam.

City apartments no larger than suburban closets are throwing open their doors to thousands of nitpicking strangers as part of a national contest.

The second annual "Smallest, Coolest Apartment" contest has gotten 36 entries from New Yorkers — close to a third of the 102 contestants from around the nation. None of the apartments is larger than 650 square feet.

The winner of the contest, run by the blog apartmenttherapy.com, will be announced Wednesday. The top prize is a \$2,500 store credit from the modernist gurus at Design Within Reach.

The Daily News visited four of the itty-bitty homes entered in the competition. Here's a look at what The News found:

'Where's your stuff?'

James Liao, West Village

Liao, a 27-year-old financial analyst, bought his 585-square-foot studio only five months ago.

He credited Craigslist for making it possible for him to find affordable, quality items. He also shelled out \$37 for a round coffee table on sale at Target. Its original price was \$150.

"It's a little odd to have strangers praise and criticize your apartment," he said about the online critiques of his home during the contest. "They all keep asking, 'Where's your stuff?'" (The answer: in his three closets.)

Liao said he reduces clutter by borrowing library books and listening to music online. He used soothing colors when picking out paint, shades, upholstery, pottery and lampshades. He also limited the number of textures and shapes, using mostly clean-lined furniture.

'Make everything custom'

James and Margaret Vira, Kips Bay

This pair of architects share a 565-square-foot studio — and put their professional training to work while making the most out of their cramped living space.

They built a dining nook along the outer wall of their bedroom, and James Vira made a narrow dining table, which seats six comfortably, from an \$80 sheet of

plywood that they then covered with homemade concrete tiles.

Three 1960s dining chairs came from eBay and \$120 table bases were ordered online. They found their computer desk and striped wool rug at overstock.com.

He advises anyone trying to fix up a very small home to get out the tools. "To make the space livable, we had to make everything custom," he said.

Coloring their world

Kellen Hassell and Brianna Hvam, Chelsea

Hassell, 23, and Hvam, 25, spent only \$1,500 to furnish their 290-square-foot studio.

The couple, who rented the space after moving to the city from Madison, Wis., have carved the apartment into a reading nook, sleeping area, living room and dining area.

"Many of the midcentury modern spaces are all very beautiful, but don't reflect real living for real people who have real stuff in their homes," says Hassell, a social worker.

Most of their furniture came from retailers West Elm, Ikea and Pottery Barn, while rich-looking Benjamin Moore paint — in soft red, deep brown, burgundy and cocoa — was used to create distinct areas.

The pair decorated their walls with large black-and-white photos of Madison, taken by Hassell's father, and a candleholder that casts a tree-shaped shadow from the narrow shelf over their bed.

'We were trying to do California'

Jenny Rogers and Clove Galilee, Greenwich Village

They met in college when they were in line at the financial aid office. Now living in close quarters with their dogs Petey and Jamie, these artists still substitute sweat equity and savvy Web searches for hard-earned cash.

They bought their 550-square-foot studio for about half its current market price. The floor was so stained with cat urine that it took days to sand it clean. The nicotine-stained concrete walls required 14 coats of paint.

Today, their cozy home, with its pale aqua walls, ebony-stained original oak floor, Murphy bed and white bookshelves, radiates a sense of calm.

"We were trying to do California," says Rogers, who lived in Oakland before moving to Manhattan.

To complete the Big Sur vibe, the pair framed the kitchen's pass-through with 100-year-old fir logs from a Brooklyn dealer and installed kitchen cupboards with frosted glass.

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