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Stuffed

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Jam-packed inside and out, Boston is ripe turf for 'personal organizers,' due here in force

By Monica Collins | December 4, 2005

Boston is a tight squeeze.

Nooks and crannies can cost \$600-plus per square foot. Attics are scarce. Older homes in space-challenged neighborhoods such as the North End, Beacon Hill, and Back Bay have even fewer closets because they were built in the centuries before big-box stores and mad stockpiling of personal paraphernalia.

Especially at this time of year, it's dangerously easy to be flattened by the clutter culture with space at such a premium. And no holiday re-gifting, plastic boxes from the Container Store, or cute shelves named Ivar from IKEA can make it go away.

"I've lived in downtown Boston for 20 years," says Linda Reisert, 38, a Beacon Hill personal organizer, "in a variety of homes including a loft, a studio apartment, one-bedroom, two-bedrooms, town houses, and condos. The size of our homes dictates whether we can save it or be buried by it. Someone who successfully lives in the city must have a squirrel-storing-nuts mentality."

Reisert sees peculiar evidence of this in the urban bedroom, where blankets reside with kitchen supplies as space demands creative storage solutions.

"Who else but a city dweller lives with toiletries and bottled water under their bed?"

So simplify, stupid.

Such is the mantra among interior designers and a growth industry of personal organizers who generally charge less (average fees range from \$25 to \$90) per hour than many psychiatrists as they coach clients clutched by chaos to edit and omit -- or tastefully store -- needless goods.

It's probably no coincidence that the National Association of Professional Organizers, based in Illinois, has scheduled its annual convention for Boston this March. An estimated 900 clutter-control mavens are expected to gather in Boston for the event. (Imagine the pressure on the Park Plaza and Towers, the host hotel, to house all those neat freaks.) The New England chapter has designated January as the second annual "Get Organized Month."

"Everybody's so busy. Life is so wild. It's so fast that I think getting organized gives us a sense of security," says Cheryl Katz, an interior designer at C & J Katz Studio in South Boston. "We see it all the time in residential and commercial projects. People really want to figure out where to keep their stuff."

Katz divides the acquisitive world into "Puritans and plunderers." Puritans live contentedly with less, while plunderers have amassed enough tiny forks to feed fondue to 50.

"A plunderer needs lots of pattern on pattern," says Katz. "Rugs on top of rugs. If one pillow is good, a dozen is better."

Whether you are a Puritan or a plunderer, the need for mastery over earthly possessions seems one of the few controls we can have here on earth. "I think there is a lot to living a simple life, at least the idea that it's simpler if it's more organized," says Katz. "And it does create a sense of calm and a relief in the middle of chaos."

Suburban empty-nesters moving to begin anew in a condominium are prime candidates for the art of simplifying.

These mid-lifers have also already proved themselves, and have less need to strut their stuff.

"I think at a certain age, you've lost your desire to acquire," says Reisert.

Paul La Camera and his wife, Mimi, raised three sons in a 12-room house in Newton with a basement, attic and two-car garage. A few years ago, the couple moved into a four-room Back Bay condo "with no basement, no attic, and no garage. We significantly downsized," says La Camera, general manager of WBUR-FM. "People asked if it was emotional, but I think it was much more physical and just overwhelming." La Camera remembers spending hours cleaning the basement, only to "look back, and it was still packed." He says the couple gave a lot away to extended family, and donated to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

"When you shed a lot of your life, you relieve yourself from a lot of your accoutrements," says La Camera, "and it felt liberating and totally refreshing. It makes you feel 10 years younger."

Even longtime city dwellers who raise families in tight spaces feel the relief of making do with less.

Ellen Plapinger, who lives on Beacon Hill with her husband and three kids, was prompted to seek help from Reisert after unleashing a torrent of things when she innocently opened a closet. She also says she knows what it's like to live with "30 boxes in the basement that you've never opened." Now, she describes the joy of being organized as "the euphoric feeling you might have after a great spinning class."

Cleaning up, throwing out, and recycling have become her aerobics for the soul. Reisert continues to work with Plapinger every six weeks. Last month, they cleared another room, which yielded "four trash bags and a bag of videos" for donation to the library.

Stuff-wranglers describe the exhilaration when people unburden themselves of things they don't want, use, or need. "People are very, very afraid of getting rid of their things because they all have memories," says Laura Moore, 49, of Cambridge, whose service is called Clutter Clarity At Home and whose motto is "Replacing Clutter With Clarity and Control."

"But you have to get rid of the past to live in the future."

Says Tracy Welch, a personal organizer and self-described "creative consultant": "I have one client who tells me, 'Tracy, I love you because you're brutally honest and you force me to clean up my act.' "

Welch's business, Tracy's Production, is based on Fort Hill. "I have the ability," he says, "just to have a better solution." Welch, the unwitting inspiration for this story, helped pack, unpack, and untangle this reporter during a recent move.

For many of us, Get Organized Month can't come fast enough. If we don't have the will or the arranger's eye, it's hard to see the way clear of a bulging bureau filled with unfashionable rags untouched for years, or piles of paper needing to be filed, or a donnybrook of detritus taking up space in the corner.

These messes stand as constant reminders of personal folly and the need to grapple with disorganization. Many take the Scarlett O'Hara approach, vowing to purge tomorrow.

Yet, in getting acts together, tomorrow never comes unless someone forces you to confront your attachments. They must offer the assurance that your love for a dearly departed aunt does not diminish if you toss out her fraying armchair.

A Moore customer, Alison Paddock, describes how the organizer literally took her by the hands and "went forth where I wouldn't dare to go."

In this case, it was a "little cave" filled with junk in a basement storage bin at Paddock's Cambridge apartment. "I had been avoiding it for so long," says Paddock. "I know, it's ridiculous, but when you avoid something for so long, it gets bigger than life." Now, though, it's smaller by half.

On the other hand, coaching folks to get rid of their stuff often means convincing them their lifestyle won't be diminished.

Erika Solloux, 38, of Organizing Boston, says that we regularly wear "20 percent of the clothes we own and look at only 20 percent of the paper we save."

Then, there's all that stuff we buy and barely use. Often, the issues are very painful. Solloux describes a wrenching call from a potential client who described herself as a "shopaholic. She said, 'I buy and buy and buy and can't live in my house anymore.' You could hear the pain in her voice. She said, 'I'm going to retire in a few years and I don't want to live in my home. I just went to the Christmas Tree Shop and I bought all this stuff I don't need.' "

Recognizing limits is a key concept in paring down. The clutter culture "is very much in reflection of having too much debt, too much weight, being overworked and overbooked," says Moore.

Moore became an organizer because "I've pretty much been doing this kind of thing my whole life. I've moved 15 times. I've experienced three deaths in my immediate family -- two parents and my brother. I've been divorced and moved in and out with people my whole life. I moved from a large house into a two-bedroom apartment but I don't have clutter in my house. I define clutter as being surrounded by things you don't need or love anymore. Everything in my apartment, literally, I either use or I love."

As she encourages clutter-crazed customers to minimize into usables and lovable, Moore also gives them techniques for coping. For example, instead of saving every picture or school paper, an urban Mom might consult with her child about which ones to save.

"Give the children notebooks and let them store their favorites," suggests Moore. "You're also teaching them how to let go."

Solloux urges her clients to keep a "rotation box" of favorite knick-knacks, displaying some and storing others while reducing tabletop memorabilia mayhem.

Reisert, who neatly named her business Sort Order, theorizes that stores "like Home Depot thrive on the fact that people can't find the last box of nails they bought. We all have money to throw around and, often, we're just replacing things we can't find."

Not to mention wasting time searching for the priceless items buried underneath clutter. Reisert was gratified when she led a client to unearth a ring left by her late grandmother as they cleaned out a purse.

"She started crying because she thought she had lost the ring. It was irreplaceable," she says. "When you have less stuff, it's easier to find what you have."

And find out what you can live without.

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