



This home was built by Wishbone Tiny Homes of Asheville.

Small and tiny houses

▣ BY OLGA RONAY ▣

All of a sudden there's lots of small talk. Small and tiny houses are everywhere — on TV, in the movies, in the blogosphere, at conferences. Maybe there's even one near you.

Not that living small is something new. Historically there's a long tradition of people living in small dwellings, including movable ones. Apartments in cities like New York and San Francisco tend to be small — even more so in European and Asian cities. Call it a response to the financial crisis, or to the ever-expanding size of new houses (averaging 983 square feet in 1950; 1,780 square feet in 1978; now 2,662 square feet), but there's something about the idea of smaller houses that has caught the imagination of Americans lately.

How big is small? Most define

small as 400 to 1,000 square feet. Houses under 400 square feet are considered tiny. RVs and tiny houses on wheels may be even smaller; some are less than 100 square feet. For comparison, a 2-car garage is about 440 square feet.

Why build small?

The advocacy group Small House Society cites "... economic conditions, concern about the environment, and a desire for simple more effective living." For some, it's an opportunity to build their own home — and perhaps move it if work, family, or curiosity beckon.

For Laura LaVoie and her husband Matt, it was all of the above. They live in Madison County in a 120 square-foot house they built themselves. "I had been working in a career for 15 years that I was good at but didn't find fulfilling," she says. "At the same time, I had mounting

debt and felt trapped. I needed something to give me confidence to make major changes in my life. The tiny house was just the catalyst. It gave me the opportunity to reduce my expenses, pay off my debt, and quit my job to pursue a new career in freelance writing, something I had always wanted to do."

Who's living small? A poll by Ryan Mitchell of The Tiny Life found that all age groups are well-represented in the tiny house community. Millennials, along with Baby Boomers, make up the majority of Wishbone Tiny Homes' clients. Owner Teal Brown says, "The Millennials are looking for an affordable first home option, while the Boomers are looking to simplify and downsize. Within these groups it's mostly women and couples who are interested."

The movement for smaller hous-

es got a big boost with Sarah Susanka's 1998 book, *The Not So Big House*. "Build better," she counseled, "not bigger." Builder Jeremy Stauffer of Nanostead agrees, noting "Building small allows you to become really creative in small ways. While building something really neat that would go into a large home might be cost prohibitive, those options can be feasible with a very small space."

Inspired by small houses he'd seen in Seattle, Barry Bialik started Compact Cottages Company in Asheville in 2008. While remaining conscious of affordability, he incorporates a number of green features. All are site-built on a foundation, with floor plans ranging from 768 SF to 960 SF—and "growable" he says.

Asheville's Wishbone Tiny **continues on page 25**

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Small homes as urban infill

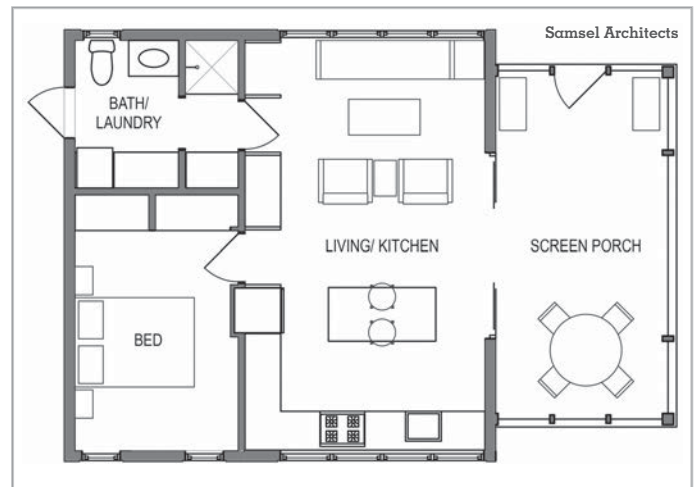
□ BY MARGARET CHANDLER □

As Asheville's population grows, housing in the urban areas becomes more difficult to find. Small homes provide an excellent opportunity to take advantage of smaller infill lots within these urban areas. Where an average-sized new home would completely cover these lots, a home with a smaller footprint can provide a balance between interior square footage and usable outdoor space.

Samsel Architects recently com-

pleted a small home on a sloping tenth-of-an-acre lot, located a block from Haywood Road in downtown West Asheville. The 816- square-foot home includes an ample kitchen that is open to the living/dining room, a bedroom, full bath/laundry and full-height multipurpose loft. The homeowners initially wanted to build even smaller, but the usable square footage needed to be increased so they could secure a home loan.

ous, and a screened porch expands the living area and provides an extra 200 square feet of living space for three seasons of the year. Small homes can have a higher cost per square foot when compared with a typical new home. In a small home, all the functions of an average-sized home are condensed into a much smaller footprint. The economy of scale simply does not work in favor of a small-scale home and as such, the overall cost per square foot can seem high.



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The minimal 24-foot-by-24-foot' x 24' footprint allows for enough yard to provide privacy and separation from the road and adjacent homes, as well as a sunny area for a garden. Non-essential interior space is eliminated, and most spaces serve multiple functions. The open loft above the bed and bathroom has tall windows across all three walls, allowing a view of the sky from the living area. Large windows and a light interior color palette help the space feel gener-

This is offset by the fact that there is far less home to frame, insulate, and finish out, which can often allow for small upgrades — a high-end shower, for example, is more financially feasible if there is only one to be built.

Building smaller homes within the existing urban infrastructure presents many advantages. These types of homes grant more people access to downtown and other walkable community amenities, while also helping to preserve the surrounding landscape by reducing residential construction sprawl. Small homes are not for everyone, but can be an excellent solution for urban living.

Margaret Chandler is a nearly-licensed intern architect with Samsel Architects. She has worked in sustainable design since earning her degrees at Clemson University, and briefly lived in a treehouse off the grid in Austin, Texas. Margaret currently serves on the WNCGBC Board of Directors and the AIA AVL Executive Committee.

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Homes, led by father and son team Gerry and Teal Brown, builds custom houses ranging from 150 to 1,000 square feet, both on trailers and on foundations. Brown says building small and green presents both opportunities and challenges. "We focus on energy efficiency because it is the most impactful over time due to low energy consumption. Indoor air quality is probably the biggest challenge. Small, tight spaces are subject to moisture in the form of condensation."

Many residents of smaller houses find that having less indoor space opens up a bigger world beyond their doors – both literally and figuratively. Small houses are often designed to take advantage of outdoor space, whether decks, or gardens, or surrounding natural areas. And it's not only connections with

which allow for one smaller residential structure (such as garage apartment) to be built next to or within a single-family house. The changes will make ADUs legal on more city lots, while capping size and height to increase compatibility with neighboring houses. As it updates its comprehensive plan over the coming years, Asheville will be considering smaller houses as one way to increase affordable housing, according to planner Vaidila Satvika.

As for the future of small houses, Brown hopes "... to see more legal parking options open up for the tiny homes on wheels. More financing options would also be great. Building standards need to be a part of that discussion." Stauffer agrees about financing options, but also hopes that as smaller houses enter the mainstream "there will be more interaction between small-scale farming and gardening."



LaVoie residence (above). Green Dreams photography

What are the rules?

Four different types of rules may apply to small and tiny houses. Building codes set a minimum size for dwelling units. In North Carolina the minimum is 120 square feet – provided that other code requirements including construction standards, mechanical systems, and energy are met. In addition, many cities and counties have local zoning codes, which may require a larger minimum house size than the building code does, may limit where smaller houses can be built, and in the case of houses on wheels, where and how long they can be parked. Yet another set of standards may come from deed restrictions, which may vary from subdivision to subdivision. Finally, construction standards for RVs and tiny houses on trailers may be regulated under RV standards, which include a maximum width of 8.5 feet for travel on roads. Structures certified as RVs may be located wherever RVs are allowed by local zoning or deed restrictions.

the natural world that are strengthened. LaVoie says, "I have been most satisfied, and surprised, by the way that the tiny house has facilitated my connection to community." Jay Shafer, who jump-started the tiny house movement with a single tiny house on wheels, is now developing a community in California where tiny houses can be part of a larger context. Several tiny-house communities have been started as a way to house formerly homeless people and address challenges of affordable housing.

A member of the Asheville Small Home Advocacy Committee, LaVoie says, "I would like to see small and tiny homes recognized by cities and municipalities as one of many paths toward affordable housing." In a move supported by LaVoie's committee, the city of Asheville recently adopted changes to its Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) provisions,

Thinking small? "Try a few out on Airbnb," advises Brown. Then tap into the knowledge of the very active and very helpful community of people who support living smaller.

Jay Shafer, in a documentary produced by faircompanies.com, says, "I want to make it clear that I'm not talking about trying to shove every family of four into 120 square feet. When I talk about small houses, I'm talking about houses where all the space is being used and used well. When you get rid of all the stuff you aren't using or don't need, it's easier to see where your happiness lies." Good advice for a house of any size!

Olga Ronay is a city planner and co-founder of High Cove, a North Carolina mountain community with a focus on the arts, environmental stewardship, and lifelong learning. High Cove welcomes tiny, green-built, well-crafted houses—along with their small and medium-size brethren.



Wishbone Tiny Homes.

