

Small House, Big Impact: The Effect of Tiny Houses on Community and Environment

CHARLIE KILMAN Carleton College

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FOR over two decades, the tiny house has captured the imagination of alternative housing enthusiasts with its dollhouse facade, sustainable strategies, and quality craftsmanship, yet tiny houses still baffle many Americans.

Some homeowners think that their 1,000 sq. ft. suburban house is tiny, while others hear the words “tiny house” and dream of a Thoreauvian cabin nestled in the woods.¹ Because the tiny house industry is still in its infancy, the definition of what actually constitutes a tiny house varies widely from source to source. *The Tiny Life Blog* claims a tiny house should be between 100-400 sq. ft.,² while *Tiny House Style*, a book created by the popular tiny house building company, Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, states that international building codes require homes to have at least 220 sq. ft. of interior space to be legal.³ The International Code Council actually specifies: “Every dwelling unit shall have at least one room that shall have not less than 120 sq. ft. of net floor area” and “other habitable rooms shall have a net floor area of not less than 70 sq. ft.”⁴ Clearly, there is ambiguity around the definition of a tiny house because the size of one depends on local building codes, owner preferences, and climate, among other factors. For the purposes of this essay, I will be defining a tiny house as a dwelling unit containing less than 300 sq. ft. of interior space, because that seems to capture most definitions of tiny house size.

Tiny houses come in various shapes and sizes; however, it is important to note that the traditional tiny house is often built on a trailer bed in order to circumvent zoning codes and restrictions. Otherwise the features of a tiny house greatly vary from owner to owner, but a typical tiny home usually consists of a great room that combines both kitchen and living room to maximize space. The interior design of a tiny house also employs convertible couches, foldaway tables, and clever shelving solutions that solve storage issues. Sleeping lofts, which often come with ladders, are another fairly common feature in tiny houses because they convert otherwise unused vertical space into livable quarters.⁵ Bathrooms tend to be smaller as well, yet many tiny houses still have full-sized toilets and showers. Generally, efficient design and quality craftsmanship seem to be a trend in tiny houses because owners want to increase the utility of their space without sacrificing comfort.

Tiny houses have become popular despite their limited square footage in part because of dissatisfaction with the ever-increasing size and cost of the typical American home. According to the US Census Bureau, the average size of a new single-family home in 1973 was 1,660 sq. ft.⁶ Now in 2015, the average size of new single-family homes has ballooned to 2,598 sq. ft., which is almost a 1,000 sq. ft. gain, or 64%, over the course of 42 years.⁷ This growth in home size is remarkable, especially considering that the average number of people per household has dropped from 3.01 in 1973 to 2.54 in 2015.⁸ With standard house sizes growing and households shrinking, a number of

¹Tumbleweed Tiny House Company’s original models were named Walden and Emerson.

²“Tiny Houses.”

³Weissmann and Spesard, *Tiny House Style*.

⁴International Code Council, *2012 International Building Code*.

⁵“Tiny Houses.”

⁶“Median and Average Square Feet of Floor Area in New Single-Family Houses Completed by Location.”

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸“Average Size of Households in the U.S. 1960-2014.”

homeowners are searching for viable alternatives to their current lifestyles.

Enter the tiny house. These houses have recently received significant media attention; however, it is hard to say whether they are considered a legitimate housing option in the mainstream market. Even though small house living has existed in the United States since the early 1620s, Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected from the tiny house lifestyle.⁹ From the houses of the first English settlers to today's McMansions, the mainstream United States homeowner has moved away from simple living under the banner of progress and luxury.

In this essay, I argue that the tiny house is a legitimate housing alternative that fosters a strong environmental ethic alongside a greater appreciation for community. In order to examine the sustainable and relationship-based lifestyle of a tiny house owner, I employ a fourfold approach that synthesizes census data, academic texts, blogs, and personal interviews from tiny house owners in the San Francisco Bay Area. First, I explain the monetary incentives for and against "living tiny." Second, I examine how living in a small space nudges tiny house dwellers to make more environmentally-friendly choices. Third, I analyze how the small home creates a strong need for community and shared experience. Fourth, I argue that the core values behind living tiny can be applied to the greater public in order to shift away from the current "bigger is better" mindset. Ultimately, the lived experience of the tiny home helps their owners foster a more ethical relationship with their environment and community through minimization of consumption, adoption of sustainable living strategies, and emphasis on strong, local relationships. Although the tiny house movement has not yet taken hold in the mainstream housing market, it is a form of housing that can offer an economically, socially, and environmentally viable alternative to the current American housing lifestyle which in many ways is steeped in overconsumption.

Less Space, More Money

The biggest incentive for living tiny is saving money. According to the United States Census Bureau, the median house price in May 2015 was \$282,800, a definite increase from the median price in 1975, which, when adjusted for inflation, was \$164,119.¹⁰ Considering that the median household income in 1975, when adjusted for inflation, was \$52,340,¹¹ and now is only slightly higher at \$53,046, there seems to be a disconnect between the buying power of potential homeowners and the affordability of homes.¹² Facing this much less affordable housing market, some people are turning to tiny homes as an alternative to a mortgage-burdened lifestyle.

Tiny houses are dramatically less expensive, but much like the definition of their size, the cost of these houses varies widely. *The Tiny Life* claims the average cost of a tiny house is around \$23,000, while *Forbes* estimates the price tag to be anywhere from \$200 to \$400 per sq. ft., or \$50,000 to \$100,000 for a 250 sq. ft. home.¹³ Low range build-it-yourself tiny houses can cost as little as \$20,000 and tiny houses on listing websites might cost from \$30,000 to \$60,000.¹⁴ Almost all of the tiny homes that I have researched are priced below \$100,000, a full \$182,800 less than the median price of an American home. Given this price difference, the total cost of a tiny home is clearly attractive compared to that of a typical American home.

However, the costs of a tiny home are much more complex than the average prices suggest, as there are considerable obstacles that come into play when buying, owning, and living tiny that are not immediately apparent. A major impediment that many tiny home enthusiasts discover is

⁹Walker, *Tiny Houses*.

¹⁰"Median and Average Sales Prices of New Homes Sold in United States."

¹¹"Household Money Income in 1975 and Selected Social and Economic Characteristics of Households."

¹²"State & County QuickFacts."

¹³Carlyle, "12 Tricked-Out Tiny Houses, and Why They Cost So Much."

¹⁴"Latest Properties."

finding a plot of land for their house. For most, there are four feasible locations for a tiny house: (1) park it on your own property, (2) park it at a friend's or in a neighbor's backyard as a recreational vehicle (RV), (3) place the tiny house in an RV park, or (4) join a tiny house community.¹⁵

Zoning and building codes prohibit dwelling units below a certain size, which deter potential tiny home owners from putting their tiny houses directly on the ground in many locations. Zoning laws widely vary from county to county, which means there is no certain way to navigate the legalities of a tiny house. For example, the minimum single-family residence size in Gwinnett County, GA is 1,400 sq. ft.,¹⁶ while in the city of San Francisco the minimum square footage is 220.¹⁷ This ambiguity requires the potential owner to hunt through a complex system of building codes and zoning laws, requiring time and energy. So, the price of the tiny house might seem low at first, but the hunt for suitable land and the navigation of legal codes adds further costs to the small price tag, or even causes owners to evade these codes by getting their tiny homes RV certified by connecting them to trailer beds.¹⁸

Alongside land and legal issues, lack of financing often proves to be a major obstruction for many who want to live cheaply but do not have the capital to start the project. The tiny house industry is still maturing, which means that there are few financing options to help front the cost of owning a small home. As a consequence, the majority of the money going towards a tiny house has to come from personal savings. Many Americans do not have \$30,000 in the bank, so, at the moment, owning a tiny house appears to be more feasible for those few who have the initial capital and resources. Yes, \$30,000 is a small amount of money for a house compared to the median price of homes in the United States; however, the vast majority of those mainstream houses are financed with 20% or less required as a down payment. Popular government home lending programs from the Federal Housing Administration and other agencies even offer loans for some borrowers as low as 3.5% down, so the up-front cash required to buy a mainstream home can often be significantly less than for a tiny home, even with its lower price tag.¹⁹ Granted, for some, living debt free is attractive in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, so buying a tiny house is worth the upfront cost.

Increasingly, the initial cash required to buy a tiny house is being reduced by a growing number of tiny house financing options. However, some of these options rely on purchasing the tiny house through a company that is a certified RV builder.²⁰ I talked about the issue of loans with an employee at Tumbleweed Tiny House Company: "\$75,000 [for a tiny house] is still a lot of money for most people... if you get a tiny house, you can get an RV loan for 15 years, you're going to be paying \$450 [per month] or so give or take. That's much more affordable for people. That's the whole idea is that you have the quality in a very efficient space, but it's affordable."²¹ In the case of Tumbleweed, which *Forbes* calls "the Cadillac of tiny houses," owners can get financing because the company has established their tiny house models as RVs, for which there is an accessible financing market.²² Although interest rates for RV financing are currently higher than those for mainstream American homes, the monthly cost still remains low. For example, a 15-year, \$50,000 RV loan from US Bank currently has a 5.46% interest rate, requiring monthly payments of \$407.²³ In comparison, the current national interest rate for 30-year mortgages is 3.83%, which means

¹⁵"Tiny House FAQs," *Tiny House Community*, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://tinyhousecommunity.com/faq.htm>.

¹⁶"Zoning Districts, Gwinnett County, Georgia."

¹⁷"Efficiency Dwelling Units: Numerical Cap and Open & Common Space Requirements."

¹⁸Personal Interview, June 20, 2015.

¹⁹Smolin, "Complete Guide to FHA Loans and Mortgages."

²⁰"Frequently Asked Questions."

²¹Personal Interview, June 24, 2015.

²²Carlyle, "12 Tricked-Out Tiny Houses, and Why They Cost So Much."

²³"RV Loan Rates and Payments."

that monthly payments for a median \$282,000 home would be \$1,319.²⁴ So the RV loan has the advantage of both a shorter time until paid off, as well as smaller monthly payments, ultimately, allowing more access to housing.

However, Tumbleweed is an outlier in the tiny house industry because many other tiny house-building companies have yet to establish their products as RVs. The other viable alternatives for financing a tiny home are peer-to-peer lending sites like Lending Club or the tiny house specific website, Tiny House Lending. Financing from sites specifically geared towards tiny houses and peer-to-peer lending are both still new alternatives to classic home mortgage models; as they develop, they could lead to a more legitimized, accessible, and cheaper financing process for buying a tiny home.

Due to the tiny house industry's infancy, legal and financial alternatives have not fully developed; making the economics of a tiny house much more complicated than just the upfront cost. As demonstrated by Tumbleweed and private lending sites, the financial obstacles to buying a tiny house are eroding as the industry builds appropriate infrastructure for more consumer access. And, if a potential homeowner can gather the initial capital, buying a tiny house with a lower price tag and less debt than a mainstream house can certainly pay off in the long run.

The Lived Experience

Especially within the last five years, the tiny house movement has converted a diverse range of demographics into small-space dwellers, who are attracted by the tiny house's smaller environmental footprint and lower economic burden.²⁵ Despite these benefits of living tiny, the lifestyle of a tiny house owner can be challenging. As a practical matter, owners have to live in a much smaller space that, in some cases, is below the legal minimum house size. But the real beauty of the small house lifestyle is its ability to change mindsets and, particularly, to foster a more conscious relationship with the environment derived from the influence of a tiny space. These values can frequently be attributed to the owner's own personality and beliefs before living tiny, but it seems as if the house often alters the owner's mindset.

Before the tiny house even begins to change owners' routines, it already encourages a more sustainable interaction with the environment. The structure of a tiny house is extremely efficient due to its small surface area. The lack of space means lower energy use because there are fewer lights, less space to heat, and fewer appliances than in an average American home. In an academic essay, Mary Murphy, a tiny home owner, describes the environmental impact of a house by splitting the utility systems into categories including electricity, water, telecommunications, water, heating and cooling, cooking, and transportation. Through an analysis of these categories, she claims that the tiny house excels in efficiency not only because of the miniscule nature of its footprint but also because the design can be, to an extent, adaptable to the owner's preferences. In one passage concerning heating, Murphy describes the flexibility of installing utilities: "In [her tiny home's] first winter I heated it with an electric space heater I got at a thrift store for \$15, and even in an unusually frigid January my heating energy bill was only \$80/month. . . I am upgrading to a super-efficient, clean burning micro-woodstove (a technological improvement which is costing me over \$3,000) that will allow me to use a local and renewable fuel source."²⁶ Murphy's tiny house is efficient both in its minimal square footage—limiting the utilities needed to create a comfortable living environment—as well as in allowing for change in appliances as the occupant sees fit.

Alongside efficiency, the tiny house fosters a more engaged relationship with consumption. The

²⁴"Current Mortgage Rates and Home Loans."

²⁵"Top 10 Reasons to Live in a Tiny Home."

²⁶Murphy, "Tiny Houses as Appropriate Technology."

quick climb in house size since 1973 might indicate that conspicuous consumption, or more specifically, consumption for the sake of status, pervades contemporary American culture to the point where homeowners often prefer big houses without regard for their impact on the community or the environment. Some claim that constantly striving to be better than one's neighbor through material goods and needless waste is an endless cycle. Michael Bell points out: "levels of consumption are constantly devalued as more people attain them through general economic growth."²⁷ Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* also tackles the idea of consumption by explaining that power is not easy to see, but by displaying their consumption of goods, their ability to waste time, and their ability to waste resources, people can exhibit their power freely, and are always striving to prove that they have more power than their neighbors.²⁸ Ideally, displaying or showing off power then translates to happiness. However, as Bell explains, happiness is not necessarily correlated to consumption, which is a core principle of the tiny house lifestyle.

One of the successes behind the tiny house is that it restricts consumption and waste, which encourages its owner to lead a minimalist life. Having talked with homeowners and conducted several interviews about tiny houses, I have observed that tiny house owners must constantly pay attention to the quantity of goods and excess in their lifestyles, simply to keep the house uncluttered. In an interview, one homeowner described her relationship with consumption: "It changes so much. It's like you start out, and you buy things. And then you think about the idea of building a tiny house, and then you have to start limiting things for a more practical reason than anything else. For thinking, 'well can I fit this in the house?'"²⁹ Here, the tiny house owner does not have an inherent ethical relationship with consumption, as was clear from her actions when she had more space. But because of limited space, this tiny house dweller has to be more conscious of her consumption rate. For example, someone shopping for clothes might usually ask: "Does this look good on me?" or "Should I buy this?" Faced with the constraints of a tiny house, the questions become: "Do I *need* this piece of clothing?" or even further "Will it add anything to my life?"

Two examples from my interviews with tiny house owners illustrate their relationships with purchasing goods. The first tiny house owner admitted, "We don't buy things. It's very unusual for us to say, 'Oh, lets go shopping today!' That just doesn't happen, because we don't need anything else. We have everything we need. If we do want to change or bring something new in, it's like a big thing. It's a discussion."³⁰ So, in this instance, the "shopping spree" has completely lost its appeal because they don't *need* anything else. They have all they need to live; any more material goods will end up being a burden. This sentiment is echoed in the second interview: "I had huge problem with clothes. . . I love clothes. But I never had a real reason not to buy the clothes, and now that I live here I have reasons to not do things. It's funny, I'll walk into a store and I'll shop for like six months before I buy anything. Because nothing has anything that I really want or need."³¹ The tiny house forces the owner to constrict how much they consume and helps them recognize that more material goods are often a burden.

Simple living means having less, so tiny house dwellers need to make a concerted effort to appreciate the multi-faceted potential of every possession. As April Anson, a tiny house owner and academic, explains, "living in a tiny house has forced me to appreciate material possessions that have been, or can be, used in multiple ways; it has grown my gratitude for belongings that enrich, rather than burden, daily life."³² This mental switch from burden to appreciation demonstrates the

²⁷Bell, *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.

²⁸Veblen, *The Theory Of The Leisure Class*.

²⁹Personal Interview, June 20, 2015.

³⁰Personal Interview, June 22, 2015.

³¹Personal Interview, June 20, 2015.

³²April Anson, "The World Is My Backyard?: Romanticization, Thoreauvian Rhetoric, and Constructive Confrontation in the Tiny House Movement."

tiny house's ability to alter its owners' ecological ethic by forcing them to understand the value of what they consume.

For tiny house owners, less consumption means a smaller environmental footprint because manufacturing, shipping, and displaying products requires a large amount of resources.³³ Culturally, by moving into a tiny house, owners are no longer buying large quantities of goods. Instead, they adopt a lifestyle built around common experiences and recognition of what is important to them. With this outlook, those who move into a tiny house are not necessarily downsizing, but "right-sizing" their lives by cutting down on their burdens. The small space helps occupants realize just how much they consumed before and how much of that they actually need, ultimately translating to less resource drain.

Another key environmental issue is waste, a topic that is less of a focus in the average American house, but addressed daily in a tiny house where a few important interactions help residents appreciate their immediate impact on nature. One of the rooms where these interactions occur (and the one that blogs cover extensively) is the bathroom. Most tiny houses contain some form of a "humanure" system, where human waste is composted rather than flushed into a sewer or septic system. Small homes, of course, can be built with capable plumbing systems, with toilet options ranging from low flush RV toilets to high-tech composting toilets. But, most homeowners end up opting for some form of composting toilet because they are cheap, easy to install, and no water, plumbing, or septic are needed.³⁴

The composting toilet nudges its user to better understand the destination and nature of their waste in a couple of important ways. First, when people use a conventional toilet, it is easy to believe that the waste magically disappears with a flush down the drain. With the most basic of composting toilets, however, human waste stays in the basin and needs to be covered with some form of sawdust or peat moss in order to mask the smell. By facing the unattractiveness of excrement, the owner realizes that waste does not just disappear; it stays around for quite some time. A second way that composting toilets help craft a more honest relationship with waste and a healthier environmental ethic is by reusing waste. Composting human waste allows owners to recycle their excrement back to the land, requiring that they know, for instance, how long compost needs to sit before it is ready to use (usually around one year when composted outside), and that they understand the importance of human waste in the cycle of land use.³⁵ For the tiny house owner, then, the composting toilet shows their impact on the earth, but provides a solution so that waste can be properly used to create a healthier environment. Ultimately, the challenge of the composting toilet, like many other challenges of living tiny, crystallizes for tiny home owners the impact of humans on the environment around them and the importance of coexistence with the natural world.

One of the more intangible benefits of living in a tiny house is the constant interaction with the outdoors. Like the other elements of a small space that help foster an environmental ethic, this push towards the outdoors is rooted in the scarcity of indoor living space in a tiny house. By contrast, if need be, the average American homeowner could stay in their sizeable house for multiple days without leaving. As an example, the home theater allows many households to forego watching movies at a movie theater, because they can do so in the comfort of their own homes. This "home theater syndrome" where homeowners have insulated themselves from their environment by bringing everything they could possibly need inside the home, a phenomenon aided by the latest technologies, has left Americans disconnected from their environment. Granted, the home theater syndrome has not completely affected everyone's environmental ethic, but according to a survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association, 20% of the people questioned cited

³³Murphy, "Tiny Houses as Appropriate Technology."

³⁴Carrie, "Everyone Poops. Tiny House Toilet Options."

³⁵Jenkins, "Humanure Compost Toilet System Condensed Instruction Manual."

computers and tablets as a barrier to spending time outside, while another 19% cited watching TV as the main impediment to outdoor recreation.³⁶

The space of a tiny house reverses the home theater syndrome to some extent by limiting indoor leisure and restricting technology that tempts people to stay inside. In *The Big Tiny*, Dee Williams writes about this intimacy with nature found in her everyday interaction with her skylight: “The fact is, even after all these years of sleeping with my head inches from the roof. . . nature still surprises me. And then I’m surprised by my surprise, thinking that, at this stage in the game, I should be a bit bored by things like frost.”³⁷ Her language shows her constant fascination with the environment, which is driven by her ability to experience nature first-hand almost everyday. Another tiny home owner claims, “I could sit here for four days and be completely happy, but when your windows are so close and your door is so close and you have so much time, then it’s like, ‘well what could I do?’”³⁸ In both of these instances, the small space dwellers are tied to their environment through the close interactions with the outdoors that the tiny house constantly allows. This pervasive experience creates a more effective understanding of the complexities of nature, ultimately shaping a more ethical coexistence with the environment. In the words of Aldo Leopold, “the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”³⁹ So, the tiny house helps bring the environment closer to its owner, allowing for nature to be defined as part of community as opposed to separate.

It Takes a Town to Live Tiny

Although the tiny house movement is rooted in a sense of individualism, tiny house living can foster a change in how individuals relate to community. Individualism pervades the language of tiny house owners, especially if they are building their own home. From the movie *Tiny: A Story About Living Small* to Dee Williams’ *The Big Tiny*, the conversation about tiny homes conveys messages of do-it-yourself attitudes and pride in ownership.⁴⁰ Williams readily admits that she designed her house to fit her; it was to be *her* house.⁴¹ However, this do-it-yourself attitude does not capture the whole picture of living tiny. The reality of tiny house living drives a need and a desire for community and relationships. We can see the change from a self-centered mindset to a community-centered mindset throughout Williams’ narrative, especially in her closing remarks about the tiny house culture: “these people wanted a sense of home that included the people and the natural environment around them.”⁴²

For tiny home owners, time plays a large factor in helping bolster community values. Living in a tiny house can offer the option of working fewer hours because overhead costs are so low. As a result, small space dwellers have the freedom to go to the laundromat and interact with locals, or even go see a Tuesday matinee at the movie theater.⁴³ With more time, tiny home owners can also pursue their passions and political interests, which could otherwise be hard to juggle with a full time job. This increase in community activism can mean working at a local community shared agriculture plot, or lobbying local government to allow for an intentional community of tiny houses.⁴⁴ In many ways, tiny home owners’ availability of time allows them to be active and deliberate community

³⁶“National Recreation and Park Association Online Omnibus Survey.”

³⁷Williams, *The Big Tiny*.

³⁸Personal Interview, June 20, 2015.

³⁹Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*.

⁴⁰Williams, *The Big Tiny*.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Personal Interview, June 22, 2015.

⁴⁴Personal Interview, June 29, 2015.

participants.

Ultimately though, tiny house owners' community participation is rooted in necessity. A concrete example of this practical reliance on community is the everyday navigation of appliances (or lack thereof). Some appliances such as washing machines are rare in tiny homes. Tiny home owners must venture into the community—to the laundromat. Absence of certain appliances can also contribute to a greater environmental ethic as well since perhaps the tiny house owner will hang the laundry on a clothesline outside, saving water and electricity, while experiencing the beauty of the wind blowing through the sheets or the sound of birds echoing in the trees. The tiny home owner's need to outsource and improvise produces a demand for local services like a laundromat or a public library if the tiny house owner lacks Internet or wants to read a book. Further, by frequenting such public places, tiny house dwellers are more likely to integrate into and appreciate the value of a strong community. With limited space and resources at home, tiny house living requires connection to a local population with a variety of services. In other words, it takes a town to live tiny.⁴⁵

Paradigm Shift

Clearly for their owners, tiny houses foster an environmental ethic as well as strengthen community values through the implications of their square footage and unique culture. The tiny home might never be a mainstay in the United States real estate market; however, its existence could help the public recognize possible flaws in the American housing system where larger houses have been promoted as the only way to lead a successful life. The pendulum of the American housing system has swung too far towards the “big,” consistent with the “bigger is better” view that often seems to permeate the American mindset. The tiny house movement represents the other end of this pendulum, challenging the “go big” mindset of McMansions with its countercultural approach of minimalism and small space. Tiny home enthusiasts take the position that endless consumption might not equate to happiness and instead find their happiness through an appreciation of experiences and unburdened living.

In our contemporary culture, the idea of the American Dream could be viewed as culturally detrimental—an optimism that places emphasis on the material rather than the importance of experiences, relationships, and the environment.⁴⁶ Many prospective tiny house owners begin researching tiny houses as a possible way to achieve the American Dream, a lifestyle defined by a house in the suburbs with kids and a dog. However, the tiny house way of life represents a paradigm shift away from cultural norms and the current image of the American Dream. Small spaces attack the “go big or go home” mentality at its heart: the sprawling suburban home. By placing greater emphasis on quality living, personalization, an environmental ethic, and community values, the tiny house subverts the consumer-based mindset. Culturally, what the tiny house does is simple: it creates an opportunity outside the norms of society where people can understand that the value of the environment and human interaction is much greater than the value of material goods.

The tiny home can alter dominant narratives because it optimizes situations so that people can easily make environmentally and socially sound decisions. Or as Michael Bell writes in *Introduction to Environmental Sociology*:

What is necessary is to create social situations in which people take environmentally appropriate action, even when, as will often be the case, they are not at that moment consciously considering the environmental consequences of those actions. What is necessary is to reconstitute our situations so what we daily find ourselves doing compromises

⁴⁵Brown, “Livin’ Large in Small Spaces.”

⁴⁶Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History*.

neither our social nor our environmental lives.⁴⁷

The tiny house makes it easy for these subconscious decisions to occur, and can possibly point towards a way in which people are consistently making environmentally and socially savvy choices based on the challenges of their personal situation.

However, the tiny house movement will be hard pressed to spread into the mainstream because there are many barriers to living tiny. The upfront cost of the house, for one, can be daunting among those in lower income brackets, especially because financing is currently scarce for tiny homes. As well, it can be both physically and emotionally challenging for a family of four or more to live in such a small space. Concerns about lack of privacy could bar many people from even considering living tiny as well. House size can also be an obstacle in the sense that people equate owning a small house to being poor. Physical ability can also prove to be an obstacle to living tiny: some owners are not able to climb the ladder into a loft, and therefore have to build a bed downstairs, which sacrifices precious square footage of living space. Another impediment can be climate. In conversations with tiny home enthusiasts, many are concerned that, if they live in a cold climate, they will not be able to entertain guests because they can not use their outdoor space for a portion of the year. The tiny house is not a perfect solution for everyone, as one blogger cheekily suggests in a post titled “Dear People Who Live in Fancy Tiny Houses, Do you ever wake up wondering, ‘I’ve made a huge mistake?’”⁴⁸ Although the post is satirical, it points out the many limitations to a tiny house ranging from privacy to space issues. All of these limitations come with living tiny. For some, they are viewed as welcomed challenges rather than inconveniences; for others perhaps less so.

It is essential to understand that, to some extent, the tiny house lifestyle can exist separate from a tiny house and can have influence on the greater American public even if the majority of homeowners don’t live in tiny houses. The core principles of the tiny house lifestyle consist of creating a better environmental ethic and community values through the mechanism of the home. For many, a 200 sq. ft. house is just downright unreasonable and it will never fit their family, let alone allow them to be comfortable and happy. With this in mind, the tiny house then can be viewed not as an example of what every American should live in, but an extreme example of successful “right-sizing.” By interpreting the tiny house lifestyle as a successful counterculture movement built around a more deliberate and thoughtful lifestyle, American homeowners might realize that their own housing situations are full of physical and economic burdens. Further, they might realize that living in a smaller house, maybe just 1000 sq. ft. to start, might change their personal situation dramatically by reducing overhead costs, forcing a more simplistic lifestyle, and possibly freeing up time. The importance of the tiny house movement is not based on its quirkiness or on pictures of beautiful small homes, but instead on the application of its values to the broader public—helping them understand that smaller is better for their finances, the environment, and the community.

Conclusion

The tiny house is a legitimate housing alternative for many Americans, and can build a stronger ecological ethic as well as stronger community values. Through its small space, the tiny home challenges owners to reconsider how they value physical goods, personal relationships and the environment, all while providing a greater amount of economic freedom. Tiny house living can prove to be a challenging endeavor; however, for some, it is a perfect fit and a viable housing solution. As of right now, tiny houses and the industry behind them are still in their infancy, but

⁴⁷Bell, *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.

⁴⁸Lauren, “Dear People Who Live in Fancy Tiny Houses.”

businesses and infrastructure are growing fast, which might mean living small will be a big thing in the future. This growth is essential for the tiny house movement; in order for smaller dwelling units—in this case 1,000 sq. ft. or smaller—to be taken seriously, the benefits to our society as a whole need to be demonstrated to a wider audience. As that happens, the core tenets behind living tiny can be translated to a broader housing community. Tiny houses can mean big things for our economy, the environment, and our communities; it could be just a matter of time before our culture legitimizes the mindset behind them.

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