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Abstract

This article explores the idea of tiny homes in urban settings, and questions the ways in which tiny homes are both a subversive gesture that challenges existing paradigms around urban development, the home, and the family, as well as a projection of the American Dream in the urban arena. We also consider the opportunity that tiny homes present in helping to address certain challenges faced by cities, but also argue that addressing some of these challenges will require local governments to be inclusive of populations that have previously been marginalized for their attempts to live in settings that do not fit neatly into the social and physical fabric of the city. Because several local governments have begun to consider tiny homes as a potential solution to several pressing urban issues -- including affordability and homelessness -- we also explore how the history of government interventions in housing and the home have shaped urban and suburban communities in the past. We end by arguing that the current movement and recent explorations of local government show creativity but that local governments must take proactive steps to fold tiny homes into the everyday fabric of the city.

Image: Front View of a Tiny Home, "The Matchbox"
Photo Source: Jay Austin (Owner of "The Matchbox")

Introduction

Tucked away in a small corner of Northeast DC, there is a small triangular lot enclosed by three alleyways. Not too long ago, this lot was considered too small and awkwardly situated to be used for much other than illegal parking and dumping. Three young professionals in DC, however, thought otherwise. Within a few years, the lot transformed into a demonstration space for what has popularly come to be known as the

"tiny house movement." On this particular site, three (and at one point four) homes -- all built on trailer beds, none larger than 210 square feet -- a set of garden plots, and a small work studio, make up the "Boneyard Studios."

Image: Boneyard Studios, Washington DC
Photo Source: Jay Austin

This plot of land -- too small or poorly situated for a standard apartment building or single-family home -- is not unique in urban landscapes. The idea of occupying underutilized space and trying to make a place to live and sleep upon it is also not a unique experience or idea in urban landscapes. However, what is unique is the vision of the Boneyard Studios members to build modern, habitable structures that a local government agreed to let them build. Boneyard Studios sets the stage for an exploration of the idea of tiny homes in urban settings, and questions the ways in which tiny homes are both a subversive gesture that challenges existing paradigms around urban development, the home, and the family, as well as a projection of the American Dream in the urban arena. We also consider the opportunity that tiny homes present in helping to address certain challenges faced by cities, but also argue that addressing some of these challenges will require local governments to take proactive steps to fold tiny home living into existing zoning and building codes in a way that extends the option for any and all urban dwellers. Because several local governments have begun to consider tiny homes as a potential solution to several pressing urban issues -- including affordability and homelessness -- we also explore how the history of government interventions in housing

and the home have shaped urban and suburban communities in the past. We end optimistically by arguing that the current movement and recent explorations of local government show a creativity and willingness to experiment but that they must be critically conscious to avoid stigmatizing the option.

What is a Tiny Home? What is it not?

In its simplest description, a tiny home is just that: a structure that is built for purposes of sleeping, eating, and otherwise living, but at a significantly smaller scale than the size to which the average American is accustomed. To put this in perspective, the average size of a single-family home in the United States in 2013 was approximately 2,600 square feet.

Architect and Author Sarah Susanka, author of the Not So Big House, is credited with being one of the earliest modern proponents of the small-home movement with the publication of her Not So Big House book series, first published in 1998. Through her books, Susanka makes the case against the "McMansions" that were beginning to take root in suburban communities across the United States, and argued that smaller, well-designed spaces, can still allow households to have all their needs met in a more resourceful and sustainable way.

Around the same time that Susanka published these ideas, a young man named Jay Schafer was living in Iowa out of an AirStreamer (a futuristic RV), and built his first tiny home as a means to create an efficient home for himself. Schafer has been credited with popularizing the current tiny home "movement" through the subsequent creation of a design-build company he founded, Tumbleweed Tiny House Company (Shafer has since left the company to found the Four Lights Tiny House Company). Unlike the small homes that Susanka promoted, the tiny homes that Shafer helped popularize are extremely small—approximately 100 square feet—and generally built on trailer beds, offering their inhabitants flexibility of movement.

Image: Raising the interior wall of the "Matchbox" tiny home, built on a trailer bed
Photo Source: Jay Austin

Physically, tiny homes mostly range from 100 to 250 square feet, and contain all typical amenities necessary for basic living: a place to cook and store food, a bathroom with shower, a place to sit and relax, and a place to sleep. While tiny homes can be built to connect into existing infrastructure, many tiny home builders are installing efficient systems that allow their tiny homes to live mostly off the grid, e.g. incinerating toilets, showers and sinks powered by water stored through rain catchment systems, solar roofs, and other sustainable living methods.

Tiny homes' small footprints stand in marked contrast from the trend toward larger homes in the US over the past three decades. The average house size in the United States has grown almost every decade. While taking a small dip in the post-recession years, the average size of a home built in 2013 was approximately 2,600 square feet, up from 2,330 square feet in 2003, 2,095 square feet in 1993, and 1,725 square feet in 1983. Meanwhile the average household size over this time has decreased from 2.73 persons per household in 1983 to 2.54 persons per households in 2013. More significant decreases in household size were experienced in earlier decades; for example, the average household size in 1960 was 3.33 persons per household. This data shows a clear inverse relationship. As households have become smaller, the amount of living space has increased over time.

If we are going to draw distinctions between tiny homes and average homes and family structures therein, one must also ask how these tiny homes differ from other forms of mobile homes or trailer homes, particularly given that tiny home advocates often discuss the advantage of mobility in their homes. Posing this question also allows us to see how some parts of the current tiny home movement fit neatly into certain American ideals. Aesthetically and physically, there is a clear difference between tiny homes and manufactured housing, colloquially known as "mobile homes" or "trailers". Tiny homes are meticulously designed homes that often architecturally mimic the modern American "house". Even when not attempting to mimic the traditional American house, tiny homes are constructed with more expensive materials. This requires an attention to design and building material that can bring the price-per-square foot well above that of an average house. Mobile homes and trailers have traditionally been built using cheaper materials, and their physical shape and appearance are a radical departure from the traditional home ideal.

These physical differences are accompanied by social ones as well. Intentionally designed to maximize the use of space and provide a simple but efficient method of long-term living, the tiny home is clearly built for and by those who are making a conscious decision to abandon the status-quo trajectory that says the ability to own a large home – with a job to pay its mortgage and a family to fill its space -- is a projection of one's success. Popular articles on the topic all highlight individuals who have other options, but are drawn to, and are making a conscious decision toward, a simpler form of living. In this way, they are driven not by a purely economic need to live smaller, not necessarily by the inability to afford a mortgage or rent, but by a desire to make a statement with a very minimalist way of living. It is intentionally subversive to class and socioeconomic status norms.

In an article on tiny homes in *The New Yorker*, Alec Wilkinson describes the types of individuals that appear to be drawn to tiny homes. "The first consists of young people who see a tiny house as a means of owning a place while avoiding property taxes and maybe rent… The second group includes older men and women who have either sold or walked away from a house they couldn't afford… The third group is composed of people determined to live environmentally responsible lives…" A review of online

resources for and by tiny home communities generally supports these observations, but also makes clear that this categorization is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. All tiny home dwellers share the desire to live with fewer belongings, fewer debts and housing expenses, and a smaller environmental footprint. The first two groups, as well, are either not yet at the point, or past their experience, of rearing children as part of their household structure. While some tiny home proponents argue that their children can be raised in tiny homes, and certainly many children across the world have been raised in small spaces, the tiny house movement so far seems to appeal most to households, individuals, and couples that are not yet or no longer living with children.

While there is a great deal of experimentation among individuals and groups with tiny houses, for the purposes of this article, we want to question the potential of tiny houses taken to scale in urban settings. Specifically, do tiny houses offer a solution to the affordability and sustainability crises in many cities, and can they help address other public policy challenges? Are they in fact a viable alternative to the dominant model of home building and ownership? Before exploring these questions, it's important to recognize the historical role that governments have played in shaping housing options for various populations in cities.

Government Interventions in the Home

Government institutions in the U.S.—both local and federal—have a long history of intervening in the options for residential environments and related household living conditions. As early as the 1900s, reformers began documenting the living conditions of the urban poor, seeking to ameliorate threats to public health and safety, as well as what were perceived to be threats to individual moral character. At the time, there was a strong belief among social reformers of the connection between one's physical environment and moral character. The theory went that crowded, dirty conditions beget immoral behavior, while light, airy, open conditions beget moral behavior. Reformers, armed with this belief and the knowledge that the health and safety of households were compromised, embarked on a campaign to either eradicate or reform family tenements and rundown residential hotels, mostly occupied by single individuals. These efforts eventually were codified in local regulations that dictated the acceptable living conditions of a residence, i.e. building

codes, and the acceptable conditions around residences, i.e. zoning. At the same time, the federal government became engaged in the business of residential construction. In inner cities, federal plans for public housing quickened the pace of tenement eradication and solidified a standard for what housing for poor families should look like. Outside inner cities, federal subsidization of single-family home construction facilitated the creation of the suburbs and solidified a home-owning standard for the middle class.

       With the creation of suburbs and public housing, and the eradication of tenements and poor residential hotels, emphasis intensified on the family as the most desirable household composition. Housing for singles, despite a persistent need for it, became rarer than ever. Residential hotels had provided housing for singles whose lifestyles were such that purchasing meals and occupying single rooms was an affordable and attractive housing option. As these were eliminated from the landscape of urban housing, singles found themselves without affordable and attractive options. In public housing, government officials controlled access to housing based on appropriate household composition. At different times in the history of its regulations, only two parent families were allowed, and at other times, only single mothers and/or the elderly. In the suburbs, non-white families were excluded from the opportunities of homeownership through discriminatory practices of banks, real estate and development industries, and even the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Examples of such discriminatory practices included "redlining" of neighborhoods (where banks and other institutions intentionally denied services to specific neighborhoods based on racial makeup of that neighborhood), instituting "racially restrictive covenants" in deeds (where deed provisions strictly and specifically limited use or sale of property to certain races or ethnicities), and "blockbusting" (where real estate agents and developers intentionally mislead white property owners into selling their houses at a loss by scaring them into believing that racial minorities moving into their neighborhoods would further drag down property values). Through government and private industry action, as well as the personal discriminatory practices of white residents themselves, American city dwellers bifurcated into middle-class, mostly white suburban neighborhoods and poor, mostly black inner cities.

       Housing also increasingly was associated not just with function, but with status

and new ideas about what it meant to be middle-class. Privacy was prioritized more and more as families found themselves with more space—both inside their housing and outside. Yards, front porches, and fences created layered physical boundaries between one's housing and the rest of the world. Inside single-family homes, the increased size and number of rooms created the possibility of personal privacy for individual members of the family. Finally, separation from commercial and industrial areas—a product of zoning restrictions—allowed home owning households to experience privacy from less desirable functions of the community, for instance trash incinerators, factories, and even commercial development. Paid labor--excluding domestic paid labor—and consumption happened in specific areas, while domestic work, sleeping, and eating happened in the suburban residential spaces.

While many of these changes in residential options and conditions indisputably raised the standards of living in the United States, they also resulted in a narrowing of housing options for various household-types and individuals. This narrowing has contributed many challenges that local governments in American cities continue to deal with today.

The Opportunity

Much has been written over the past several years about the increased urbanization of the United States. According to census reports, the growth of urban areas in the United States has significantly outpaced overall growth in the country. Other documented trends over the past decade that contribute to the need for more units of housing are that individuals are choosing to get married and rear children later in life, so more single housing is needed. This trend exacerbates the already problematic lack of affordable housing for single adults. The economic reality of homeownership is changing, too. Increased numbers of recent graduates come out of college either unemployed or under-employed, and with staggering levels of student loan debt. To add to the problem, the median wages for individuals with bachelor's degrees have also decreased over the past decade. The subprime mortgage crises that began in 2008 exposed other troubling patterns in the homeownership and homebuilding industry: lenders and developers engaged in risky and in some cases illegal behavior that resulted

in many families and homeowners finding themselves with houses that were worth much less than their mortgage. The mortgage crisis was followed by an economic recession that left many without jobs to pay for their oversized mortgages, and few options for selling their homes without incurring losses—not to mention that being locked into these mortgages left many with few mobility options for seeking employment elsewhere. The mortgage crises and economic recession clearly impacted existing homeowners, but it also impacted the next generation of would-be homeowners.

These realities converged in many American cities to put added pressures on a range of public policy challenges faced by local governments, begging questions of whether current housing models are sufficient to meet the variety of housing needs and demands that exist. Tiny homes are in no way a solution to all of these challenges, but they do provide an opportunity to explore new housing options in areas where extra land on established lots is available, but empty lots for new development are not. In this way, tiny homes can be viewed much like other accessory dwelling units (ADUs), which are units like "granny flats," basement apartments, over-garage apartments, and the like. In a 2008 report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, researchers noted how "allowing ADUs facilitates efficient use of existing housing stock, helps meet the demand for housing, and offers an alternative to major zoning changes that can significantly alter neighborhoods." Tiny houses increase the population density of an area but without building up or out. The small footprints of the houses occupy small bits of unused land. When they are used as ADUs, tiny houses can draw on the amenities already available because of the primary residence, like sewage, water, electricity, and gas. In situations where a group of tiny houses is built—similar to pocket neighborhoods where houses share a common piece of land -- an area that normally would be used for a single house can accommodate a number of households through the use of common outdoor spaces.

There is nothing magic about exact square footage, like 100 or 140 square feet. To be truly mobile on US highways and roads, there are certain limitations of size and weight which generally puts many tiny homes under 200 square feet. Even when mobility is taken out of the picture, there is a line that small home proponents have drawn: 600 square feet or smaller. The point is to have a smaller footprint so that more households

can occupy a single plot of land in a way that still feeds larger narratives to which many in the U.S. subscribe--those of self-sufficiency, privacy, and ownership--without the detrimental impacts of the suburban model of these ideals. Tiny house owners are owners. They can customize and personalize their homes in ways that other more efficient models of living like mobile homes lack capacity.

Top image: View of tiny home interior from door

Bottom image: View of tiny home interior from under loft bed

Photo Source: Jay Austen

Human beings, like other animals, are territorial. When a space lacks clear physical territories, people compensate by engaging in territorial behavior. Tiny houses offer a clearer sense of physical territory and privacy. Communal behavior occurs when we are in greater contact with our neighbors. This happens through walking, using our outdoor spaces, frequenting the same shops, etc. The trouble with suburban living is not that it almost exclusively relies on freestanding single-family houses. Similarly, living in the urban core is not best accomplished through large-scale multifamily housing, though that is one piece of the necessary housing stock. One significant challenge with suburban living is that the freestanding house becomes separated from other daily living functions. Vehicles become the only viable way to transport people to jobs, stores, schools, and other public activities. Larger individual pieces of land are associated with each freestanding structure, resulting in wasted space. The boundaries of the physical territory extend to the edges of the property, not just the walls of the structure. As a counterpoint to these modes of living, tiny houses set up as pocket neighborhoods can create stronger communal behavior simply through proximity and the need to share space.

Not only do tiny houses fulfill our need for privacy and territory while allowing for communality, but they meet those needs in a sustainable way. These houses quite simply take up less land, use fewer building materials, require less furniture, and produce less waste than their larger counterparts. For these reasons, tiny houses are also far more affordable than their larger counterparts.

Whether tiny homes can appeal to enough individuals and households to make an impact environmentally depends on how many choose to do so as an alternative to purchasing larger single-family homes. In reality, sustainability requires a degree of density that, simply by comparison, apartment buildings may better serve. Nonetheless, tiny homes do offer other opportunities. In fact, several local governments have taken note of their potential and are starting to address whether tiny homes can help address public policy challenges unrelated to single-family homeowners. The City of Portland, Oregon is close to passing a resolution that would allow for the construction of a tiny home community on public land that would provide temporary housing for homeless people. While not initiated by the local government, in Austin, TX a local non-profit has raised funds to create a tiny-home community that can provide housing to some of its

homeless population as well. Tiny homes have and are also being explored as a solution for post-disaster temporary housing. This strategy was highlighted by the work of Marianne Cusato, who designed small homes for families in response to Hurricane Katrina; more recently the federal government's Rebuild by Design competition, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, showcased a set of tiny homes in Brooklyn, NY as examples of structures that could quickly and efficiently be built to serve as temporary housing in response to future disasters.

That local governments are exploring the use of tiny homes to address homelessness and to provide temporary disaster relief shows a creativity that is encouraging but severely limited. Homelessness and natural disasters are extraordinary circumstances. It says that local governments are willing to be creative in times of stress and upheaval; but to really harness the opportunity of tiny homes governments will have to incorporate them into existing zoning and building codes. Statistics are showing that housing affordability is not an extraordinary situation. It is one that is all too common and mundane. At this point in the tiny home movement, the intrepid few who have built in cities without regard for city building and zoning codes are just that—the few. They have shown what is possible and challenged local governments, exposing parts of the city code as antiquated and unfit for accommodating alternative modes of living. But for the groups who could benefit from a more affordable option like tiny homes, they will need local government to endorse the tiny home model.

Using tiny homes just for people experiencing homelessness risks stigmatizing the structures and the people in them. It makes a statement that people experiencing homelessness are "only deserving enough" to live in 200 square feet or less. Similarly, tiny home usage in the wake of natural disasters characterizes tiny living as generally undesirable but a possibility when absolutely necessary. We advocate instead for local governments to make a statement that anyone can live in a tiny home, at any time. Perhaps it will never be a situation where "everyone's doing it," but it needs to become a situation where *enough* are doing it, or, where those who *want* to do it can. Local governments can certainly subsidize tiny home living for people experiencing homelessness, but only if embedded in a larger structure of acceptance of tiny homes for any and all.

In our more radical moments, we might try to argue that this is a chance for local governments to decouple themselves from powerful housing developers and their profit-driven motives, but the pragmatic reality is that housing developers could also get in this business, and we don't actually think that's a bad outcome. Cities across this country are feeling the strain of shrinking individual household incomes and housing options, and we need more options. Housing developers bring an economic scale to situations that allow for bigger responses by cities to a housing need, and this situation is not all that different. A critically conscious response by city governments must be one that harnesses the full opportunity of tiny homes, and by that we mean that the city figures out how to extend the option to anyone who wants to take advantage of the more affordable, lower maintenance, and increased flexibility and environmental consciousness of the tiny home.

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