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## Anti-McMansions have every comfort of home

**By Craig LeMoult**

Columbia News Service

Published March 31, 2006

When Gregory Johnson says he lives in a tiny house, he's not kidding. His entire house--an attractive chalet with a bed, bathroom, dining room table and kitchen--is just 7 feet wide and 10 feet long.

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

As the American landscape is increasingly peppered with overgrown palaces that many call McMansions, homeowners like Johnson have opted for the opposite extreme. These houses aren't just small, they're tiny. And unlike the denizens of cramped apartments in cities, the inhabitants of tiny houses choose to live in them not despite, but because of their miniature size.

The last half decade has seen American houses beef up like baseball players on steroids. According to the National Association of Homebuilders, the average American house in 1950 had a total floor area of 983 square feet. By 2004, that number had more than grown to 2,314 square feet. Organizations such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation worry that historic neighborhoods are being compromised as homes are torn down to make way for houses two or three times larger.

Homeowners like Johnson share that frustration and prefer 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 back yard of his parents' house, has been dubbed the "mobile hermitage." It has electricity and running water, but he 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 consultant, is the founder of the Small House Society, 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.

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

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"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. Author Lester Walker features Thoreau's diminutive house and more than 40 others in "Tiny Houses: or How to Get Away From It All" (Overlook, \$35).

Following the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, mini "earthquake houses" were built to house displaced residents, according to Walker. In the Carolinas, "pout houses" sprang up in back yards to provide spouses who lost a domestic argument a place to spend the night. In some of the more rural areas of Texas, where the family ranch was 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."

For others, the draw of tiny houses is far more practical. They can provide a housing alternative when there are no other options.

After Julie Martin's home in Bay St. Louis on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, she lived on a FEMA-sponsored cruise ship for 4 1/2 months. When she heard about Shafer's tiny houses, she knew she had found the way to have a private space she could call home until the reconstruction of her community was complete, a process that could take years. Her tiny house arrived in late February.

"I love it! It's wonderful!" she said. "I could live in this for a long time."

Before the hurricane, Martin had a business restoring the grand historic homes for which the region is known. Her own home, built two years before George Washington's inauguration, was the oldest on the Gulf Coast, she said, until it was washed away by the storm. With her home and business destroyed and the area in what she calls "survival mode," Martin saw a business opportunity in tiny homes. She worked with Shafer to design a special Gulf Coast model of a tiny house, with a front porch, asymmetrical windows and doors, porcelain faucet handles and other details typical of the area's old homes.

The houses may be small, but Martin says they have two details she deemed essential: a full bathtub and a walk-in closet.

Because they're built to last and can be set on property later as a guest cottage, Martin says the tiny houses, which start at \$37,000, will appreciate, unlike a trailer. She says inquiries are already starting to pour in.

"It's just cozy. It has a little homey cabin feeling," she said, speaking on her cell phone from inside her brand-new miniature house. "It's the anti-FEMA trailer."

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