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November 2025 | Issue 1

First Keys



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ADULTING 101



Perfectly Imperfect

Feng Shui: What
You Need to Know





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Contents

- 4 EDITOR'S LETTER
- 6 FENG SHUI: 5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW
- 8 FROM DORM TO APARTMENT
- 11 THE REAL COST OF MOVING OUT
- 13 PERFECTLY IMPERFECT
- 24 BEFORE YOU GO



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Editor's Letter

When I was first brainstorming First Keys, I wanted to capture the mix of excitement and uncertainty that comes with moving into your own place. It's that moment when you hold your own set of keys and realize the space is completely yours. Maybe it still smells like the last tenant, or the walls are a little bare, but it feels like the start of something new. That sense of independence and discovery is what this magazine is all about.



This issue explores how young adults and recent graduates can turn simple spaces into reflections of who they are. For many of us, those first apartments are far from perfect. They're filled with hand-me-down furniture, thrifted finds and last-minute purchases. But with creativity and intention, they can become comfortable, functional and uniquely ours.

We look at how feng shui can influence the way we feel in our homes, especially for anyone juggling the early stages of adulthood. A few mindful changes in arrangement and light can make a big difference in how we start and end our days.

Our "Dorm to Apartment" guide offers practical advice for making the shift to more grown-up living without overspending. It's about small upgrades that bring comfort and personality to your space, even on a budget.

My favorite story in this issue features my friend and grad student Allyson Ritchey. She shares her experience moving through different living situations and finding what "home" means to her. Her story reminds us that creating a home takes time and reflection, not perfection.

First Keys is for anyone learning how to live independently, design intentionally and find peace in their own space. Here's to new beginnings and the joy of making a place your own.

— *Megan Sawka* Editor-in-Chief

First Keys

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5 Things You Need to Know About

Feng Shui

BY MEGAN SAWKA

Feng shui has been around for more than 3,000 years, but over the last few decades, it has popped up as a trend among Americans who want calm and balanced homes. The ancient Chinese practice focuses on arranging spaces to create harmony and improve energy flow. Interior designer Abby Fitzgerald, owner of Fitz Haus Design, says many people use these ideas without realizing it.

"I do not always use the term 'feng shui' with clients," Fitzgerald says. "But I think everyone wants their home to feel grounded and peaceful. The way you organize a room or reduce clutter directly affects how you feel in it."



ABBY FITZGERALD/FITZ HAUS DESIGN

1 Clear the Clutter

In feng shui, clutter blocks chi, or energy flow. Even modern psychology supports this. Visual mess increases stress and decreases focus. Fitzgerald recommends starting small.

"Make sure everything has a place," she says. "A simple landing zone near your door, such as a basket for mail or hooks for bags, can make a huge difference."

Creating calm through intentional organization is the goal. A tidy entryway or bedroom helps reset your mind when you walk in.

4 Light it Up

Lighting can completely change a room's atmosphere.

"Do not rely on the harsh overhead light that comes with your apartment," Fitzgerald says. "Layer your lighting with floor and table lamps to create warmth."

Natural light is equally important. Keep windows clear to allow energy and sunshine to flow freely. If privacy is an issue, use lightweight curtains that diffuse light rather than block it.

2 Find your flow

Good feng shui prioritizes movement and balance. Furniture placement can influence how energy and people circulate in a room. Avoid blocking walkways or putting large pieces directly in front of doors. Fitzgerald suggests paying attention to how you naturally move through the space.

"You should not walk into a sofa or chair as soon as you enter," she says.

A common feng shui principle called the "commanding position" recommends placing your bed or desk so you can see the door without being directly in line with it. This setup promotes relaxation and focus, especially in small apartments that double as workspaces.

5 Personalize with Purpose

While feng shui has guidelines, your space should still reflect who you are. Fitzgerald encourages clients to include meaningful items in their décor, such as vintage finds or souvenirs from trips.

"Those pieces add character and joy," she says.

Your first adult home does not need to look like a catalog. Focus on creating a space that feels balanced, intentional and uniquely yours.

3 Balance the Elements

Feng shui is built around five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Each represents a different type of energy and can appear through color, shape or texture.

You do not need to go all in on traditional feng shui symbols. Subtle touches can make a difference. Add greenery for wood, candles for fire, ceramics or clay for earth, metallic décor for metal and mirrors or cool tones for water. The goal is harmony, not perfection.



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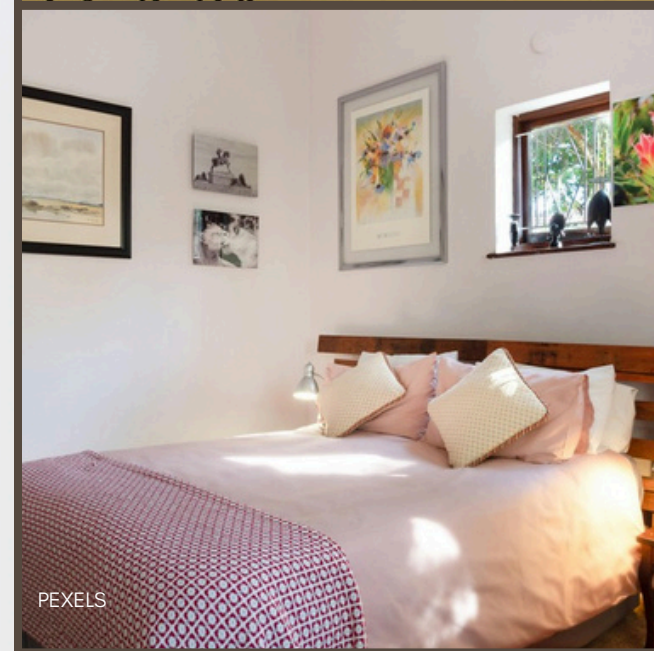
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Goodbye Dorm, HELLO FIRST APARTMENT

BY MEGAN SAWKA

Moving from dorm life to your first apartment is a milestone that can feel both exciting and intimidating. Between limited budgets, mismatched hand-me-downs and the challenge of finding your style, creating a home that feels more adult takes intention and creativity. Interior designer Abby Fitzgerald, owner of Fitz Haus Design, shared advice on how you can stretch your college furniture upgrade on a budget and build a space that feels personal and polished.

Fitzgerald says not everything from a dorm needs to be thrown away. Some of the best pieces can be repurposed or refreshed with a few small changes.

"You probably have a really great chair or a small dining set worth keeping," she explains. "If the bones are good but the fabric is awful, don't underestimate what a slipcover or new upholstery can do."

Quality frames can be given new life with a coat of paint or new cushions, and simple items like storage cubes can become more stylish with updated baskets or covers.

When shopping for new pieces, Fitzgerald advises focusing on quality rather than price alone. Reading product descriptions carefully is key to avoiding flimsy construction.

For those on tighter budgets, thrift stores, flea markets and estate sales can also offer treasures.

Creating a space that feels organized and calm is another important step in making an apartment feel like home. Fitzgerald emphasizes intentional storage, especially in small spaces.

"Create a landing zone by your door with a console or small shelf with hooks, baskets, or a tray for keys and mail," she says. "It helps your space stay calm and clutter-free."

Affordable organization tools like woven baskets, drawer dividers and shoe racks can keep things tidy and prevent the small items from taking over.

Once the basics are in place, it is time to make the space feel like your own. Fitzgerald says that rugs, curtains and lighting can instantly elevate a room.

"Do not rely solely on overhead lighting," she explains. "Add lamps or even LED lights under cabinets to make your home feel cozy and intentional."

She also encourages collecting personal pieces over time, like artwork from a favorite trip or a thrifted vase that catches your eye.

Transitioning from dorm living to a first apartment does not require a full redesign or an unlimited budget. With thoughtful choices, creativity and a focus on what feels personal, you can create a space that looks and feels like the start of your next chapter.

The Real Cost of

BY MEGAN SAWKA

Moving Out

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perfectly imperfect

BY MEGAN SAWKA

*A JOURNEY
THROUGH
EVOLVING
SPACES,
SENTIMENTAL
FINDS AND THE
SLOW PROCESS
OF BECOMING AT
HOME IN HERSELF.*



When Allyson Ritchey moved into her freshman dorm at Shippensburg University in 2020, her space looked like the definition of a freshman room. The walls were mostly bare,

a few Squishmallows lined the bed and string lights framed her window. She was supposed to have a roommate, but COVID restrictions left her living alone in a room built for two.

“It was very trendy at the time,” Ritchey says with a smile. “I had Squishmallows everywhere, and my friend next door had Monster cans on her wall. That was the era.”

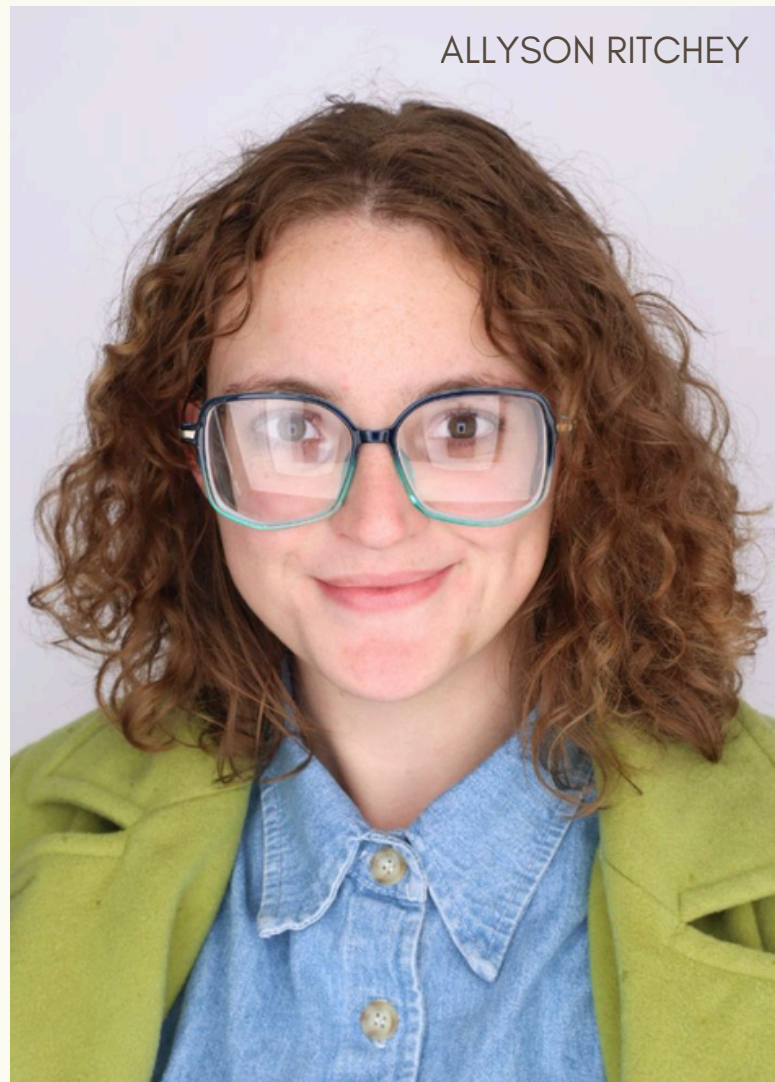
Her dorm may not have been polished, but it gave her something new: control over her own environment.

With no roommate to compromise with, she began to notice how her surroundings affected her mood. She hung a scarf she found at Goodwill on her wall, one that would later travel with her through every move.

“I like to find things I really enjoy and keep them,” she says. “That scarf has been with me since my freshman year.”

At the time, Ritchey didn’t think of her space as personal expression. It was just a room. But looking back, she recognizes it as the beginning of her relationship with design. Each move since then has reflected a step in her journey toward independence and self-definition.

By her sophomore year, Ritchey’s sense of style began to shift. She started decorating with more intention, though her shared living situation still limited her creativity.



ALLYSON RITCHEY

“When you have a roommate, you can only do so much. But I started realizing that I wanted my space to feel like me.”

That sense of intentionality, interior designer Abby Fitzgerald says, is often where personal style begins. “You don’t need a big budget to create a space that feels mature,” says Fitzgerald, who owns Fitz Haus Design in central Pennsylvania. “What matters most is intention. When you start thinking about why you keep something, you’re already designing with purpose.”



MAGNET BOARD

Sentimental pieces make a house feel like home – each photo, heirloom and keepsake tells the story of who you are and where you’ve been.

For Ritchey, that meant letting go of dorm-room trends and focusing on what felt meaningful. Her favorite items were small but sentimental: thrifted scarves, photos and postcards. She loved finding pieces that had history.

“I think about how someone used to love this item, and now I get to love it too,” she says. “There’s something really sweet about that.”

Fitzgerald agrees that pieces with stories make a space feel personal.

“Homes with character are built over time,” she says. “They’re layered with objects that remind you of who you are and where you’ve been.”



MEMORIES FROM THE DORM

“ I think my style was shaped by not being able to express myself much when I was growing up. Now I get to do that through my space. I can make it perfect and messy at the same time. ”



The biggest transformation came after graduation. When Ritchey moved to Bowling Green, Ohio, for graduate school, she finally had a place that was completely her own. Her apartment came unfurnished, which meant she had to start from scratch, but it also gave her total creative freedom.

“Moving here was the first time I didn’t have to ask anyone before changing something,” she says. “I could move furniture around whenever I wanted or leave boxes unpacked if I felt like it. It’s nice knowing I can just do what I want.”

Her apartment now reflects that sense of independence. “My style is collagey, mixed together, scrappy and eclectic,” she says. “It’s a little messy, but it feels right.”

Most of her furniture comes from thrift stores or Facebook Marketplace.

“Since becoming a grad student, I’ve become very scrappy,” she says. “I got a papasan chair for free because someone needed it gone. It’s one of my favorite things.”

Fitzgerald says that kind of creativity is what defines early adulthood design.



“ You don’t have to buy everything new. If a piece has good bones, keep it. Add a slipcover or a coat of paint. What makes a home feel grown up isn’t the price tag; it’s the thought you put into it. ”

For Ritchey, the process of creating a home became less about following a trend and more about reflecting her personality. Her eclectic style mirrors her approach to life: flexible, expressive and deeply personal.

Her design philosophy aligns closely with Fitzgerald's view that style should reflect identity, not perfection.

"People often think of interior design as making a space look perfect," Fitzgerald says. "But really, it's about how it feels. If your space brings you peace or reminds you of good memories, then you've done it right."

Ritchey's walls are covered with postcards, maps and thrifted artwork; pieces that might look random to someone else but tell a story to her.

"I see potential in things that other people might not," she says. "Even if it's just an old brochure or a weird photo, if I think it's pretty, I keep it."

Fitzgerald says those kinds of details give a home authenticity.

"When people walk into your space, they should feel like they know you a little better," she says. "That's what design is really about: letting your personality show through."

Ritchey admits she's a perfectionist, but her apartment has helped her learn to balance control and creativity.

"I'm really obsessive when it comes to schoolwork, but I've learned to let go at home," she says. "My space doesn't have to be perfect to feel right."

THRIFTING GIVES RITCHEY A COLLECTION OF UNIQUE, MEANINGFUL ITEMS

Fitzgerald often encourages her clients, especially younger ones, to embrace that same mindset.

"A first apartment is not supposed to look finished," she says. "It should grow with you. Try new things, move furniture around, collect pieces slowly. That's how you learn your style."

For Ritchey, that mindset has allowed her to evolve with each move. Her spaces are constantly changing; sometimes cluttered, sometimes minimal, but always genuine.

"I used to care about what people thought when they came over," she says. "Now I just want my space to feel like home."

Her favorite part of that home is still her ten-dollar bookshelf. It's white with a small floral carving at the top, covered in books, plants and trinkets.

"It's one of the first things I bought that felt like me," she says. "It's not perfect, but it's mine."

Fitzgerald says that sentiment captures what design is all about.

"It's not about perfection. It's about connection," she says. "Every object, every color choice, every photo you hang, it all tells your story."

Now in graduate school and working on her thesis, Ritchey spends most of her time surrounded by the pieces she's collected over the years. From the scarf that started it all to her growing collection of vintage finds, each item is a reminder of her journey from dorm life to adulthood.

"Every time I move, my space changes, but I always bring those pieces that matter," she says. "They make me feel grounded."

For Fitzgerald, that kind of attachment is what turns a place into a home.

"Your first adult space doesn't have to be polished," she says. "What matters is that it feels like you belong there."

Ritchey agrees. Her home may be filled with mismatched furniture and thrift store finds, but to her, it represents something much bigger. It's the physical expression of the person she's becoming.

"When I look around, I don't just see furniture. I see memories. I see the story of how I got here."



BY MEGAN SAWKA

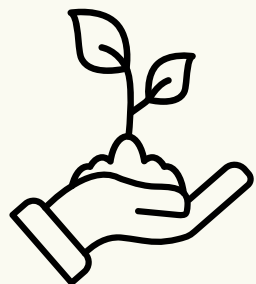
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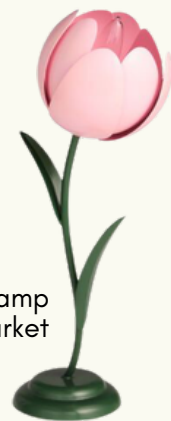


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