

“The beginnings of all things
are small”

- MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO (106 BC-43 BC)

How Great Small Can Be

You can feel it, you can hear, it's in the air: the era of “big, bigger, biggest” is over. Not only because of the economic crisis, writes Caroline Buijs, but because increasingly, people are discovering that they feel happier with less.



I recently watched the documentary *The Queen of Versailles* by American filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, a film about the building of the biggest house in America. It was designed to be bigger than the White House, but inspired by the Palace of Versailles in France. What's big? Well, for example, there were two tennis courts under construction, 10 kitchens, and 30 bathrooms. And, oh yes, a sushi bar. As the lady of the house offered a tour of her unfinished home, she exclaimed, "Oh no, this isn't my bedroom," in one of the giant empty spaces. "It's my closet!"

But the story isn't just about the massive house. There's a narrative. The economic crisis hits, and her dream shatters: the house can't be finished and is put up for sale. Despite her bad taste, it's hard to find this spendthrift unsympathetic, if only because of her wry humor. When the mansion is put up for sale, she says to her staff, "Look on the bright side. Now, at least, you don't have to keep this huge house clean."

Watching this film, I thought about my former home: a two-room apartment, only 50 square meters (about 500 square feet), where, with the arrival of baby one, we converted a closet into a nursery, and with the arrival of baby two, we tied shipping rope to both ends of the wicker cradle, hammered two hooks into the ceiling, and made a "swinging

cradle" that hung above the foot of our bed. Though our mothers gave us doubtful looks, baby two slept wonderfully in that swinging cradle. We didn't even have to get out of bed when we heard cries in the middle of the night; we could just nudge the hammock with a sleepy foot and the baby would fall right back to sleep.

MORE SPACE MEANS MORE REST

These days, the mentality of "big, bigger, biggest" is getting less and less sexy. Writer and designer Graham Hill, founder of Treehugger, an organization devoted to sustainability, encourages everyone to think about doing "a little life editing" to get rid of what they don't need and keep just the most essential possessions. In his TED talk, "Less Stuff, More Happiness," he speaks about his own "LifeEdited Apartment," a 420-square foot (about 40-square meter) New York City apartment built based on crowd-sourced design, which fits all kinds of modern conveniences and comforts in a very small space.

He begins his TED talk sitting on a cardboard box. "What's in the box?" he asks. "I don't know, but it must be pretty important, because I've travelled with it, moved it from apartment to apartment to apartment." There's laughter in the audience. Who hasn't got such a box? "Sound familiar?" he asks. For example, Americans have, on average, three times the amount of space per person that they did 50 years ago. With all that space, you'd think they'd have plenty of room for their stuff. But no, says Hill, even as people are expanding their domains, rental of personal storage lockers outside the home has only increased.

In recent years, says Hill, we've become very good at buying more stuff, but having more not only leads to more debt, but also to a larger carbon footprint. Funnily enough, Hill says, our happiness level hasn't gone up in the last 50 years.

Hill thinks that life in a small space gives you a greater sense of freedom. Because "less space = less stuff = a smaller ecological footprint = saves money = more peace in your life." He shows irresistible photos of his super-efficient apartment, which includes a coffee table that transforms into a dining table for ten, a bed that comes out of the wall and — quite spectacularly — a moveable wall that opens to reveal two guest beds. Perhaps, Hill says, less is more than more. That's why at the end of his speech he suggests that we look at the contents of that cardboard box we've been lugging around with us to see if we really need the stuff in it. Clear ➡➡



"I have learned that to be
with those I like is enough"

- WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892)



“These days I tend to leave my big single lens reflex camera at home”

“Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a luxurious diet when they are brought to hungry lips”

out the useless, he suggests, “to make room for the good stuff.”

SMALL PLEASURES

Does happiness lie in minimalism? If I ponder what regularly makes me happy, I think so. We were happy with our baby’s makeshift cradle, and our child seems to be growing up quite well without a palace. We always spend our summers going on camping trips, and instead of choosing one of the very large European camping sites with 675 lots, last summer we chose a place that was so simple that the bill wasn’t a computer printout, but a handwritten note. And it had space for a small doodle: I’d used the washing machine once, and since I don’t speak Spanish and the Spanish owner didn’t speak English, she indicated that I owed a little bit of money for using the washing machine by drawing the washing machine with all its knobs and a little door. That bill has a special place in my scrapbook, reminding me of the small pleasures of going, well, small.

I also feel happier when I get a bunch of flowers from my son – self sown, grown, and cut from his own little patch in the school garden – rather than a mega-impressive bouquet that is so huge I can hardly see the individual flowers. Recently, I found a beautiful tribute to the small: a vase designed by Vlinder & Vogel that’s a small glass ball that sits in a wooden wall peg, created specifically for that one leftover flower for which there is no space in a big vase. The nice thing about that little vase is that it’s made me bike through the city with fresh eyes: is that a flower poking out from the cobblestones? Now, I always keep an eye out for the forgotten flower that would fit perfectly in that tiny vase.

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus is known as the philosopher of pleasure, who admitted with great candor how fond he was of delicious food and a life filled with great pleasure. But in reality, Epicurus lived frugally: he didn’t have a beautiful house and his meals were simple. Apparently, he was satisfied with a meal of bread, vegetables, and a handful of olives. Once he wrote to a friend, “Send me some cheese, so I can always put on a feast.”

Epicurus philosophized long and hard about what made life really enjoyable. It seemed not to be the big things. On the contrary, he distinguished three categories: 1. Natural and necessary: friends, freedom to think, food, shelter, and clothing. 2. Natural, but not necessary: a beautiful home, a private bathroom, banquets, servants, fish, and meat.

3. Neither natural nor necessary: fame and power.

Epicurus meant that while having wealth wouldn’t make anyone really unhappy, having money but no friends would make no one ever truly happy. And if we have friends, but no fortune, then we will never be unhappy.

“Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a luxurious diet, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips,” he wrote.

BELLS AND WHISTLES

Happiness, then, is relatively independent of non-essential material possessions. And you can’t equate happiness with greatness or wealth.

“Why, then, if expensive things cannot bring us remarkable joy, are we so powerfully drawn to them?” asks Alain de Botton in his book *The Consolations of Philosophy*. “Because expensive items can feel like plausible solutions to needs we don’t understand. Objects mimic in a material dimension what we require in a psychological one. We need to rearrange our minds but are lured towards new shelves. We buy a cashmere cardigan as a substitute for the counsel of friends.”

Although our material world is filled with enticing images of luxury goods and lush landscapes, continues De Botton, there are fewer images of ordinary lives and individuals, and those simple joys that make most lives pleasurable. “We receive little encouragement to attend to modest gratifications,” he writes. “Playing with a child, conversations with a ➤

FOR THE LOVE OF SMALL

The best things are so accessible that sometimes we simply overlook them. American blogger Nancy decided to create the ongoing list justlittlethings.net, on which everyone can add happy moments created by something small. A brief selection:

- * Fuzzy socks
- * A clean public restroom
- * A username that's not taken
- * The first swim of the summer
- * Looking at old photos
- * The smell of popping popcorn
- * Finding coins in the laundry

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“Life in a small space gives you a greater sense of freedom”

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friend, an afternoon in the sun, a clean house, cheese spread over fresh bread.”

Even if the world around us doesn't encourage us to seek the “small pleasures,” we can, of course, still celebrate those by ourselves. For me, it's a wonderful thing if I can bike to work rather than take the car, or if the girl behind the cash register returns my smile, or if my daughter gives me a note that says, “I think your swiet, Mama,” written on it. Then I'm glad that I know and feel that happiness doesn't lie in the big things, and that I'm not going to be any happier if I lived in a bigger house or had a bigger car.

I'm happy with my mini-caravan in the dunes, but every few years get an irresistible urge to take off to some distant land – call it a big pleasure. But then, in that far-away land, I seek out the “small.” I don't tick off those “must-see” lists of tourists' spots. I don't need anything more than to sit in a square and look around me. I want to watch what people do here, walking, biking, eating, and talking. Do they kiss each other in public, are they kind to their children, do lovers walk arm in arm?

Isn't it fitting that these days, I tend to leave my single lens reflex camera at home, and I no longer print huge enlargements, but instead, I take pictures with the Hipstamatic app on my phone? And then again, perhaps it's no coincidence that it's recently become possible to print perfectly in small format – 10x10cm – exactly the size of my Hipstamatic photos.

The time of big presents and bells and whistles also seems to be over. I'd rather receive a present from a friend who'd thought about what to give me: a voucher for a tasty bowl of homemade soup, for example, on a day of my choosing. Or tickets to a local music festival – rather than one of those mega-pop festivals – where there are no cash sales, no fences, and where the atmosphere is still relaxed.

EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS

A small beginning can trigger a large change in life, write Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval in their book *The Power of Small: Why Little Things Make All the Difference*. Just getting a new haircut can make you feel different, more self-confident so that you dare take the steps that you wouldn't have before. They give the example of “Larry,” a computer programmer, who dreams of a job in the sales department. “Larry's new haircut... started a chain reaction within him. He bought some new clothes. He started going to the gym more often.



He made an effort to smile more. Once he began to think of himself in a different light, others saw him differently as well. When he became friendly with some of the sales managers at work, he confided his desire to switch careers,” write the authors. Larry ends up getting the coveted job in the sales department – and it all started with a haircut.

Maybe, especially on those rainy days when we feel out of sorts, we've lost sight of how important we are to others. And that importance so often lies in small things: giving your full attention to your child, letting your partner sleep in and making breakfast, doing the shopping for the old lady who lives around the corner. These things make us feel good about ourselves and the world – small gratifications of the ordinary life in a world where big things can sometimes add up to so little. ●

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READ MORE?

- * “The Consolations of Philosophy” by Alain de Botton (Vintage, 2001)
- * “The Power of Small: Why Little Things Make All the Difference” by Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval (Crown Business, 2009)
- * “The Economy of Good and Evil” by Tomáš Sedláček (Oxford University Press, 2001)

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WATCH MORE?

- * “The Queen of Versailles,” directed by Lauren Greenfield (2012)
- * “Less Stuff, More Happiness,” TED Talk by Graham Hill

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AND MORE?

- * Curious about the vase mentioned in the text? It's called Bloemenlab II and can be ordered through vlinderenvogel.com.
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