

# CLOTHES CALLS

## WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU RUN OUT OF CLOSET SPACE? OUR READERS HAVE SOME RESOURCEFUL SOLUTIONS SERIES

Story by Lisa Skolnik.

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This is the first article in our YOUR ROOMS series, an occasional feature that will showcase innovative design ideas-to borrow and to inspire-from spaces in people’s homes.

Whether you have a passion for fashion or buy only what you need, chances are you could use a bit more closet space. “It’s the one thing no one ever has enough of,” says Chicago Realtor Sue Dodge, pointing out that “large closets are on all my clients’ wish lists. Everybody always wants more closet space.”

Regardless of how much clothing we own or how many closets we have to fill, organized and well-used space usually translates into enough space. There are countless ways to organize a closet, ranging from creatively devised do-it-yourself set-ups to meticulously executed, planned-to-the-inch systems installed by professional space planners.

There is no such thing as the right way when it comes to organizing closets, only what works for each person’s needs. Ultimately, each closet is as individual as the people whose belongings it holds. Of course, there always is something to be learned from someone else’s experiences. So we found some interesting solutions devised by Chicagoans who had closet problems, yet managed to get their closets in shape to meet their needs. Here’s how they did it.

**Problem: What do you do when your closets are maxed out?**

*Situation: Lisa Lichtenstein, who just graduated from De Paul University Law School in Chicago, has been living in a tiny one- bedroom apartment on Chicago’s Near North Side for five years. It came with a wall-to-wall closet in the bedroom, a linen closet next to the bathroom and a coat closet in the foyer. “It definitely wasn’t enough to hold all my clothes,” she says.*

Solution: When your space is really tight, the best way to increase your storage quotient is with customized built-ins, says Lichtenstein.

“Dressers and bureaus are space-wasters” instead of space-makers, she says, because “six or eight drawers don’t offer enough cubic square footage to accommodate loads of clothes. Plus all that space around the piece of furniture is left unused.”

Lichtenstein turned a minuscule alcove next to her front door into a floor-to-ceiling closet that holds 66 pairs of shoes. The white laminate cabinet blends with the adjacent white walls and looks like a built-in, but it’s simply bolted to the wall and actually is removable.

Her next step was to tackle the closet situation in her bedroom. Lichtenstein chose Closets Unlimited in Elk Grove Village. The company’s willingness to provide written estimates with completion dates was critical to her decision, she says. The firm executed her job in two days and stayed on budget, building a three-bank laminate unit in her bedroom measuring 12 feet long and 6 feet high.

One bank holds hanging clothes, the second is fitted with shelves and the third combines shelves and also holds her television. The guts of the unit can be reconfigured by Lichtenstein without tools, which makes it easy to alter the heights of shelves and closet rods. She also had matching nightstands made out of the same laminate, and all pieces are bolted to the walls for proper balance.

The last step Lichtenstein took toward closet nirvana was to replace the bifold doors on the wall-to-wall closet in her bedroom with sliding doors made of mirrors. “I wasn’t going to waste wall or floor space on a mirror, so this was the perfect solution,” she says. It also made the tight bedroom seem more spacious.

Total cost for the bedroom project was about \$2,200, and if she moves, the wall unit and nightstands can go with her.

**Problem: Not every place comes with a closet, especially if it originally was a commercial space. What do you do when you don’t have a closet in the place you are renting and building one is out of the question?**

*Situation: Chicago artists Linnea Gits and Peter Dunham always have lived in rented lofts, and the one they moved into two years ago had literally no closet space. In fact, they were happy it had an enclosed bathroom. To compensate for the closets, they got creative.*

Solution: “I found these lockers at a thrift store for \$80, and thought they were wood,” says Gits. In fact, they are metal and had once graced a police station, but someone had given them a decorative paint job somewhere along the line to make them look like an armoire.

Gits speculates it was done in the 1930s from the newspapers she found inside along with old police beat schedules. Although they also could have purchased lockers with rods in them to use for hanging items, the clothes they wear on a daily basis tend to be items that are stored folded.

For the little hanging space the couple needs, they chose to outfit a walk-in vault, which was the only other enclosed nook in the place, as a closet. Situated next to the area they designated as their main living space, the vault measures 4 by 6 feet, with a 14- foot ceiling.

Dunham used plywood to flush out two banks of storage along one wall of the closet, each with three spacious shelves over a hanging rod because the ceiling is so tall. Although the shelves are not easy to reach, Dunham and Gits don’t use the space on a daily basis and didn’t require easy access.

Cost: Dunham spent about \$75 on the plywood and rods he used to fit out the safe.

**Problem: What do you do when your closet space is oddly shaped and you really have to make the most of it?**

*Situation: With her own showroom at the Chicago Apparel Center that carries about 20 different lines, it is not surprising that Susann Craig has a huge wardrobe. After all, she’s in the biz and has accumulated a lot over the years. She also thinks it’s important “to wear things from*

*the lines I rep,” which can be difficult if you have a lot to look through every time you get dressed. Storing her clothes and making them accessible on a daily basis was a challenge when she built her new North Side loft two years ago and allocated an odd, pie-shaped room under the eaves for her closet.*

Solution: Craig, who has a massive collection of Outsider art, tends to think in terms of display and budget at all times. Consequently, she turned to what she knew best when it came to outfitting her closet, namely the commercial rolling racks she uses in her showroom. She has four long racks in the space, and now rolls her clothes around by season. In summer, the winter racks go to the back of the closet, and vice versa come winter.

The racks Craig uses can be purchased for about \$100 each, or rigged out of steel piping for less if you are handy at building things, she says. The money is a small investment considering these are sturdy enough to last a lifetime, she maintains.

For folding clothes, Craig has several banks of a standard wire storage system with slide-out baskets stacked along another wall in the space. She bought them at a garage sale, although the same system is sold at hardware and storage stores.

Of course, Craig is far from done in the space. She plans to make it look pretty, which will involve hanging her hats and scarves from the walls on interesting display racks when she has time. Her costume jewelry already adorns the wall above her vanity in this manner, suspended from a variety of display racks she found at flea markets and antique shops.

Cost: The Container Store sells the elfa system (which is what Craig found at a garage sale) for: drawers, \$11 to \$25; frames, \$36 to \$57.

**Problem: How can you create a high-density closet for two in your bedroom when there is no space to spare?**

*Situation: Beth Kopin, a Highland Park interior designer, lives in an 80-year-old Colonial that had small, old-fashioned closets. She and her husband, Jeffrey, wanted a walk-in closet to hold all their clothes and to function as a dressing room.*

Solution: To create a two-person walk-in closet where there was none, Kopin stole a bit of space from the bedroom next door. As an interior designer, she knew the ins and outs of space planning, so she was able to figure out exactly how much square footage she would need—right down to how much space to allow for each component of the closet. Professionals who plan closets, however, know how to figure this out for the lay person, she points out.

Kopin was able to create an 8-by-16-foot closet with the stolen space and tailor its details specifically to their special needs. For instance, Kopin is short and her husband is tall, so her parts of the closet are set at standard height while his hanging rods are set higher to accommodate his shirts and pants. He also has a very high reach, which allowed Kopin to place two rolling laundry baskets (one for wash, the other for dry cleaning) on the floor on his side of the closet and put shelves up to the ceiling above them.

Kopin also made the closet seem far more spacious by putting her shoe shelves at the entry. Because they are much shallower (12 inches deep) than sweater shelves (16 inches deep) and drawers (which need 24 inches), they intrude less into the walking space at the closet’s entryway and make the space feel less claustrophobic.

At the far end of the closet, Kopin centered a 30-inch-wide bank of shelves for folded clothes on the wall and covered it with split mirrored doors to create an enclosed armoire. This makes the space look bigger and brighter and allows her to use it as a dressing room. A ledge at the top of the closet, which Kopin can’t reach without a step stool, is filled with pretty hat boxes that hold family memorabilia.

Although Kopin knew her stuff, she still needed to work with a closet company to refine the details and build out her plans. She chose Closet Works in Chicago. Her total budget for the project was \$3,000 (she finished it several years ago and, she notes, costs may have risen since that time).

**Problem: When you build walk-in closets, you often are left with small, dark spaces that are not the best use of available square footage. Is there any way to avoid this?**

*Situation: In a Lincoln Park home, architect Ken Kasten was asked to improve upon the developer’s plans, which called for a pair of walk-in closets in the master suite. They would have received no natural light and would have been flanked by a long, narrow hallway that would have to serve as the entryway to the room, which the homeowners found unacceptable.*

Solution: City houses tend to be long and narrow, and the closets initially were situated in spots that were essentially in the center of the second floor’s footprint, farthest from the windows at the far end of the bedroom, explains Kasten.

To improve the design, he treated the entire space, which measures 8 1/2 by 17 feet, as a single entity.

Instead of two walk-ins, banks of closets 2 feet deep were set along both sides of the space, leaving a 4 1/2-foot-wide hallway in the center. The closets were covered with stock wood doors finished with panel moldings that give them an elegant, custom-milled look. An arched ceiling and cove lighting make the whole space seem like a grand foyer instead of a bank of closets.

Behind the closed closet doors are all the closet components that would have gone in the walk-ins.

Because this is new construction and the closet interiors were planned as part of the entire job, the only thing he had to add to the budget was the cost for 13 more doors, which were \$150 each, and an extra day’s worth of carpentry costs.

Total: About \$2,000 for the doors, plus labor. The closet interiors cost about \$5,000, though less expensive systems are available.

**Problem: Kids’ rooms are for the kids, so it is important to keep the extraneous stuff out of the way. How can you fit it all in the closet in an organized fashion?**

*Situation: Dena Mendes, who has a 3-year-old daughter named Paris and a 17-month-old son named Jet, believes bedrooms should be devoted to play and sleep. So she needed to organize both their closets in her Glencoe home to accommodate all their clothes and their non-play- oriented possessions.*

Solution: Mendes has very specific ideas on how to do closets, especially because she has renovated four homes in the last five years. “They have to live like a room and be totally accessorized,” she says. “I like my closets to be clean, carefully organized and as attractive as possible.”

To that end, Mendes starts out by equipping all her closets with a basic organizational system, then outfits them as carefully as she does her rooms.

In this case, Mendes used California Closets to do her children’s closets with basic wood systems that meet their needs. Both closets included built-in shelves and drawers so there is no need for dressers.

Her daughter’s closet, which measures 5 by 12 feet, cost about \$1,500 to fit out and her son’s 5-by-7-foot closet cost about half as much.

Then Mendes endowed the closets with her own special touches, such as pretty frames or collectible toys on some of the shelves.

As a result, she often finds her children playing in their closets instead of their rooms.