Magazine

Tiny house, big benefits: Freedom from a mortgage and worries — and stuff

By Nina Patel June 25

America is having a big love affair with tiny houses. There are television shows: "Tiny House Nation" and "Tiny House Hunters." There are movies: "Tiny: A Story About Living Small" and "Small Is Beautiful: A Tiny House Documentary." Pinterest has more than 900 boards devoted to tiny houses, and design Web site Houzz showcases thousands of tiny- house photos. "Many Houzz readers have been fascinated by the idea of a portable home they can pay off quickly and personalize down to the smallest detail," says editor Sheila Schmitz. And you know a concept has arrived when "Portlandia" skewers it: Check out the "Microhouse" episode.

Why are Americans, whose homes average about 2,200 square feet, so obsessed with tiny homes? Perhaps they are responding to the benefits tiny-house owners cite: financial and emotional freedom, a greener lifestyle, the satisfaction of building one's own refuge.

The phrase " 'tiny house' put a name to the movement that was already

there," says Thom Stanton, a tiny-home builder in West Virginia.

Stanton says two groups are fueling the movement: millennials, because their college loans have put traditional houses out of reach, and retiring baby boomers looking for affordable homes with minimal maintenance. Meanwhile, traditional homeowners are contributing to the trend by building tiny houses on their properties to shelter guests, family members or caregivers, or putting them on vacation land.

But there's one big drawback: Many municipalities haven't made room literally or legislatively for tiny residences. It's a challenge to find a place to park a tiny house if you don't own land. And they often fall into a legal limbo. "Tiny houses exist in sort of a legal gray area, neither explicitly allowed nor expressly forbidden," says tiny-home owner Jay Austin of Northeast Washington. Though the District recently banned "camping" in tiny-house-like structures, Austin says he has been told the provision is unenforceable.

In Maryland, tiny-house legality will likely be handled at the local level as a zoning or building code issue, according to Wiley Hall, acting communications director for the state's Department of Housing and Community Development. In Virginia, a home built on a foundation has to meet the Virginia Residential Code. But most tiny houses are built on wheeled platforms, and there are no code standards that govern recreational vehicles, says Amanda Pearson, public relations director for the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.

To further complicate matters, placement on a property is determined by local zoning and land use regulations.

Sorting out these issues will be a crucial test for tiny-house dwellers, who recently formed the American Tiny House Association. But the owners of the three homes that follow have already found big benefits.

The retirement cottage on wheels

Pasadena, Md., residents Greg and Renee Cantori have had a tiny house parked to the side of their 1,400-square-foot 1970s ranch home for three years, awaiting their retirement. The Cantoris, who believe in collecting life experiences rather than material things, have had long careers in the nonprofit sector. They added green features such as a composting toilet, gray-water garden, programmable thermostat and LED bulbs to their main residence. And Greg, 55, has been bike commuting on and off for 30 years, currently cycling 50 miles round trip for his job in Baltimore. Greg and Renee, 53, even opted against installing a dishwasher in their kitchen because they appreciated the family time the task provided as their two daughters were growing up. “Conveniences create isolation,” Greg Cantori says.

So it’s not surprising that the couple has chosen a post-career tiny-house lifestyle. “We will be doing things that we enjoy and spending time together doing it,” he says.

A tiny house “becomes your launchpad,” says Raleigh, N.C., architect Sarah Susanka, author of the “Not So Big House”series who promotes building homes that are small but higher quality. “It’s a lot easier to live in a tiny house when you’re in a beautiful place,” she says. “A version of this is the micro units in cities where the city itself becomes your living room and dining room.”

The Cantoris’ 238-square-foot tiny home sits a few hundred yards from their 39-foot sailboat, which is docked on a creek that feeds into the Chesapeake Bay. After they retire, they plan to sell the main house and spend time on the boat and in the tiny house — a lifestyle Greg Cantori dubbed “surf ’n’ turf.”

Many retirees travel the country in RVs, he says, but a tiny house “feels like a real house.” The cottage-like blue house with white trim is a light-filled space with dormers and beadboard ceilings and walls. It has a large loft that fits a queen-size bed and a smaller loft for a twin; Cantori split a stepladder in half to create rungs for each loft. On the main level, the house has a sitting area, kitchen and bathroom. The house has a shower/composting toilet on the far end. The original builder fitted it with a combo washer-dryer, but the Cantoris plan to remove it; they’ll hand wash clothes or use a small manual washer. They also want to buy solar panels and a rain collection system.

The Cantoris bought the $19,500 house three years ago in preparation for the retirement plan, but also because they needed a guesthouse and

office. Greg and his brother towed the house from Ohio to Maryland, once parking in an Ace Hardware parking lot and returning to find a line of people waiting for a tour. The couple's land in West Virginia, where they will base the house, is within biking distance of a town for access to supplies, groceries and entertainment. If they move it, they'll tow it with a U-Haul truck.

Greg Cantori wants to find a place for these homes in society, and asked the executive director of Civic Works, a Baltimore nonprofit organization, to set up a project in which kids in its YouthBuild program would construct tiny houses. (Students of the Academy of Construction and Design, a trade school at Cardozo Education Campus in Northwest Washington, have been building a tiny house on a lot owned by Micro Showcase, a D.C.-based nonprofit that highlights micro building.)

Cantori, who serves on the advisory council for the youth project in Baltimore, hopes to find a way to use the completed structures to house the homeless.

[What we can learn from small-space dwellers.]

A Spartan calling, and residence

Kevin Riedel of Richmond was inspired by the idea of living in "gospel poverty" and focusing on his spirituality when he built his 130-square-foot house four years ago.

The then-23-year-old also wanted “to have my own house but wanted flexibility in terms of where it could be, and I wanted something that was more affordable than getting a standard mortgage,” he says.

Though his grandfather had helped his dad build a house, the thought of constructing a large house was daunting. A tiny home on wheels was a great solution. His idea was to keep the tiny house on someone’s property, but when he couldn’t find a place, he bought the land where the house now sits. Instead of the freedom he sought, he now has some degree of responsibility as a property owner. As the only one of his friends who owns a place, he often hosts cookouts and gatherings around his fire pit.

His cabin-like house has a gable metal roof and is clad in western red cedar. The door opens to a spacious living area filled with a refurbished love seat. The other end has an L-shaped kitchen and bathroom tucked under the loft. Including the trailer, it cost about $20,000.

His parents insisted that he include a flushing toilet rather than a composting one because they feared he’d never be able to find a girlfriend otherwise. (Since then, Riedelhas decided to become a priest; he will attend seminary at Catholic University this fall.)

“Building a tiny house definitely isn’t a fairy tale,” he says, noting that some tiny-house bloggers romanticize it. The first winter, his hot-water

heater froze and broke. This past winter, the water supply pipe to the toilet froze and flooded the home, so he replaced the pine floor milled by a craftsman in his home town of Little Washington, Va., with vinyl tiles that resemble wood. “You have to have some degree of determination to push through the upsetting, disappointing moments,” Riedel says.

Even the tiny-house movement can include the desire for more. “There’s a bit of pressure to build niftier, cuter, tinier, bigger, more cleverly, more artistically, etc.,” he says, which is something that he’s had to fight against. The house will remain on the property while Riedel, who is completing an internship at a rectory, attends seminary. A friend, Will Gilrain, is living there now. “It makes you realize how much — or how little — you need,” Gilrain says.

A home base that makes travel possible

For 26-year-old Jay Austin, who works for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, living in a 143-square-foot house isn’t a political or philosophical move; it’s practical. Though affordability was one reason he wanted to build a tiny house in 2012 (it cost about $50,000 including materials and labor), there was an “element of financial freedom I didn’t expect,” he says.

Austin travels a lot, including a recent five-week trip to India. He uses unpaid leave, something he could not afford to do if he had rent or a mortgage. He also doesn’t spend a lot on household items.

Austin spent six months making weekly trips to Goodwill to downsize from his 700-square-foot studio. “Driving away felt for a few minutes like panic. That panic subsided after a few miles, then it felt really freeing.” By the time he was done downsizing, it took only a few trips on his bicycle to move in.

“There is a trend in tiny-house design in which everything becomes miniaturized. I was more interested in a space that was small but not scaled down,” Austin says. He prioritized the kitchen counter over clothing storage, extending the plywood countertop into the space that originally was going to be a four-foot closet.

Natural light was also important to Austin. “I put in five big windows and a huge skylight over the loft. I didn’t want the house to feel tiny,” he says.

The rustic and industrial house has charred western red cedar siding installed on the vertical. The small living room has bench seating on both sides with storage underneath. The kitchen countertop is butcher block with a matching table across the aisle. He stores his bicycle on brackets above a window.

The house was originally part of Boneyard Studios, a group of tiny homes in the Stronghold area of the District that broke apart in 2014. It is now parked at a friend’s house in the Ivy City neighborhood.

Tiny-home living surprised Austin “by how not surprising it is,” he says. “There’s just less walking between different parts of the house.”

Silver Spring resident Nina Patel writes about home design and housing, and contributes to Date Lab.

More resources for tiny-house living

Tiny house plans:

http://www.houseplans.com/exclusive/lester-walker

Tiny house blog:

http://tinyhouseblog.com/

Comet Camper blog and downsizing course:

www.cometcamper.com

www.cometcamper.com/e-courses

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