



## Overstuffed at the holidays

This time of year, storage troubles stand out – and can trip up a sale

By Sandra Fleishman

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It's time to put Grandma's big gravy boat back in the basement cupboard, along with the giant serving platter, and to return the extra blankets that normally live under the stairs but came out for Thanksgiving guests.

Or maybe all that stuff will have to stay in a closet upstairs until the holidays next month. But then, where will the presents get stashed? (Hanukkah is less than a week away! Let's hear it for online shopping and delivery. Or teeny gift cards.)

This dilemma, made more acute during the holidays, brings up the issue of where to put all the stuff we accumulate throughout the year. The [hunt for storage space](#) forces homeowners and renters alike to evaluate whether they need bigger closets, or to finally lay a floor in the attic, or to consider calling in a professional organizer.

Or, horror of horrors, to clean the house.

Storage is a fundamental concern at home, according to real estate agents and professional organizers. It's particularly important to people shopping for another place. "Everybody cares about having enough storage space," says Kathe McBeth of Re/Max Realty Centre in Olney. "But the best thing you can do is get it organized," she says. "If it looks like the seller feels like the house is too small, then what do you think the next person is going to think?"

That's why agents routinely recommend decluttering, thinning overstuffed closets and moving everything not needed into [rental storage units](#). But there's a reluctance to get started, and this is exacerbated during the holidays. [Professional organizer Pierrette Ashcroft](#) says she is working with a home seller who has five strollers but doesn't want to get rid of any. "She says people will understand" why they're needed.

With builders going smaller since the recession began - the median floor area of new homes has dropped from 2,309 square feet in the first quarter of 2007 to 2,169 square feet in the second quarter of 2010 - even those starting out fresh will have to figure out how to store more with less. New condos can pose the biggest challenge.

Heck, even people in really big houses worry about the closets. First lady Laura Bush made a point of showing Michelle Obama the closets and storage space in the White House when the Obamas first came by for a visit, she told "Good Morning America" in 2008. "I think it's something that women like to be sure they know about before they move somewhere," she said.

"There are a number of what look like secret doors everywhere here," Bush said in a History Channel documentary at the time, according to "Good Morning America's" Web site. "Because of the oval shape that's so common in the White House, we end up with these extra spaces in what would be the corner. So that's what these are used for."

Folks today aren't using the corner spaces alone, but whatever they can, professional organizers say. They're squirreling away belongings in their attics, basements, kitchens and bedrooms, using closet systems, [garage systems](#) and kitchen systems. They're even jacking up their beds with "bed risers." These little stilts allow for taller sweater boxes, stacks of shoe boxes, vacuum-sealed bags that "shrink" clothes and a variety of plastic bins, of the kind sold most exhaustively at the Container Store. The Dallas chain has grown to 49 locations in 32 years. Bed risers have been carried there since 2003.

### **A priority for buyers**

The National Association of Home Builders and the National Association of Realtors don't track the amount of storage space in homes over the years, but they report data suggesting that consumers want more.

Stephen Melman, the NAHB's economic services director, says builders are responding. Of the top 10 features they are including in 2010 homes, a walk-in closet in the master bedroom is No. 1, a laundry room is No. 2, and a linen closet is No. 6. "What we're seeing," Melman says, "is that even though houses are smaller, builders are still trying to create more areas devoted to storage."

Mudrooms have dropped in priority, Melman notes - "With the recession, how do you justify a huge space for a mudroom?" - while garage organizers seem to be in.

U.S. demand for home-organization products "will increase 4.3 percent annually to \$8.9 billion in 2013," according to a 2009 research report by the Freedonia Group. "U.S. consumers, particularly middle- and upper-class households, are willing to pay more for items that will make their lives easier and more organized," the report says.

Demographic trends point to more demand, the report notes. "For instance, as baby boomers become empty-nest families and move to smaller homes, they will look for ways to organize their possessions in these spaces. Also, the children of the baby boom cohort are moving into dorm rooms and first apartments, many of which are also small spaces that require organization products for comfortable living."

The housing market downturn "also caused many homeowners to adjust the way that they spend money on their homes, leading many to invest in built-in organization systems either to upgrade homes they plan to stay in or to differentiate homes that are being sold."

Olney agent McBeth says she will "frequently advise sellers to install closet systems," particularly in houses built in the 1950s or earlier, when closets were small. "A closet that's organized looks bigger," McBeth says. She has purchased metal rolling racks with multiple shelves for her own home.

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"The toughest thing when you put your house on the market is that you have to have nothing personal in it. The tchotchkes have to go," McBeth says. A few pieces of furniture are needed, "because people can't visualize the placement of furniture" otherwise. And a few accessories are good. But no one, she says, wants to see other people's "stuff."

Agents recommend that sellers store things at a neighbor's house if they don't want to pay for a rental unit.

### **Advice for sellers**

The Freedonia research suggests that sales of modular organizing units, particularly for closets and garages, are expected to post the strongest gains. And it anticipates the development of modular systems tailored to other rooms.

But Faye Nabavian, a Long & Foster agent in north Bethesda, says she "wouldn't go to the expense of putting in permanent closet systems" when it's time to put a home on the market. "People might not like what you got."

"My recommendation to the homeowner is to put things you normally don't use into storage for, say, three months," Nabavian says. Since the sellers hope to move soon, they can also start boxing up items and store those neatly in a small area. Having an armoire doesn't suggest there are too few closets, she says, unless it is jammed tight.

Shelly Murray, manager of Weichert Realtors in Germantown and president of the Greater Capital Area Association of Realtors, warns that there's no way to hide. "It's not just in the bedroom" that folks will poke their heads into closets. "People will be opening up your cabinets in the kitchen and the bathroom. So make sure that that's organized; you don't want all your plastic containers in the kitchen falling out when someone opens the doors."

Professional organizers may be a resource for sellers or those staying put. Mo Osborn of Simplify Your Life in Falls Church has taught classes on storage organization and how to downsize during her 17 years in business. She works with another company, Always a Solution, run by Linda Mino, an active member of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization. (Mino's client base includes individuals who are challenged with hoarding and attention-deficit disorder issues.)

To Osborn, a former nurse, "the first thing someone needs to do [to deal with storage issues] is to declutter. Get rid of the things that they don't need. . . . There are lots of storage ideas, lots of containers . . . but to me there's just more junk, more quote unquote stuff than we've ever had. And if you keep buying it, you're always going to run out of storage space."

"I kind of feel like the real story about organization doesn't get out, and that's that there are 4,000 people in [the National Association of Professional Organizers] . . . and that you can find them using any Zip code," says NAPO-certified organizer Jane Campbell of Back in Sorts Organizing in Rockville. "The whole industry didn't exist 30 years ago, and now there are people out there who can help you."

### **'A massive disaster'**

One client using another organizer, though, hated her experience.

The client, who did not want to be identified, because she is trying to sell her D.C. condo, said in an e-mail that "I used the services of an 'organizer' referred by a real estate agent. 'Disorganizer' would be the better descriptor.

I had hoped that she would speed the process and lighten my load. The complete opposite occurred. I was left with a massive disaster. Everything was pulled out, mixed up, lost, tossed, and/or broken. I could not walk in my place. Countless things that I need were tossed or broken. The pipes under my kitchen sink were broken from [the organizer] shoving buckets that did not fit in that space."

The client complained that the damage required two plumbing visits to repair and that the organizer did not listen to her. "Prior to this, everything was in closets, cabinets and drawers," the client noted.

But the condo owner did see the errors in her own ways. "While I knew where everything was, the closets weren't pretty and looked full. By D.C. standards, my apartment has a lot of storage. Because I had filled all the space, real estate agents suggested that people may not be able to fully appreciate the storage" - thinking instead that their stuff would not fit or would be tight.

She had raised a son in the condo and still had all of his school projects, artwork and crafts. Selling has forced her to rethink what she really needs to keep: "He is in college and it is time to let go of much of this and the childhood stuff."

Professional organizer Campbell, who has a PhD in psychology, says she sometimes uses her psychological training in working with clients, "but cautiously." She does have one basic piece of advice for those with storage issues compounded by the holidays: Don't hurry to put all those infrequently used items back in storage. "Go through it and get rid of the stuff you didn't use this year," she says. "Donate it, or God forbid, put it in the trash. Don't just throw it back in the closet."