

Living MARCH 28, 2015

From heirlooms to old craft projects, millennials nix their parents' treasures



BY JURA KONCIUS
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A seismic shift of stuff is underway in homes all over America.

Members of the generation that once embraced sex, drugs and rock-and-roll are trying to offload their place settings for 12, family photo albums and leather sectionals.

Their offspring don't want them.

As baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, start cleaning out attics and basements, many are discovering that millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, are not so interested in the lifestyle trappings or nostalgic memorabilia they were so lovingly raised with.

Thanks, Mom, but I really can't use that eight-foot dining table or your king-size headboard.

Whether becoming empty nesters, downsizing or just finally embracing the decluttering movement, boomers are taking a good close look at the things they have spent their life collecting. Auction houses, consignment stores and thrift shops are flooded with merchandise, much of it made of brown wood. Downsizing experts and professional organizers are comforting parents whose children appear to have lost any sentimental attachment to their adorable baby shoes and family heirloom quilts.

To make matters worse, young adults don't seem to want their own college textbooks, sports trophies or T-shirt collections, still entombed in plastic containers at their parents' homes.

The 20- and 30-somethings don't appear to be defined by their possessions, other than their latest-generation cellphones.

"Millennials are living a more transient life in cities. They are trying to find stable jobs and paying off loans," says Scott Roewer, 41, a Washington professional organizer whose business is the Organizing Agency. "They are living their life digitally through Instagram and Facebook and YouTube, and that's how they are capturing their moments. Their whole life is on a computer; they don't need a shoebox full of greeting cards."

Many millennials raised in the collect-'em-all culture (think McDonald's Happy Meal toys and Beanie Babies) now prefer to live simpler lives with less stuff in smaller downtown spaces, far from the suburban homes with fussy window treatments and formal dining rooms that they grew up in.

The desire of many millennials to stay in cities rather than moving to the suburbs or rural areas is instigating a rewrite of the American dream. According to the 2014 Nielsen report "Millennials: Breaking the Myths," 62 percent of millennials prefer to live in the type of

mixed-use communities found in urban centers where they can live near shopping, restaurants and work. And 40 percent say they would want to live there in the future.

Take Kelly and Josh Phillips, who rent a 700-square-foot apartment in the Washington, D.C.'s Shaw neighborhood. The couple frequently sells things on Craigslist and calls an Uber instead of owning a car. "My parents are always trying to give us stuff," says Kelly, 33, and documents, old books or broken glassware. "We have clutter. We would rather spend money on experiences."

Her husband agrees. "I consider myself a digital hoarder," says Josh Phillips, 33, who is opening a Oaxacan restaurant, Espita Mezcaleria, this fall in Shaw. "If I can't store my memories of something in a computer, I'm probably not going to keep them around."

Stephanie Kenyon, 60, the owner of Sloans & Kenyon Auctioneers and Appraisers in Chevy Chase, Maryland, says the market is flooded with boomer rejects. "Hardly a day goes by that we don't get calls from people who want to sell a big dining room set or bedroom suite because nobody in the family wants it. Millennials don't want brown furniture, rocking chairs or silver-plated tea sets. Millennials don't polish silver." The formal furniture is often sold at bargain prices, or if it's not in good shape, it might go straight to the dump.

"Baby boomers were collectors," says Elizabeth Wainstein, 50, owner and president of Potomack Company Auctioneers in Alexandria, Virginia, where lots of unwanted family treasures end up being sold. "They collected German porcelains or American pottery. It was a passion, and they spent their time on the thrill of the hunt." She says younger people aren't really that interested in filling shelves.

Kenyon says the under-35 set has always had eBay to find exactly what they wanted and aren't as nostalgic for former decades.

Dominique Fierro, 33, a photographer and stylist who rents a 900-square-foot condo in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, Titou, 33, a personal trainer, is always fending off offers. "My family is always trying to give me stuff," Fierro says. Every couple of months, she cleans out her closets and gives her own things away either to charities or to cousins. "I don't want formal entertaining stuff. I have a set of white and a set of blue plates. I don't want my parents' silver that you have to hand-wash."

Millennials like to stick to their personal design aesthetic. “Millennials are design-conscious, informed consumers. They bring a lot more confidence to how they want their homes to look,” says Newell Turner, 53, editorial director of the Hearst Design Group. “They need to have reasons for why they are doing something. They are not just taking a bed to inherit it. It has to have an important meaning for them or fit in with an aesthetic they are building for themselves.”

Tyler Whitmore, 58, owner of Tyler Whitmore Interiors in Bethesda, consults on staging and downsizing. “Eight times out of 10, kids don’t want the parents’ furniture or boxes of letters or scrapbooks,” she says. “That’s a hard thing to come to grips with, and at first parents are insulted. It can create hurt feelings. But it’s not that they don’t love you. They don’t love your furniture.”

Kenyon says that boomers may be a bit envious of their offspring as they look to shed things and have more freedom to travel.

Roewer often finds himself counseling boomers as he helps them clear out. Roewer was born in 1973, which makes him part of Generation X. He says his own parents try to give him items for his 750-square-foot home.

“When my parents downsized from 4,500 square feet to 1,100, they sent me four boxes of stuff. It was things like cards from people I no longer knew, a paper plate with the face of a lion I had glued yarn around and my christening outfit. I appreciate my mom taking care of this stuff, but I really don’t want it.” (He is keeping his Cub Scout Pinewood Derby cars.)

Karen Hammerman, 52, one of Roewer’s clients, has three sons ages 17 to 24. She and her husband, Ira, live in a five-bedroom house in Rockville, Maryland. “Millennials have stuff on discs and flash drives,” she says. “I don’t think my sons are going to want my walnut table, eight chairs and buffet. We will downsize maybe in five years, and I will either sell this stuff or give it away.”

Hammerman has three large zip-top bags full of memories set aside, one for each son. But as Roewer told her, she shouldn’t be insulted if they don’t want their first-grade drawings or boxes with seashells glued to them.

“They made these things and gave them to you and you enjoyed them,” Roewer says. “The gift-giving cycle is now complete.”

bc-boomers (TPN)

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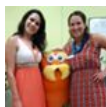
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Downsizing the Home

Bravo to millennials for putting the brakes on out-of-control consumption and for not wanting to be drowning in "stuff." However: there is an important concern about digital preservation that is not addressed at all in this article. The assumption that we can keep our memories forever "on a computer" is unfortunately both false and dangerous. If we want to be able to share our memories, and our families' history, with future generations, we're going to have to think ahead. How will they access all those memories we've stored digitally when the playback devices have become obsolete? Unfortunately there are no easy answers to this question, but awareness of the issue is the first step. We've written about it here:

<https://downsizingthehome.wordpress.com/.../preserving.../>

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Jim Lammers · President at Trinity Animation

The Washington Post and NYT always assume the whole country is like the gang that lives in downtown DC and NYC. Urbanized living in 1000 sq ft apartments will end for 99% of all the millennials around the USA when they have their first child. And scrapbooking seems to be bigger now than ever before; they have entire stores dedicated to it!

On the other hand - I don't think too many people ever wanted large wooden hand-me-down items. The biggest offender is an off-brand piano, but virtually any downsized parental furniture is going to be of a style that clashes with what the kid and their spouse like to use.

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Dorothy Wheat

I'm 71. I remember feeling that way until my parents passed. At that time I received some treasures and I love them to this day. Every time I use one of Mom's old pans I feel a certain warmth. I love my Grandma's cocoa pot. I treasure the work table my Grandpa made.

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Billy Craig Meers · DevOps Engineer/Systems Engineer at Coddington Group

I am 40 and I am much like the millennials. My father passed away about 17 years ago and I miss him terribly but I have no affinity to his stuff. He was a collector and had quite a few items. When he passed people were like vultures asking my mother for any and everything. She turned them down until I just helped her sell most of it. I kept a couple of handguns but I really just didn't link his stuff to our memories. I get that people do. My Mother is very sentimental and gets kind of offended when I don't want old furniture like my Dad's desk. Honestly it makes me depressed to feel that I am obligated to drag a bunch of stuff through my life. My Mom probably still has our old report cards. She tried to give them to me once and found out I was going to throw them away so she kept them. If it makes her happy that is fine but I just don't want to store all that stuff.

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