

**Express**

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# CONDOLiving

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FEATURING WASHINGTON, MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA'S FINEST IN CONDOMINIUM LIVING CHOICES



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# A Little Place of One's Own

Tiny studio condos and co-ops are gaining fans among city dwellers who long to own

When Kirsten Catanzano went home shopping in spring of 2002, she wound up buying the smallest place she visited — a co-op unit in Georgetown that measures a mere 310 square feet.

"It's probably the smallest thing they make," she said. "It's like a dorm room."

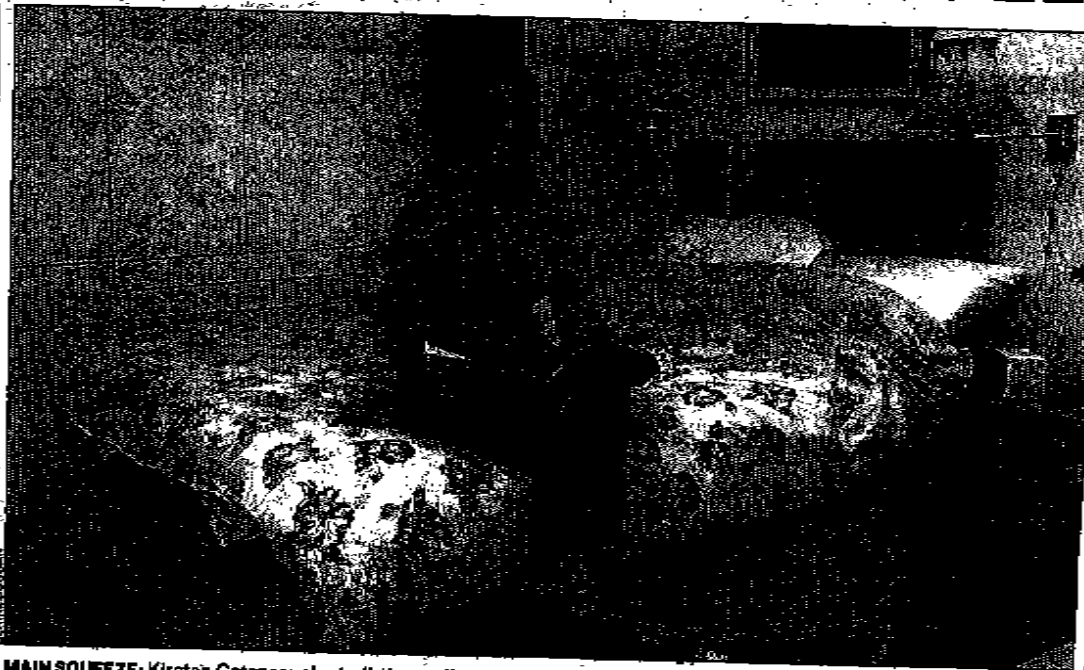
The steep rise in Washington home prices has put one-bedroom condos and co-ops out of reach for a growing segment of home buyers, forcing many first-timers to choose between one-room living downtown and more space farther out. Buying a studio "gives them the opportunity to live in the mid-city neighborhoods," said

Matt Zanolli, an agent with Long & Foster in Woodley Park, while enjoying the financial benefits of homeownership.

For Catanzano, the small size was a drawback she could live with. Her building oozes old-Georgetown charm and has a quiet garden with a grill. Her walk to Georgetown University, where she worked at the time, took just a few minutes. Her studio is filled with light and boasts a new kitchen and bathroom, plus a wall of closets. Furnishing the place was easy. "I didn't need to buy anything," she said.

She'd like a separate bedroom and more space for entertaining.

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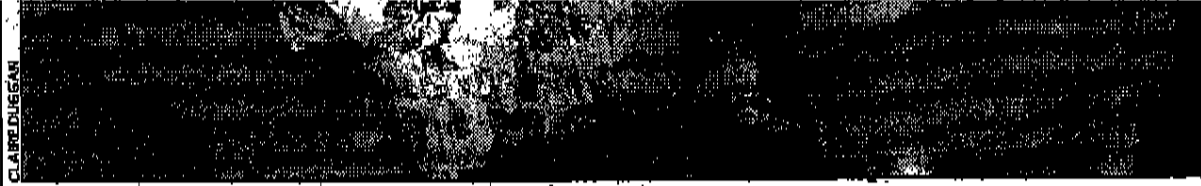


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but at \$91,000, her studio (or efficiency -- Realtors use the terms interchangeably) was an affordable way to get off the rental track. "It's small, but it has a small mortgage," she said. A neighbor recently sold a similar unit (sans the renovated kitchen and bathroom) for \$60,000 more than Catanzano paid.

Studios are usually occupied by singles, and Washington has one of the highest rates of single-person households in the country: 44 percent, according to the 2000 Census. (Some of the area's tiny condos are original bachelor pads in historic buildings.) They're also a good bet for buyers who live in Washington part-time for business. "I have some clients who say 'I travel constantly, I really just need some place to throw my hat,'" Zanolli said.

For Carrie Simmons, a teacher, living in town trumped having a separate bedroom. This summer, she bought a studio in an Adams Morgan co-op building for \$118,000. It has just 450 square feet, but Simmons loves the location. "I'm single and I wanted to live in the city," she said. "I park my car on Friday and I don't move it until Monday."

The coziest part, though, is that it's all hers. "I know I'm not going to be here forever, but it's a good investment," Simmons said.

That wasn't always the case. "Historically, [efficiencies] were about the worst investment you could buy," said Roby Thompson, an agent with Long & Foster in Woodley Park who's been working in Washington real estate since 1987. Many efficiencies sold then didn't start gaining value until the early to mid-1990s, he said. Investors bought them to rent out, and parents bought them for their college-age children instead of paying for dorms.

In the last five to 10 years, though, a number of forces have created a hot market for small condos and co-ops. Tax breaks for first-time buyers, more flexible lending options and the high prices of larger homes have all driven up demand.

In addition, more people are buying efficiencies as their homes, rather than as rentals. In areas of downtown D.C. such as Georgetown, Dupont Circle and



ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE: Carrie Simmons painted one wall of her Adams Morgan studio cranberry and eschewed window drapes to make the room feel larger.

Logan Circle, even small studios can now sell for \$200,000 or more—a price unthinkable just five years ago.

In the past, conventional wisdom held that owners needed to hold onto a home for about five years to break even. That rule hasn't applied in the Washington

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ROBY THOMPSON,  
REAL ESTATE AGENT

market of late, where more rapid growth has been the norm. "We sell a studio as fast as any other size real estate today," said Lawrence Savage, of Lawrence Savage Real Estate, a brokerage located in Georgetown.

Ray Post, a Realtor with Tutt, Taylor and Rankin, held an open house for a Kalorama studio with less than 500 square feet earlier this month. About 60 people showed up, and several submitted offers right away. It sold for more than \$10,000 above the asking price of \$169,900. But Thompson cautions against get-rich-quick expectations. "Everybody seems to think they're going to make a fortune," he said.

If the market slows down -- as some say it inevitably will -- properties will become more difficult to sell, which could mean trouble for owners who need to move for work or suddenly need space for two. "If you're looking at buying a studio just to buy, it's a mistake," Thompson said.

"Some buildings allow owners to rent properties out, often after living in the unit for a certain amount of time. If this is the plan, weigh the carrying costs—the total monthly payments for a property's mortgage, taxes and condo or co-op fees—against how much the property could fetch in rent.

Carrying costs and rents used

to be much closer but, while condo prices have skyrocketed, rents have remained relatively stable, creating a gap. Thompson warns that very small apartments can be difficult to rent, and that tenants typically don't stay more than a year or two.

"Buy for your lifestyle," Zanolli advised. He's seen owners of small condos and co-ops find clever ways to make the most of their space, like installing Murphy beds. "You're thinking 'Laverne and Shirley,'" he said. "But now they're cabinet units and they're very attractive." Furniture stores like Ikea sell tables that operate on the same principle, folding against the wall when not in use.

With help from her interior designer sister, Simmons, the Adams Morgan co-op owner, painted one wall an accent color -- cranberry -- to make her space appear longer, and she avoided drapes to give the windows cleaner lines. She'd like to renovate the kitchen as well -- after all, she expects to stay for about five years.

"It's definitely home now," she said. DEBBIE KAZETZ

## Live Larger Than Your Studio

Your ideas don't have to be small just because your space is. Some advice from interior decorators:

- Don't be afraid of strong color even in a very small space. It's inviting.
- In rooms with low ceilings, draperies hung from ceiling to floor give the illusion of height.
- A tiny room needn't have only small-scale furniture. A few bold pieces are better.
- Instead of expensive frames, paint colored squares on the wall to set off photographs.
- In small spaces, try using only one fabric, with touches of one or two others as accents.
- Splurge for a halogen spotlight, which is the only light that shows true color.
- Use old things in new ways, like an 18th-century fish print in a \$10 Ikea frame backed in a piece of red gingham fabric.
- If you can't afford expensive fabric, use expensive trim. JILL KONIGS (WASHINGTON POST)