

Warm memories in small spaces

By DINA SANTORELLI

I grew up in an apartment in Queens — actually, three different ones, but they all had a pretty similar layout. They were railroad-style living spaces, on the second floors of a three-family and then two two-family brick homes.

There was no yard access, no den, no usable driveway, no washing machine — no kidding. In each, I was lucky to have my own bedroom, but otherwise there were four people who shared a single bathroom. We were always very conscious of how loud we were walking or talking, so as not to disturb the landlord, and coming home late at night often meant parking several blocks away.

Fast-forward more than a decade. Now I live in a modest split-level house in Nassau County, where five people (although one little guy has yet to be potty trained) share two bathrooms, three bedrooms, a sizable yard with an in-ground pool, two driveways (one a double), a spacious den and basement and (thank heavens!) a continuously operating washer and dryer.

And, apparently, the house is too small. At the moment, my husband and I are in the beginning stages of home renovation, which eventually will add two more bedrooms, a specifically designated home office and, yes, another bathroom on a top floor. Oh, and a front porch, too.

Wouldn't it be nice, I've mused, to have a real home office, perhaps with a



NEWSDAY ILLUSTRATION / GARY VISKUPIC

window? Sure, considering I currently do my freelance writing seated next to an oil burner in a dimly lit basement. And wouldn't it be great to sit on a front porch on cool summer evenings and watch the children catch lightning bugs on the front grass? Yes! Yes! All this is, indeed, wonderful, but I can't help but wonder if any of it is really necessary.

I don't see great rooms with cathedral ceilings or a Jacuzzi. I see my family and myself sitting in a (by today's standards very small) living room and watching

Abbott and Costello movies on Sunday mornings and relatives crowded together around our small kitchen table for Thanksgiving dinners.

Sure, there were times when my brother and I wished we had a pool when we were growing up or that we could just stomp on the apartment floor like maniacs, and there were always the kids who, when asked to come over to my house after school, would pointedly correct me that I lived in an "apartment," not a "house." But these incidents pale in comparison to an otherwise brightly lit childhood filled with love, if not Ralph Lauren linens.

My grandmother, born and bred in Brooklyn, has lived in tiny apartments all her life, and every time she comes to visit, her eyes grow wide as she steps into my house, which she considers a mansion. And I tell her over and over, "Gram, it's just a house," and she smiles.

Don't get me wrong — I'm happy that, with the upcoming improvements, my husband and I can give our children their own bedrooms, and that we have our own pool, our own yard, and that I can accommodate 20 or 30 people comfortably in my home for parties, even on rainy days.

But if being happy were solely about all those things, about white picket fences and fancy bathrooms, then why was it that so many of my childhood friends always wanted to come over to my house to play?

Dina Santorelli is a freelance writer.