



Little Boxes

The New Movement to Seriously Downsize Our Homes

By Kristin Bender

It all traced back to two summers spent living in a 100-square-foot canvas yurt on an ashram in New York. (A yurt is a tent-like dwelling built around a circular frame that was first used by sheep-herding nomads in central Asia; an ashram is a place of religious retreat.) The experience left Chase Rogers convinced that she was ready to join the growing number of people nationwide who are downsizing for the sake of saving money, minimizing energy use and reducing their carbon footprint.

“You could [stand in the middle of it and] stretch your arms out and touch the walls,” says Rogers, 40. “What I realized was that I didn’t need that much. What was important to me was nature—preserving it, and being near it.” Rogers grew up in a sprawling 10-room home in the upscale community of Greenwich, Connecticut, and was living in a 2,300-square-foot home in New York when she moved to the ashram.

“I had all the material things and all this space but something was missing,” says the writer and graphic designer. “I got rid of all the things and had less space and I realized I didn’t need that much to be happy.”

She’s not alone. A growing number of people in the U.S. are downsizing their homes in response to the collapse of the housing market, rising energy prices and concern for the environment. The trend has long moved in the opposite direction, with the average American home size, about 2,500 square feet, up 140% from the 1950s. ▶

Tiny Texas Houses are built almost entirely of salvaged materials and cost between \$60,000 and \$90,000.

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“Housing has always been this competitive sport and there has always been a negative connotation to being small,” says Genevieve Ferraro, who lives outside Chicago and runs a website called The Jewel Box Home, dedicated exclusively to small-home living. “Status has been acquired by trading up and moving up. But in my opinion, the new status symbol is not how you display it but how you do it responsibly. The best way to be a responsible environmental citizen is to stay in a smaller house or go to a small house because you are automatically consuming less.”

There are small-house blogs, websites and organizations such as the Small House Society. There are books like *Little House on a Small Planet* (Lyons Press) by carpenter and designer Shay Salomon and *The Not So Big House* (Taunton) by architect Sarah Susanka, and a growing number of mainstream resources teaching people they can live in less space and have more time to enjoy it.

“I wonder if the small-house movement is like clothing styles,” muses Gregory Paul Johnson, who along with Jay Shafer, Salomon and Nigel Valdez founded the Small House Society. The organization promotes the research and development of affordable and ecologically responsible small houses. “They say you can keep the same clothing and it will eventually be back in style again. Relatively small homes were definitely the norm in decades past. Then big



became the norm. Listen to the song ‘Big Time’ by Peter Gabriel. We like big cars, big homes, big televisions, big churches, even ‘Super Sized’ meals, which cause us to become big.” Johnson lives in a 140-square-foot home dubbed the “The Mobile Hermitage” designed by Shafer’s Tumbleweed Tiny House Company in Sebastopol, California, and wrote of the life lessons he learned there in the book *Put Your Life on a Diet* (Gibbs Smith). His Iowa City home features cedar siding, a metal roof, double-pane windows and a small deck. The walls, floors and cabinets are made of thick pine.

But finding a home designer who will think small can be a challenge.

Tiny Texas House styles include this “Rustic Farmhouse,” with a truly primitive privy.

Rogers says she could easily be happy living in 50 square feet (about the size of a standard laundry room) if she could find the right design. But designers tried to steer her away from an 850-square-foot home with attached studio. Then she met Dragana Vlatkovic, the founder of d-v design in New York. “I had a client who was interviewing contractors for a home that he wanted to make energy efficient, but comfortable for cooking,” Vlatkovic says. “He was consistently being told that he would need to add 500 square feet.”

Vlatkovic is designing Rogers’ home in Sebastian, Florida, about an hour south of Orlando, on the 80-acre Saint Sebastian River Conservation Easement. Of the 20 homes she has designed in the past three years, five have been less than 1,000 square feet. The floor of Rogers’ home will be entirely made of polished pre-fabricated concrete—an environmental improvement over many materials, since the flooring often comes from salvaged slabs, requires little maintenance and does not rely on the chemical glues and waxes of many wood floors and carpets. And the concrete floor—which is able to absorb and retain heat—will help keep her place warm in the winter and cool in the summer. In addition, Rogers plans to purchase all ENERGY STAR appliances, and to install a small solar unit on her roof for hot water.

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Green building is critical, says Salomon, because 40% of the raw materials humans consume are used in construction. In *Little House on a Small Planet*, he writes: “Most of the trees we cut down become buildings. Half of the copper we mine becomes wire and pipe inside these buildings. Building an average house adds seven tons of waste to the landfill...”

Rogers’ project could be completed this year, realizing a lifelong dream. “I’ve never been comfortable with a lot of empty unused space,” she says. “I’m just not comfortable having a dining room that is used once a year.”

If McMansions were the trademark of the overindulgent ’80s and ’90s, the not-so-big house may be the symbol of a generation that is slowing down, considering the earth’s resources and doing what it can to preserve them. Consider this: a 2008 survey by the National Association of Home Builders shows that more than 60% of potential homebuyers would rather have a smaller house with more amenities than the other way around. And homebuilders such as KB Home, Warmington Homes and John Laing Homes are shrinking floor plans and offering smaller, less costly houses according to published reports. In a *Chicago Tribune* story in December 2008, Tom Stephani, a longtime homebuilder and the president of the McHenry County Home Builders Association, declared the “big house is dead.”

GOING TINY

Three years ago Brad Kittel, 53, got tired of looking at the piles of excess building materials in his 140,000 square-foot salvage business called Discovery Architectural Antiques in Gonzales, Texas. So he decided to put them to use as construction materials for tiny homes. “When I started talking about building a house that was 10’ by 16’ people said ‘that is the size of my

closet.’ After I built the first one, everyone liked it,” Kittel says. Tiny Texas Houses, which uses almost entirely vintage materials for the homes, was born. The company has built 20 of the diminutive homes for Texas residents so far but the calls are coming in from residents of other states who want to give living in a 12’ by 20’ (or smaller) home a chance. The homes cost \$60,000 to \$90,000 and include a loft at both ends, a downstairs bedroom, a living area, full kitchen and bathroom and outdoor porches along both sides. Styles vary from rustic to Queen Anne with gingerbread trim to a gambrel-



Tumbleweed Tiny House Company's Z-Glass house is not designed to be portable, but at only 14' wide, it can be trucked down the road.

roofed Dutch Colonial.

“My goal ultimately is to bring them to other places because the demand is there. We have calls for these from Virginia, all over California, New Mexico and Colorado,” he says. “There seem to be plenty of people who want to downsize.” Kittel’s own home is a windowless, 600-square-foot room above his company headquarters. “My goal is to create outposts [where the tiny homes are built] all over the country,” he says.

There’s no plastic, sheetrock or fiberglass used in the homes, only quality salvaged materials. Kittel says he is often approached by baby boomers and older folks who want to live more modestly,

and mortgage-free, as they are nearing retirement and fixed incomes.

“They are realizing they have all this stuff they are not using and they are paying taxes and utilities on a house they don’t need,” he says. “You would be surprised at the number of houses where people are just living in one or two rooms, saving money because they aren’t heating and cooling a whole house. By staying in one or two rooms they can control their environment.”

Johnson of the Small House Society says his group has a membership that includes 40 architects and urban planners who have built at least 500 tiny homes around the world since it was founded in the fall of 2002. Those living in small homes are people who are concerned about their impact on the environment, those who want a simpler life and more free time. They are activists, artists, writers, divorcees, widows, nuns, Buddhists and singles, Johnson says.

One of the society’s cofounders, Shafer, has for more than a decade lived in a space the size of some people’s closets. “My decision to inhabit just 89 square feet arose from some concerns I had about the impact a larger house would have on the environment, and because I do not want to maintain a lot of unused or unusable space,” Shafer writes on his website. “My houses have met all of my domestic needs without demanding much in return. The simple, slower lifestyle my homes have afforded is a luxury for which I am continually grateful.”

Shafer lives in Sebastopol, California, and his company builds homes that are 65 to 837 square feet and run between \$20,000 and \$90,000 to build. That may seem like a lot for such minimal space, but Shafer explains that the portable homes-on-wheels, or “travel trailers” are made from quality materials that typically cost \$200 per square foot. Finished homes include hard-

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The Janssen family called this 250-square-foot RV home for nine months.

wood floors, pine walls, built-in cabinetry and stainless steel counters. They are fully insulated and come with double-pane windows. Doors are made by hand and windows are special order. Shafer says each of his houses takes between 500 and 800 hours to build, and, because they are movable, don't require a building permit.

SMALL & SWANKY

Living small doesn't have to mean living without luxury.

"With all the books and TV shows and magazine articles about small-house living, people are realizing you can really save on construction costs by building small homes without sacrificing on comfort," says Vlatkovic. "If the home is well designed, you can even live more comfortably [than in a big home] because you don't have unused space that you have to clean, heat and furnish."

Olive 8 is a development of 229 homes under construction atop the Hyatt, a full-service hotel and spa in the heart of Seattle's downtown retail neighborhood. Some condos are as small as 800 square feet, but the building will be Seattle's tallest residential tower. Using less land space by building up and not out didn't come without a price. In exchange for building higher, developer R.C. Hedreen paid almost \$1 million to preserve Sugar Loaf Mountain County Park in rural King County, as well as other privately held land for salmon habitat.

And if it gets approval after the project is complete, Olive 8 will be the first hotel/condo building in Seattle to have Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council, company officials say. The project includes a sustainable roof where native and adapted plants will provide a habitat for birds, bees and butterflies, helping to promote biodiversity. The roof will also be water-



efficient and use light-colored, reflective paving materials to deflect heat. Urban summertime temperatures tend to be higher than in rural areas because of pervasive expanses of concrete and asphalt.



New York company d-v design focuses on smaller spaces and energy-efficient materials with a modern look.

Steam condensation from the building's heating system will be captured, cooled and used on-site to water the landscaping. Low-flow showerheads will save about one gallon per minute per head and dual-flush toilets will use 29% less water per flush. Olive 8 officials say they expect the project will save an estimated 2.4 million gallons of water per year, or 32% less water usage than a conventional building of the same size and occupancy.

And green building makes good market sense, too. Jill Elizabeth West-

fall, coauthor of *Green Matters: The Residential Builders, Visionaries, Communities & Lifestyles Shaping Atlanta's Landscape* (GreenLife Books), says there are more American homebuilders "going green" than not. "About 40% of builders believe that it helps them market their homes in a down market," she says.

Westfall cites the findings of the McGraw-Hill Construction survey, which was cosponsored by the National Association of Home Builders and shows that the residential green building market was worth \$12 billion to \$20 billion (or 6% to 10% of the market) in 2008. In 2012, the market is expected to double to between 12% and 20% of the market share, or \$40 billion to \$70 billion.

"We have hit the tipping point for builders going green," says Harvey M. Bernstein, McGraw-Hill Construction vice president of Industry Analytics, Alliances and Strategic Initiatives. "This year, the number of builders who are moderately green—those with 30% green projects—has surpassed those with a low share of green—those who are green in less than 15% of their projects. Next year, we will see even greater growth, with highly green builders—those with 60% green projects—surpassing those with a low share of green."

There are many reasons for living in a smaller space while keeping environmental preservation in mind, says Ciji Ware, the author of *Rightsizing Your Life: Simplifying Your Surroundings While Keeping What Matters Most* (Springboard Press). "The thrust of the book is about people who are tired of the bur-

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den of carrying a big mortgage, a lot of square footage, and maintaining earthly possessions that don't mean much to them anymore, especially if the kids have flown the coop,” says the Sausalito, California, author. “Their 401Ks have turned into 101Ks, and they want to reduce their carbon footprint.” Ware has a formula for keeping possessions tight in order to live light. Something must be valuable, useful, beautiful or sentimental to make the cut. “Something has to have two of the four or you don't keep it,” she says.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Living small is nothing new. During the 1800s, Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond measured 10' by 15', and cost roughly \$28 to build. Furnished with a bed, a table, a small desk, a lamp and three chairs, he lived there for two years, two weeks and two days, according to Tiny House Design, which has a motto of “live light, live small, be free.” After World War II, 1,000-square-foot homes were the norm for returning soldiers and their families. But as folks tried to “keep up with the Joneses,” the average size of a home grew from roughly 1,600 square feet in the 1970s to about 2,500 square feet today.

Of course, there are challenges to living in tight quarters. “People need private space,” says Johnson. “There's a phrase people refer to which is ‘too many rats in a cage.’ Animals get stressed if there isn't enough space. Space requirements will certainly be different for every individual, couple and family,” he adds. “What worked for a while may stop working if the family dynamics change, or if other stress factors cause people to be extra sensitive.”

For some, living small means not living in a typical home at all. Sara and Matt Janssen spent nine months traveling more than 15,000 miles to 42 states

in a 250-square-foot RV with their three-year-old daughter, Bella, as part of the Live Lightly Tour. They furnished the home-on-wheels with



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The new Olive 8 condos in Seattle save serious space, water and heat through efficiency measures.

thrift-store finds and things from their previous house. “It's still a consumer culture, you watch TV and you want to buy things and you walk through Target and you feel inadequate,” Sara says. “For us, we are constantly trying to give away and recycle.”

That is something 38-year-old Laurel

Reitman of San Francisco can understand. Last year when she was pregnant, family, friends and coworkers at the high school where she teaches physics wanted to give her things for the new baby. Reitman and husband Mark Frey, 31, already had hand-me-downs and, thanks to their small house, a built-in excuse not to take more stuff. “Having a small house became an acceptable reason we could give so that they wouldn't buy us things,” says Frey, “but we didn't have to reject their kindness.”

Reitman adds: “We had lots of conversations that went like this, ‘You have to have a swing.’ ‘Thank you so much, but we really don't have the room.’ Our small house bolstered our ability to resist the very strong current of consumption that goes with having a kid.”

Reitman and Frey, a plant ecologist, say they don't mind living in a one-bedroom apartment, which is about 600 square feet. “It's something I've given a lot of thought to in this last year,” she says. “We could afford to buy something tiny, but I would rather hang out with the baby and live small right now.”

Reitman says their home is just the right amount of space and she feels good about reducing their impact on the environment, saving money and living more simply—with only one small concern. “[The baby] sleeps in the pantry and except for my paranoia about the hot water heater exploding, it's working out pretty well,” she says.

CONTACTS: Small House Society, www.sourcesforlife.com; Tiny House Design, www.tinyhousedesign.com; Tiny Texas Houses, www.tinytexashouses.com; Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, www.tumbleweedhouses.com. **D**

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