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Claremont Mckenna College

Tiny Houses: Community and Dwelling

submitted to
Professor Lance Neckar
and
Dean Nicholas Warner

by
Evan Dion

for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract:

The topic of this thesis is explore how tiny houses are being used and how might they be applied to homelessness in the future. The thesis also discusses the influences of past architectural thoughts and ideals that lead to the creation of the modern day tiny house on wheels. The thesis addresses questions such as: Who lives in tiny houses and for what reasons? How are different tiny houses designed?

I found that tiny houses are helping to eliminate the negative connotation of living in a small house. I also discovered that the two main demographics of people living in tiny houses are those who are downsizing and those who were previously homeless. Each group has various motivations for moving into a tiny house. It is clear that the tiny houses will likely become more popular for both groups in the future but it is unclear of how long individuals will stay in their tiny homes. My hope is that the homes are passed down and reused by both groups.

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Introduction

Sarah Susanka, an American architect, wrote in her 1998 novel, *The Not So Big House*, that houses “are getting bigger and bigger, and because square footage is all that is required, they are being built without the level of detail so important to humanizing life” (Susanka 14). Susanka’s book is recognized as a turning point in modern American thinking on housing trends in the United States. Her book is what initiated the small house movement. The small house movement is an attempt to reorganize America’s ideals on housing in the 21st century. The movement has shown that people are not completely attached to living in large homes that are not necessarily meeting their needs. Tiny houses are intended to be truly livable and functional and not just a symbol of wealth or power. The design of a small house shows a clear understanding of the physical and psychological requirements of a home. As the size of a house decreases the remaining space becomes more valuable and purposeful. Life in a tiny house is deliberate. Several questions have emerged due to the popularity of tiny houses in the past few years: What is the essence of dwelling? What happens when we challenge the norm? Can we maintain or increase the quality of living by decreasing the size and complexity of the dwelling? What types of people live in tiny houses and how are they used? An exploration of the philosophical origins of simple living, the architecture and design of different types of tiny houses built on trailers, the building process, and the people living in tiny houses will suggest that downsizing is a transformational experience. This change of dwelling addresses social and economic issues for low-income and homeless people. In this thesis it will be argued that tiny houses are

dwellings and are capable of increasing the quality of life of the resident even if they are accustomed to more space. I will also discuss the application of tiny houses as a tool to mitigate homelessness and highlight the less visible support aspects of a tiny house village.

Chapter 1: Philosophical and Historical Origins of Simple Living

Modern American houses are much larger than they have ever been in the past. Even though improvements in insulation and green design have greatly improved in the last 50 years, the average house uses the same amount of energy to heat and cool as houses built in the 1960s. It has been proven that house size and location have the biggest effect on the performance of a building and its affect on the environment. In the 1960s it was expected for a house to just have one bathroom and for siblings to share a room. However the average US house size has almost doubled to 2,349 sq ft since the 1950s. And it is not just houses, but also refrigerators, cars and other appliances (“Small But Perfectly Formed”).

But this was not always the case. The earliest Americans built and lived in small specific structures each with a designated purpose. There were spaces for working, worshipping, meditating, recreation, giving birth, making decisions, storing or preparing food, not unlike modern cities and towns. However the houses that the Native American tribes occupied were small and sparse. When the Europeans came to America they advised the natives to change their living structures into something larger but they refused because of their attachment to their current lifestyle. In the book *Native American Architecture*, by Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, the authors researched one of these particular encounters. Here is an excerpt:

Indians were deeply attached to their architectural patterns, found them practical and enjoyable, and resisted the white man’s attempts to change them. When the French advised the Abenaki to exchange their portable dwellings for

European-style homes, their chief replied, ‘Why now do men of 5 to 6 feet need houses which are 60 to 80...do we not find in our dwellings all the conveniences and advantages that you have in yours, such as reposing, drinking and sleeping, eating and amusing ourselves with our friends...?’ (12)

The Abenaki tribe was more than content with their small houses and resisted the expansion of dwellings. They found they were just as happy and fruitful in smaller spaces of the type that would be considered primitive today. The European houses that the chief is referring to are still quite small for today’s standards.

The most extreme jump in house size in the US did not occur until after World War II when Americans were dreaming of bigger and better. And the growing never really stopped. In the US today only 4% of new homes built are under 1,400 sq ft in while 9% of houses built are over 4,000 square feet (Les). It is in this environment that the tiny house movement has found its place. It is a movement away from oversized, expensive and resource intensive houses towards something that may be better for both the planet and the soul. The movement changed though in 1999 when Jay Shafer started putting tiny houses on wheels because the house he wanted to build did not fit the California building code “minimum-size standards” (Shafer 9).

Tiny houses are a rapidly developing novelty of American architectural thought and values. Some of the earliest of the modern tiny houses started appearing in the late twentieth century. However the concepts behind the tiny house are old and can be traced back throughout American architectural history. The tiny house idea brings together American concepts of dwelling that mix community and the individual. One of the most

influential American thinkers in the concept of living simply was Henry David Thoreau. His ideology is exemplified by this excerpt from his journal:

‘What you call bareness and poverty is to me simplicity. God could not be unkind to me if he should try. I love the winter, with its imprisonment and its cold, for it compels the prisoner to try new fields and resources. I love to have the river closed up for a season and a pause put to my boating, to be obliged to get my boat in. I shall launch it again in the spring with so much more pleasure. This is an advantage in point of abstinence and moderation compared with the seaside boating, where the boat ever lies on the shore. I love best to have each thing in its season only, and enjoy doing without it at all other times. It is the greatest of all advantages to enjoy no advantage at all. I find it invariably true, the poorer I am, the richer I am. What you consider my disadvantage, I consider my advantage. While you are pleased to get knowledge and culture in many ways, I am delighted to think that I am getting rid of them. I have never got over my surprise that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too’ [Journal, 5 December 1856]-Henry David Thoreau.’

(“Henry David Thoreau’s Tiny Cabin in the Woods”)

Henry David Thoreau was not in fact “disadvantaged” in his life. Although Thoreau was not wealthy at the time he wrote of his stay at Walden, he had many advantages in his upbringing. Thoreau grew up in a middle class family and was able to study at Harvard University during the early 17th century. Thoreau was not forced to retreat to the cabin at

Walden Pond. He could have lived in a bigger house but rather he chose this life. In his term, he went to Walden pond because he “wished to live deliberately” (“Henry David Thoreau’s Tiny Cabin in the Woods”). When Thoreau talks of his disadvantage he is really talking of how outsiders perceive his life at Walden to be of low quality. Thoreau would argue the exact opposite. Thoreau’s act of “deliberate living” has become re-embodied by the tiny house movement. People are following in Thoreau’s footsteps and choosing to live in a way that simplifies their lives and minimizes their consumption.



Thoreau’s cabin: 150 sq ft, 8 ft ceilings (“Henry David Thoreau’s Tiny Cabin in the Woods”)

Ralph Waldo Emerson also believed in living simply. Emerson wrote essays on both nature and self reliance. He wrote that “a man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work” which can also be applied to houses. We don’t need a house to be lavish and giant, it just has to be a dwelling. His additional essay on self-reliance portrays

independence as a virtue. For a lot of Americans becoming economically stable is a major feat and tiny houses can offer an easier route to becoming self-reliant and essentially virtuous according to Emerson. However, as described later in thesis, some people are forced to live small for financial reasons while others did not have homes to begin with. Thoreau and Emerson were two of the great Transcendentalist thinkers that later inspired the great American architect. Frank Lloyd Wright and the tiny house movement

In the 1930's, American Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was struggling with what it meant to dwell in America. Wright's obsession with the issue of dwelling and simplification resulted in his Usonian houses. Wright wanted to tackle the issue of affordable housing in the United States. He concluded that large houses were a poor use of space allocation and many features of the popular houses at the time were not essential to the home. He believed that most Americans did not know how to live well, and that large extravagant houses should not have a place in America. He wrote in his first essay about the Usonian house that "a small house on the side of the street might have charm if it didn't ape the big house on the Avenue, just as the Usonian village itself might have great charm if it didn't ape the big town" (Wright 339). A small house is only considered small when compared to a large house. Wright was attempting to break the house down into its essential components while still having an architecturally beautiful dwelling as the finished product. Wright's Usonian houses were inspired by the Transcendentalist movement and the ideas of deliberate and primitive living of thinkers such as Thoreau and Emerson. The linkage between these three individuals is briefly explained in the

book *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* by Joseph Rykwert:

When Frank Lloyd Wright arrived in Chicago the Indian wars were a generation or two away. but he had brought with him ideas of a different kind about primitive living from the eastern seaboard; his parents had come from that transcendentalist background where city culture was despised and the virtues of life in a little hut in the woods extolled. Whatever urban transports may have inspired Whitman, to the high-minded New Englander the hermitage at Walden was a goal of pilgrimage.

(17)

New England ideals of primitive living inspired by Thoreau and the transcendentalist movement was brought west with Wright and lead to his work with Usonia and the Usonian house.



The Weltzheimer/ Johnson House in Oberlin, Ohio is an example of a usonian home.
("Weltzheimer Johnson House 2010 - Weltzheimer/Johnson House")

Wright was not alone in his pursuit of distilling what a home really means. In 1951, the acclaimed philosopher Martin Heidegger gave a speech that began to distinguish the difference between a building and a dwelling. To Heidegger, a building is “a rational, organized, technological process” while dwelling is a “basic human experience of being in-the-world” (Sperber 10). Heidegger argues that humans are dwellers by nature and reach self-actualization by building (Heidegger). He points out that “today’s houses may be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but,” he asks, “do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?” (Heidegger). In his 1951 speech, titled “Building Dwelling Thinking” Heidegger was beginning to question the direction of housing. One does not necessarily feel at “home” in just any building. Even the best built houses can not guarantee dwelling. Heidegger was trying to highlight that functions such as planning and cost are not necessarily what cause a building to be a dwelling. He did not believe that houses should be built with no conception of the people who would be living in that space. A house isn’t a commodity to be consumed, it is a place for humans to dwell. Dwellings must be made with the needs of the specific occupants in mind and, if possible, the future residents should be involved in the building process.

The small house movement has been revitalized by tiny home owners in the United States. It appears that tiny houses are, at least in part, a continuation of the ideals embraced by the American proponents of simple living. Thoreau went to Walden to live deliberately which is the same concept many tiny home owners are chasing. People are intrigued by the simplicity of life and the opportunity that living in a tiny house affords.

Smaller houses are less expensive to build and maintain which allows people to work less. People also spend more time outside of home and in public spaces because of the small space they live in. The tiny house does not fit perfectly with Wright's Usonian houses; Wright was by no means a minimalist and the Usonian houses are not precisely tiny. However, his Usonian houses follow a similar chain of thought and offer a possible solution for modest affordable housing. Wright thought that "we should be living in a low, rudimentary sense" with less excess (Hess 15). His ideals of simple living and building are replicated in the ideals of many tiny house owners. Wright attempted to break down the house into its necessary components and remove whatever was left over. Wright was on a path to distill the house into a dwelling by systematically analyzing the house. Similarly tiny house builders attempt to only include what is essential. The tiny house movement is changing how we perceive wealth and commodities by building houses that most people can afford.

Heidegger would support the environmental benefits that come from building smaller. He spoke about the environmental side of houses in his speech on dwelling. He remarked that: "Man's Being rests in his capacity to cultivate and safeguard the earth, to protect it from thoughtless exploitation and to defend it against calumnies of the metaphysical condition" (345). For Heidegger, part of dwelling is using resources responsibly and being aware and active in maintaining healthy natural environments. Tiny houses are dwellings in this respect because of their environmental qualities and their careful awareness of human needs.

Chapter 2: Architecture and Design of Tiny Houses

Tiny houses come in many varieties, from truly tiny one-person houses to larger houses that could shelter a small family. Many are constructed with permanent foundations using traditional building styles or alternative practices such as straw bale. However, I will be focusing on the relatively new phenomena of the tiny houses constructed on trailers. Tiny houses also vary widely in amenities, from a simple house meant to be located next to central facilities to luxurious small houses with full size appliances. The range and depth of different shapes and styles of tiny houses is extensive, even just for tiny houses built on trailers. I will present three trailer style houses in detail. I will be looking at the tiny houses made for Occupy Madison and two models of homes built by Rocky Mountain Tiny Houses (RMTH).

Occupy Madison is a volunteer oriented non-profit that seeks to find a humane solution to ending homelessness in Madison, Wisconsin. The non-profit has recently been putting most of their effort into fundraising for, building and developing a tiny house village called OM village (“About Us OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”).

The houses built in the tiny homes village in Madison, Wisconsin are simple structures with basic floor plans. Each house costs about \$4,500 to build (not including labor which is on a volunteer basis) and are designed to be part of a community of tiny houses and used in conjunction with a main building with shared facilities. The houses are 98 square feet (7’x14’). The wall height is 6’ but with a cathedral ceiling common among most tiny house designs. The houses are built on custom single-axle welded trailers that will support two 4”x4”x14’ beams that the house sits on in addition to the

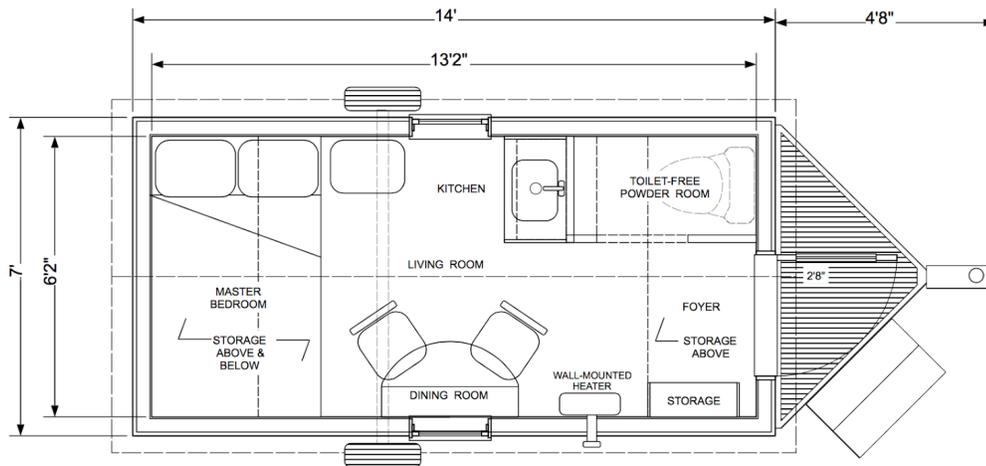
metal cross bars from the trailer. The houses are constructed using the traditional 2x4 stick construction and R13 or R-15 fiberglass insulation (similar to what is found in a regular house) along with a 4 mil vapor barrier for the floor walls and ceiling (“Features OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”).



Exterior of Occupy Madison Tiny House
 (“Chris Rickert: Democracy Looks a Lot like Occupy Madison’s Tiny Houses : Wsj”)

The indoor walls and ceilings are covered with a 1/4” plywood or panelling depending on what has been donated or recycled. The houses are built mainly by volunteers with a myriad of experience as well as future occupants (“Features OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”). Recently a local high school in Madison made a tiny house as a school project. The students learn about electricity, insulation and windows while making the house (“*Tiny Houses in Madison, Wis., Offer Affordable, Cozy Alternative to Homelessness*”). The construction of these houses are sturdy and built similarly to a typical house just with less space. The houses have wall-mounted heaters, a collapsible

dining room table, a kitchen sink, a master bedroom and two storage lofts. Some of the houses have composting toilets but the main building will have four traditional toilets. The main building will also have a full kitchen, however all of the houses have electricity so tenants can have small refrigerators or other small appliances of their choosing (“Features OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”).



Floorplan for a Occupy Madison Tiny House (“Features OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”)



Interior of Occupy Madison tiny house (“Features OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!”)

The houses built for the non-homeless population are not drastically different but are of higher quality and are not designed to be part of a community with shared facilities. The houses below were made by a tiny house construction company in Colorado called Rocky Mountain Tiny Houses. These houses were made by a small group of professional carpenters and designed by the owner who has a degree in architecture from UT Austin. One of the models offered by the company is called the Boulder which is priced at \$27,350 and is one of the cheapest tiny houses on the market (“12 Tricked-Out Tiny Houses, And Why They Cost So Much”).



Boulder (“Tiny House Design: Boulder”)

The Boulder is 7’-6” wide and is constructed into a 16’ trailer. The house is 13’-4” tall and is complete with a loft for sleeping. The size of a Rocky Mountain Tiny Houses is important because they need to be highway legal in order for them to be transported. The houses have to meet the same standard width, height and weight

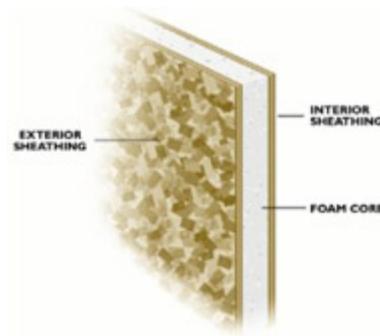
requirements as commercial trucks. The Boulder is designed to utilize the grid. The house has a 120v AC plug in, water hose connection and a drain pipe to be connected to a cleanout or RV/mobile home sewer system. The Boulder has two thirty pound propane tanks to power the on-demand water heater and stove top burner. The house is insulated with 3.5" EPS foam. The house also features a 32" shower and a gallery kitchen. The goal of the Boulder design was to step away from the traditional gable design with cedar siding such as the ones used in Madison. The other goal of the Boulder was to create a competitive but still quality product. Greg Parham, owner of Rocky Mountain Tiny Houses wrote that he wanted to see if he "could build a quality, desirable tiny house for around \$25,000. There a lot of tiny houses on the market in the \$45k-60k range" ("SOLD: The Boulder \$27,350"). Parham saw the expensive trend of tiny houses and noticed how the price tag on a pre-made tiny house did not really match the lifestyle that tiny living promotes. Parham puts it this way:

...I have a deep desire to make Tiny Houses more affordable. All those comments you see about RV's being so much cheaper just drive me crazy. It's not my goal to compete with RV's, after all, I am providing a MUCH higher quality product, but, the whole goal of a tiny house is to own it outright, not have a mortgage, and live simply. For a lot of folks, \$50k is just not feasible. \$25-30k, well, most cars cost more than that these days so something in this price range is much more likely to get someone who is on the fence about going tiny to jump in! ("SOLD: The Boulder \$27,350")



Photo taken from loft of the Boulder (“Tiny House Design: Boulder”)

More recently the company has started to specialize in larger custom built tiny homes. Since the Occupy Madison houses are designed to house two people maximum, I will talk about a custom build that is also intended for two people. The house design featured Structurally Insulated Panels (SIPs). SIPs are rarely used in tiny houses simply because they are more expensive than traditional building practices. SIPs are pre-fabricated panels and do not allow for the same amount of flexibility as a stick frame house. SIPs are panels with an interior and exterior sheathing with a foam core. The panels are strong enough structurally that they do not require studs. Also the foam creates a perfect seal with the sheathing which helps form a tight building envelope, limiting the amount of energy used to heat or cool a tiny house (“Custom SIP Tiny House (As Seen on TV)”).



(“What are SIPs”)

The performance of the SIPs are their best attribute, however, they have several other advantages during construction. SIPs are cut using computer numerical control (CNC) which means a computer controls the cut. CNC cuts are extremely accurate and speeds up the process of constructing the frame. The walls and roof of the house were delivered to the site on a shrink wrapped pallet. The walls had pre cut slots for windows and doors which makes them easier to install. Also the lack of studs makes it easier to install indoor and finishing features. SIPs are strong enough that less steel was used in the trailer frame. Even with the use of less steel, the finished product was stronger and lighter than a stick frame house with an overbuilt trailer (“Custom SIP Tiny House (As Seen on TV)”).

The house was built on a custom built 18’ trailer. The floor insulation was built into the trailer to save a few inches of headroom. The house also had a half size fridge, a composting toilet, shower, a stainless steel sink and a dormer in the loft. The final weight of the house was about 6,900 pounds which was in the towing range of the customer’s truck. Rocky Mountain Tiny Houses are made to be towed long distances and are often delivered outside of state (“Custom SIP Tiny House (As Seen on TV)”). This is not a

concern people have at Occupy Madison because the houses are built on site or short distances from the site and will never see a highway.



Exterior of Custom Built House (“Custom SIP Tiny House (As Seen on TV)”)



Interior of Custom Built House (“Custom SIP Tiny House (As Seen on TV)”)

Like all tiny house builders, RMTTH focuses on maximising space and multifunctionality. The custom house features a collapsible table as well as stairs that double as drawers. Occupy Madison houses are slightly less concerned with multifunctionality because most amenities are shared in the main building. Building tiny houses on trailers is popular because they do not require a building permit. They are also considered to be mobile homes and can be legally parked in backyards (Salomon 185). Tiny houses use many of the same materials and building techniques as traditional houses and are meant to last just as long. Tiny houses also have the capability to be off the grid. Most use composting toilets, and solar panels can easily supply the energy needed for most tiny house users. The discrepancy between the quality of the two groups of houses is to be expected because of the difference in consumer incomes. However, this discrepancy is relatively insignificant. Therefore, tiny houses are arguably the closest examples of housing equality between various economic classes. Small houses and trailers are usually associated with poverty. However, the small house movement is taking away the shame and stigmatisms about living in a small house, and in a way glorifying tiny house living.

Chapter 3: People and Communities

In this chapter the focus will be on who lives in tiny houses and why. There are many different demographics living in tiny houses, but I find that they tend to separate into two groups, (1) those who are downsizing to tiny living for reasons ranging from financial to lifestyle and/or sustainability and (2) those who were previously homeless, who have not been able to access other housing options. This breakdown leads to interesting questions about the success of tiny house living.

Many tiny houses are built illegally which makes them and their owners difficult to track and analyze. Still, there have been several surveys of individuals or couples who are downsizing to live in tiny houses. Tumbleweed Houses, a company founded by Jay Shafer that specializes in making tiny houses on trailers, separate their customers by age to analyze who is interested in their products. Tumbleweed offers fully built houses, plans, kits to build your own and Dream Big Live Tiny Workshops, where prospective tiny house dwellers learn the ins and outs of tiny house building (“Amish Barn Raiser”). Tumbleweed Tiny House Company found that people between the ages of 18 and 30 are usually struggling financially. This motivates them to be more efficient with their space. Factors such as student loans, lack of affordable housing in their area, and having jobs without retirement or health plans all come up when people of this age group are justifying their desires to live small because the alternative is financially unfeasible. The average US house price in 2010 was \$272,900 (“Median and Average Sales Prices of New Homes Sold in United States”). There simply are not enough affordable living options for millennials so they are reverting to tiny houses in order to maintain a high

quality of life with out the unrealistic cost. However, people from this demographic also cite reasons such as saving for the future and being environmentally conscious of their decision to live in a tiny house. Tumbleweed found that this group was diverse but generally linked by their lack of employment or underemployment (“Media Q&A”).

Those interested in building their own tiny house or purchasing one between the ages of 31 and 60 tend to have more financial stability. Tumbleweed found that people in this group often want to offer a tiny house as an affordable housing option for a younger friend or family member. People in this group have also used a tiny house as a vacation home or as an office space. There are others in this group that are choosing to downsize because of the high cost of housing (“Media Q &A”).

Finally, those over 60 often transition into tiny homes for economic reasons or ease of use. Some people have lost their homes or savings due to economic downturn or did not allocate enough money for retirement. Others say they want to downsize to save time and money, or to allow them to travel or pursue other interests. Interestingly, tiny house dwellers of every age appreciate the time and effort saved by the ease of cleaning a tiny house (“Media Q &A”).

Another analysis of tiny house dwellers was conducted by Kent Griswald, writer for the popular blog, Tiny House Blog (<http://tinyhouseblog.com/>). Griswald found that the site’s main demographic is females in their fifties followed by young males and females in their twenties and thirties (“12 Tricked-Out Tiny Houses, And Why They Cost So Much”).

These analyses are coming from tiny house builders and enthusiasts, but have neglected a certain sector of the tiny house movement: the homeless. According to research conducted in 2013 by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, 610,042 people were homeless in the United States. Many of these people rely on homeless shelters as refuge (“National Alliance to End Homelessness”). However, living part-time in a shelter is not desirable, and some even prefer sleeping on the streets even though it is illegal and they are often bothered by the police. A 52 year old woman complained to the US Law Center on Homelessness that “I have to be told what time to go to bed, what I can watch on TV, when I can eat, what time to go to the bathroom. Are you kidding me? I'd rather feel normal” (“Can Tiny Houses Help Fix Homelessness?”). Shelters are not always pleasant destinations for homeless people.

As an alternative to homeless shelters, a small percentage of the homeless population is seeking out the possibility of living in a tiny house. The prospect of tiny homes for the homeless is slowly making its way into mainstream media. Several media outlets including the Huffington Post, NBC news and even BuzzFeed are reporting on the several tiny house villages sprouting up around the country.

The original homeless tiny house village, Dignity Village, started out as a tent village six miles from downtown Portland, Oregon. The community of Dignity Village was started by homeless people looking to find somewhere they could sleep without being bothered by the police. Eventually the homeless started a non-profit that supplied housing for the homeless. The community requires its members to give back in small labor tasks and the rent is 50 dollars a month. Alcohol and drugs (with the exception of

marijuana) are banned which has helped many of the residents overcome their addictions (Murphy).

Many people who live in Dignity Village praise it for what it is. Mitch Grubic, the security coordinator of Dignity Village, explains “the vision that Dignity stood for — of a place with open arms where people could get clean [from drugs or alcohol], get a change of socks, get warm in winter, get water” (Murphy). What is unique about tiny houses as a piece of the homelessness solution is that the homeless individuals are not only receiving a house, but with their volunteer hours, are buying into a community and peer support system. While other tiny home owners place their homes in someone’s backyard or private property, the homeless villages are creating strong connections between residents through mandatory meetings and other beneficial interactions. The tenants are active participants in their rehabilitation by enforcing strict substance rules and having democratic decision making processes. The houses are very cheap but the work buy in is much more difficult compared to your average neighborhood which results in higher group cohesion. In Dignity Village, you are admitted on a trial basis, having to sleep on the common room couch or in a dorm room before getting a house and community membership.

However, Dignity Village has some downsides. For instance, it is located in a loud and undesirable part of town. Dignity Village is adjacent to a municipal composting facility and PDX, Portland’s airport. Dignity Village is six miles from downtown and it takes about 45 minutes to get there using public transport (Wyatt 40). Nan Roman, CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, believes that tiny house villages for the

homeless should be pursued but only if they are well thought out. He says that the solution to homelessness is affordable housing so “any innovation is important, and small housing that can be produced at lower cost is one such innovation. However, if it's not sufficient, not properly zoned, doesn't have infrastructure like water and roads, if it doesn't have good quality services, if the government and ownership is not clear...those things can cause problems. The devil is in the details” (“Can Tiny Houses Help Fix Homelessness?”). Roman brings up many of the concerns state and municipal governments have with tiny house villages. For example, the placement of the villages in relation to businesses and/or homes. Business owners do not want to encourage homeless people to dwell in front of or in their workplaces and wonder how it will affect customers. Homeowners fear that being next to a “homeless camp” will devalue their property.

Despite these concerns, tiny house communities for homeless people are being formed. Dignity Village's success, along with the awareness of the tiny house movement, has led to the creation of River Haven and Village of Hope in California, Opportunity Village and Emerald Village in Oregon, Quixote Village in Washington, Occupy Madison in Wisconsin, Second Wind Cottages in New York, and Community First in Austin, Texas (“Tiny House Village”).

The concept of the tiny house village is being expanded beyond a place and community for the homeless. Developers in San Francisco, Portland and Sonoma County are looking to create Tiny House communities for people of all backgrounds. On the outskirts of San Francisco, a group of people are seeking “to create a small village of

entrepreneurs who want to live sustainably, on the land – and with high speed internet, guitar sessions, nightly campfires, dancing and celebrating life, love and food – all within a few hours proximity to San Francisco” (“Tiny House Village”). The project is far from completion. They have yet to acquire land but the idea behind it is to bring together people who are deciding to live tiny consciously. Another group pursuing this avenue is Micro Community Concepts (MCC) based out of Portland, Oregon. The non-profit is oriented towards supplying low income housing in the range of \$150-\$400 a month. The group believes that “a micro community can be set up specifically for families, seniors, fixed income individuals, people just returning to the workforce, people returning to the community from prison, etc. MCC looks forward to working with various organizations to make these kinds of communities possible” (“About | Micro Community Concepts.”). In Sonoma County, Jay Shafer, from Four Lights Tiny Houses and formerly Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, is trying to start a new community. Some design work has been completed, and they are working on rezoning their land to accommodate tiny houses (“Tiny House Village | Sonoma County | Four Lights Tiny House Company.”). These various groups are striving to create communities of tiny houses but they have not yet flourished and are the exception.

Conclusion

While data on tiny house living is limited, the projects described here and in the media suggest an emerging American tiny house movement. Some tiny house residents are choosing to downsize. Others have fewer choices, but tiny house living offers critical advantages. Whether they are avoiding a mortgage or sleeping on the streets, people move into a tiny house with the goal and expectation that they are improving the quality of their lives. The people downsizing can enjoy a minimalistic lifestyle, and the savings afforded to them by living small and simply. The homeless can avoid the unpleasantness of shelters or alternatively being chased by cops in the middle of the night. They can also enjoy the benefits of joining the community and support group of a tiny house village.

It is worth considering the intersection of tiny house villages for the homeless with tiny house villages for others. As of right now, the homeless have very little interaction with other tiny house owners. However, a Tumbleweed workshop did recently visit Occupy Madison's village as part of their workshop in Madison. This kind of event may be a sign of future interactions ("Visit from Tumbleweed Houses OM – TINY HOUSES & MORE!"). Still, these two communities have some striking differences. For instance, while those who are downsizing are intentionally embracing the tiny house life-style, many homeless people see tiny house living as a temporary stop on the way to a larger living space. The residents of Dignity Village are required to be on a waiting list for permanent (and larger) low income housing, a common practice among tiny house villages for the homeless (Murphy). It would be unrealistic to assume that the people living in tiny houses will live in them forever - even Thoreau returned from the woods -

but that does not diminish the impact that tiny houses are having on dwelling in America. My hope is that these tiny trailer houses become hand-me-down homes when the owners are finally ready to move on. The houses could be passed down through families or adopted by a new family in a village. Ideally some of the higher quality houses could be donated to homeless villages or to a bank or community trust that could redistribute the houses to low-income Americans. State and local officials could create an affordable housing tax credit to owners who donate their old tiny homes. These transactions would be a way for the different economic groups to finally be linked.

It is also worth discussing why it is difficult to legally build and own a tiny home. It seems illogical to make zoning and building codes that do not allow for inexpensive small homes to be built. Building codes do not seem to be as much of a problem – especially if it is possible to get around the plumbing codes by having some community facilities. Zoning however is a larger issue. Zoning laws have been an instrument to protect health, safety and welfare by separating industrial and residential spaces. However, at a more fine-grained level, it has become an instrument of preserving tax base. R1 homes – single family – lose value when mixed with higher densities in some areas. Tiny houses will add density if lots are smaller. Even more finely grained are the ways in which community councils, banks and other gatekeeper institutions (even planning boards in some towns) try to keep housing values high for tax purposes. Some communities do not like to enforce fair housing practices (Neckar). Since this is a local issue – tough to challenge in court for an individual – this idea is difficult to sell unless you are in a place that works well and encourages diversity. In Sonoma, the tiny house

village is working around regulations by rezoning the area as an RV park and having all the tiny homes on wheels.

I have noticed through my research and personal experiences with tiny home owners that they seem happier than the average American. This is not something quantifiable or scientifically proven, but people who live minimally appear to be more satisfied in life. I found this to be most obvious with people who built their own homes. These people often do not know where their lives are heading or how long they will stay in their tiny homes. They find comfort and stability in their ability to afford their manageable lifestyles. They do not work as much, and this choice allows them to spend more time doing what they enjoy, or figuring out what they enjoy. Emerson and Thoreau argued on the behalf of self-reliance and living with purpose, which for most people is easier to do when living small.

The happiness factor may be due to the fact that tiny houses are dwellings and not just housing. Heidegger and Wright shared an aesthetic appreciation of the raw essential life-supporting simplicity of houses. The size of a tiny house puts emphasis on the value of space to the point that every inch must serve the occupants needs. Tiny houses are built to be lived in, not to be a spectacle of wealth or showmanship.

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