

You could cook while on the toilet: a night in one of Tokyo's micro-apartments

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. What would you consider essential in a living space? Add any other ideas of your own.

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a bed | <input type="checkbox"/> a fridge-freezer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> private sleeping quarters | <input type="checkbox"/> an oven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a wardrobe with shelving | <input type="checkbox"/> a worktop to prepare food on |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a toilet | <input type="checkbox"/> a sofa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a sink | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ windows |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a shower or bathtub | <input type="checkbox"/> a balcony |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a separate living area | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a home office | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

b. Could you live in a micro-apartment (a one-room living space under 32 square metres)? Why? Why not?

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

compact	cubicle	developer	kitchenette	occupancy	offset
plummet	quarters	tenant	top-and-tailing	tumble	viewing

1. A _____ is an occasion on which people are invited to go and look at something.
2. _____ are rooms or buildings for people to live in.
3. A(n) _____ is a small, enclosed area in a room, separated from the rest of the room by thin walls or curtains.
4. A _____ is a small area used as a kitchen.
5. To _____ is to balance the effect of something, so there is no advantage or disadvantage.
6. A _____ is someone who buys land or buildings to put new or better buildings there and make money from them.

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Level 3: Advanced

7. A _____ is someone who rents a flat, house, office, piece of land, etc., from the person who owns it.
8. _____ is the use, or period of use, of a place.
9. If two people are _____, they are sleeping with their heads at opposite ends of the bed.
10. To _____ is to fall to the ground.
11. To _____ is to fall straight down very quickly from a high position.
12. If something is _____, it is smaller than most things of the same kind or small but arranged in a way that uses space very effectively.

b. Now use the words from task a to complete each sentence. Words may appear in a different form.

1. We scheduled a _____ of the house with Janice, an estate agent we found online.
2. All new _____ have to sign a one-year contract.
3. Our new folding bike is very light and _____ – ideal to take with you underground or overground.
4. Anything over 65% _____ is considered quite high for a holiday rental.
5. When we were children, my sister and I would sleep _____ in my grandmother's spare room.
6. Clearing all clutter and using a neutral colour scheme are two ways to _____ a lack of space.
7. Voters are not allowed to enter a voting _____ with their phones.
8. Homeowners are being bought out by a large _____ with interest in the area.
9. After the flooding, house prices _____.
10. Since she doesn't cook much, she will make do with a _____.
11. Joe _____ off his bike and hurt his knee.

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The tiny homes, which measure just nine square metres – or three tatami mats – are the architectural answer to rising rents

Justin McCurry

20 March, 2023

- 1 It is one of the shortest viewings in estate agency history. As soon as the door opens, every inch of living space except the sleeping quarters is visible. A tiny genkan entryway, which could nearly accommodate three pairs of shoes, leads to a shower cubicle on the right with just enough room to swing a sponge, next to a toilet that – door left open – one could occupy while just about rustling up dinner in a kitchenette 50cm away on the other side of the “corridor”.
- 2 The *Guardian* spent the night in Shanti Casa, in the Yotsuya district of Tokyo, the architectural answer to growing demand among young people who are unable to afford the capital's high and rising rents.
- 3 Each micro-apartment measures just nine square metres – just under half the size of a typical studio apartment in Tokyo – their cosy proportions offset by white walls, a large window at the back and a 3.6-metre-high ceiling. The block is among 100 buildings opened in Tokyo by real estate developer Spilytus in the past seven years.
Gap in the market
- 4 Rents for micro-apartments can be as low as ¥50,000 (\$376) a month, rising to ¥80,000 in more fashionable locations. At Shanti Casa, the monthly rent is around ¥70,000 – ¥20,000 to ¥30,000 lower than the average rental in the area.
- 5 Critics say the micro-apartment boom highlights the lack of affordable urban housing for young, underpaid workers, with quality of life sacrificed for convenience and affordability. But Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, says the idea is to give tenants financial breathing room while they consider their long-term futures. “A lot of younger people these days don't have many possessions, unlike older generations – they have a few items of clothing and not that much money, so these apartments are ideal for them,” said Nakama, whose 1,500 micro-apartments have an occupancy rate of 98%.
- 6 “We want to provide a place for people who are moving to Tokyo from outside the city and who can't afford the high rents here. Most of them stay in these apartments for two or three years, save some money and move to a bigger place, maybe after they've met a partner and want to settle down.”
Cramped but restful
- 7 The *Guardian*'s stay in one of the firm's model flats lasted just 24 hours. The absence of cooking utensils meant a planned dinner of instant ramen had to be abandoned. Because of the dimensions, it felt more comfortable leaving the toilet door open while seated – one of the blessings of solitary living.
- 8 I spent the night alone but could have invited a friend, provided they didn't object to sitting cross-legged on the floor to eat, and top-and-tailing in a futon with a serial snorer.
My biggest fear – of tumbling out of bed and plummeting to the floor – was never realised. In fact, the night was more restful than it usually is in my own flat, which is almost four times bigger.
- 9 Tenants living in Shanti Casa's 30 units are spread out over three floors. Each flat comes with a ground-floor living space, shower and toilet, and an upper-floor “bedroom” accessible by a ladder.
- 10 About 60% of the tenants are male, and most are in their 20s or 30s, with just one in 10 over 40. Roughly two-thirds are in the early stage of their careers, along with a smaller number of students.
- 11 Residents say they are happy to put up with the modest dimensions in return for low rents and the convenience of living close to their workplaces, shops, and restaurants in bustling central locations.
'Saving for somewhere bigger'
- 12 The idea for compact living spaces that compromised on space but not cost came to Nakama after he moved to Tokyo to work for an estate agent's. The native of Oita – a largely rural prefecture in Japan's southwest – was shocked to find that a flat with rent of around ¥30,000 a month back home cost more than four times as much in Tokyo.

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- 13 Exhausted from his long daily commutes – beginning with the first train into the city and ending with the last one out – Nakama envisioned accommodation with just enough space to eat, sleep and store a few essential belongings and in locations that made it possible to walk or cycle to work.
- 14 Reina Suzuki, who began living in her micro-apartment in western Tokyo in the summer of 2022, admitted that she had been surprised by how small it was. “At first, I found it difficult to stretch out and relax. But it’s a 10-minute walk to work, I like the interior ... and I’ve got used to sleeping on the upper floor,” said Suzuki.
- 15 Suzuki, 30, has managed to find space for a washing machine but decided against buying other conveniences. With just a single electric hob in what passes for her kitchen, Suzuki is an enthusiastic explorer of the local restaurant scene but occasionally makes stir-fries and salads when she wants to avoid eating out.
- 16 Like other tenants, she plans to move out in a couple of years. “I’m going to save up for somewhere bigger. When I moved in, I felt tired a lot of the time but, over the months, I’ve got to quite like the place. I would even go as far as saying that I can relax here.”

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3 Comprehension check

a. Complete the summary of the news article. Write up to three words in each gap.

1 _____ is one of 100 buildings in Tokyo opened by Spilytus, a real-estate developer. In these buildings, you will find a total of 2 _____ micro-apartments, 98% of which are occupied.

Keisuke Nakama, the firm's president, got the idea after he moved to Tokyo and was shocked at the rental prices. He found the long 3 _____ exhausting and imagined a rudimentary space in locations where 4 _____ to work was possible.

5 _____ is reduced, but tenants are offered convenience and affordability.

Now, micro-apartments are especially popular among people in their 20s and 30s who, like Nakama, are not from the city and are in the early stage of 6 _____. Most people stay there for a couple of years and save before they settle down in a larger space.

Each flat is 7 _____ metres with a ground-floor living space, shower and toilet, kitchenette and upper sleeping area reached by a 8 _____.

Despite its limitations, some tenants, like 9 _____, claim to be able to relax there.

4 Key language

a. Rearrange the words to form statements in the passive voice.

1. can / the door / seen / every / of / inch / living / almost / space / be / from

2. cosy / by / proportions / offset / their / white / are / walls

3. been / 100 / opened in / by / have / real-estate / this / developer / buildings / Tokyo

4. affordability / life / sacrificed / is / quality / of / convenience / and / for

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Level 3: Advanced

5. of / are / micro-apartments / the / 98% / occupied

6. had / dinner / of / instant / be / ramen / to / a / planned / abandoned

b. Now write four passive statements of your own to describe your ideal living space.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss the following questions.

- Are you prepared to spend extra for enhanced 'quality of life? Or are you more focused on affordability?
- Do you feel you could live in a micro-apartment? Why? Why not?
- What would be the most challenging aspect of living in a micro-apartment?

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6 In your own words

- a. You are going to design a micro-apartment building for the town or city you live in. You can use the ones described in the article as inspiration. Design a new one that will appeal to students or young people where you live.

Look back at the Warmer task to help you develop your design. Label each area clearly and provide as much detail as possible.

- b. Present your design to your group.

Useful language

It is designed with a ... style.

... is combined with ...

A ... colour scheme has been used.

... (furniture) is / are included.

... with ... concrete / wood / glass / brick / steel ...

Space is optimised by ...