

# How to make the most of a domain

With a growing premium on space, homeowners are finding ways to create extra rooms

IAN HARVEY SPECIAL TO THE STAR

**C**anadians love their spaces. And why not? We're the biggest land mass on the planet and there's

plenty of room to stretch out.

It's been that way for our home, too: bigger has always been better. Until recently.

The cost of suburban sprawl, the stress of commuting and the price of housing has meant that in cities like Toronto, smaller is affordable.

What may have been unthinkable just a generation ago is

the norm today. Micro condominium units at sub-400-squarefeet are the new reality.

But it doesn't stop at multi-unit developments. Homeowners are getting in on the trend, too — often for the money. They're carving out small apartments or rental spaces in their own homes, not for the long-term rental market, but often as guest suites on



Andy Tran in his tool room in his Scarborough home.

offer for tourists and travellers to rent through websites such as AirBnB and HomeAway.

Andy Tran is thinking big by

thinking small.

He's a home inspector on a mission to have homeowners consider maximizing their spaces —

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field, I would get questions all the time, "Is this legal?" or "Can I put a basement suite in?" and at the end of the day, I felt I wasn't giving them a lot of value in terms of information," he says. "So I did a lot of research, went through the process myself to find out more."

Now, he's working with real estate investors and others to help them get the most of their spaces, either for their own living purposes or in creating rental units where only one unit existed before.

The key, says Tran, is to do it right and meet all building code requirements. And Tran also practices what he preaches.

He's created in his Scarbor-

ough home a 600-square-foot basement suite with bathroom, living and sleeping areas. He's also devised a kitchen with an island, storage and counters by adding a partition wall without adding to the footprint.

"If you look, you can find smaller appliances, a single machine for washing and drying like they have in Japan," he says. "Smaller stoves or ovens, they're available much more now in Canada."

Thinking small starts with making spaces multi-task, he says.

"You don't use your office and a bedroom at the same time, so why not combine them with fur-

niture which is multipurpose?" he says.

He's turned a 94-square-foot room into an office and guest suite/TV room with a fold-out bed and pop-up desk.

"A lot of people say they can't live in a two-bedroom house, because they have two kids, but many people raised large families in small homes," he says. "In Hong Kong, a family of five is happy living in 500 square feet. It's what you get used to."

The issue is the same the world over, he notes. You either get more space by moving to the suburbs and enduring longer commutes to work or you move into the city and live with less



Andy Tran shows off his renovated basement. Tran is a proponent of intensifying existing housing.

space but a shorter commute.

Tran already has a list of future projects, including separating a single bedroom into two distinct spaces for each of his children as they grow, turning a family room into a multipurpose

space for use as a bedroom and home gym, and creating what he calls a "shed-quarters" in the backyard, using renewable energy to power it.

Personal spaces and housing costs aside, there are other advantages to carving out small and separate spaces, Tran notes.

The first, of course, is privacy. Renting a room in your home to a stranger can feel more invasive than renting out a self-contained suite.

The second is legal. Renting to short-term guests through AirBnB or HomeAway means you don't have to comply with the Landlord and Tenant Act. Also, when you need the space for visit-

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Tran, who is a home inspector, makes the Murphy bed in his basement.

Fire codes are the most important aspect and will require things like a fireproof door between living spaces.

"It's a good idea to keep all those documents, including the fi-

nal approval from the building inspector, to pass on to the next buyer of your home if you sell eventually so they know you have created the apartment legally," he says.