In researching the popularity of the ‘Modern Vintage’ style for an upcoming publication, I was struck by how successfully mid-century pieces sit in smaller living spaces. As we can’t all live in large, open-plan homes, it was heartening to see those same mid-century gems also furnishing new-builds and Victorian conversion flats. For many, these offer storage solutions and shapes that not only fit the dimensions of their rooms, but also the limitations of their budgets.

In the UK, the revolution in post-war furniture design came about as a result of numerous social changes that saw people living in smaller spaces, coupled with developments in manufacturing that meant even those on low incomes could buy into designer aesthetics. After the Second World War, purpose-built housing blocks rose up in cities and traditional home-life structures shifted, seeing young people leaving their families earlier in life to set up home with partners, head off to university or move into house-shares.

The furniture that many had grown up with didn’t fit these new spaces, and the pieces that replaced them were designed with form, functionality and budget in mind. “Mid-century furniture was created to combine aesthetics and practicality in order to bring beautifully designed pieces to the man on the street,” explains Interior Designer Clare Pascoe of Pascoe Interiors, “This was made affordable by advances in manufacturing techniques, which enabled furniture to be mass-produced.”

Recent studies show that our homes certainly aren’t getting any bigger. The Royal Institute of British Architects’ 2011 Case for Space study revealed that the average new-build in England is only 92% of the recommended minimum size. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2003 found average home sizes to be in fact shrinking, and analysis of EU Housing statistics in 2005 showed that UK homes are among some of the smallest in Europe, with new-builds 35% larger in the Netherlands and a whopping 80% more roomy in Denmark.

Multipurpose magic

Multi-purpose pieces will work harder for those living in smaller spaces. One of the most practical multipurpose designs from the 1960s is the Ladderax shelving unit. Tracy Goslar, who co-runs the Brighton Retro Fair, lives on the 15th floor of an ex-council block overlooking Brighton seafront. She chose this shelving for both her living room and bedroom. “Ladderax can be reconfigured into so many different forms that it shouldn’t just be thought of as a bookcase.” It uses a combination of open, glass-fronted and wooden-doored units and, anchored by its own weight, it is incredibly sturdy. Because it is an open unit, Ladderax does not look heavy or overbearing. Raising furniture off the floor makes a room seem larger – you see the entire expanse of the floor. This was well suited to the compact layouts of post-war homes and continues to work well in small living spaces today.

It is often said that necessity is the mother of invention and as more of us make do with smaller living spaces, the furniture we choose has to earn its place. Jo-ann Fortune of vintagebrighton.com explains how to use mid-century pieces to make a big impact in a small space.