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Sunday, Apr 30, 2006

Design

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IDEAS

These houses are little in a big way

By CRAIG LeMOULT
Columbia News Service

When Gregory Johnson says he lives in a tiny house, he's not kidding. His entire house — which includes a bed, bathroom, dining room table and kitchen — is just 7 feet by 10 feet.

"On vacation most people would love to go and live in some little cottage somewhere" said Johnson, who lives in Iowa City, Iowa. "Nobody ever thinks to live like that on a day-to-day basis. But I try to live every day as though it's a vacation."

In an America known for its growing inventory of McMansions, some homeowners like Johnson are opting to live in houses without an inch of unused space.

Bigger than a child's playhouse but much smaller than a typical Manhattan studio apartment, the house the 41-year-old built and has lived in since 2003 features metal roofing, exposed stud interior walls and red oak flooring.

The house, which is on wheels and is parked in the backyard of his parents' house, has electricity and running water, but Johnson chooses not to use them. Instead, he showers at his job each morning and lights the place at night with the LED light from the front of his bicycle. The house has high ceilings and a sleeping loft, which make it feel more spacious, he says.

Johnson, a technology



Photos from Gregory Johnson

Gregory Johnson's 70-square-foot house has electricity and running water, but he chooses not to use them. His tiny house includes a kitchen, right, and dining room table.



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consultant, is the founder of the Small House Society (www.smallhousesociety.org), which has a small but growing mailing list of more than 200, including architecture firms and urban planners. The group's monthly e-mail newsletter offers tips on everything from housing code battles to homeowners insurance, two common stumbling blocks for enthusiasts.



Many owners of tiny houses are driven by a commitment to preserve the environment. Fewer building materials are wasted in building small houses, they point out, and the houses use little energy.

The biggest hurdle in getting homebuyers to warm to the idea of tiny houses is that the dwellings are so, well, tiny. But proponents say the perception of spaciousness can be a matter of design.

"I get claustrophobic in big houses if they're poorly designed or too crowded," said Jay Shafer, who started the Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. and helped Johnson build his little house after building his own 70-square-foot home in 1997. "But I don't get claustrophobic in a small house as long as it's well made, unless there are too many people inside."

Tiny houses actually predate McMansions. Henry David Thoreau lived in a house near Walden Pond in Massachusetts that was just 150 square feet. After the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, mini "earthquake houses" were built to house displaced residents, according to Lester Walker, author of *Tiny Houses: or How to Get Away From It All* (Overlook Press).

In the Carolinas, "pout houses" sprang up in backyards to provide spouses who lost a domestic argument a place to spend the night, Walker says. And in rural Texas, where the family ranch was inconveniently far from church, families would build tiny houses close to town for a place to sleep on Saturday nights, making it easy to get to Sunday services.

According to Walker, the modern-day appeal of tiny houses is simple. "They're cute. They're little baby houses," he said. "You like puppy dogs and babies. It's the same thing."

Houses on steroids

Square footage of the average American house

1950 983

2004 2,314

Source: National Association of Home Builders

Gregory Johnson's 70-square-foot house has electricity and running water, but he chooses not to use them.

Tiny houses were built to house displaced persons after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco.

Johnson's tiny house includes a kitchen and dining room table.

Photos from Gregory Johnson

Overlook Press



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