

HOUSING OBSERVER

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Credit: Full Moon Tiny Shelters, Nova Scotia

Tiny Houses

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1 Introduction

An internet search on tiny houses will bring up a myriad of websites with enthusiasts describing their transition to the tiny house lifestyle, and showing off the tiny house they built. Companies and individuals are selling design plans and offering to build them. There are numerous blogs to share information and experiences and to enable linking up with others interested in forming tiny house communities. There are also several TV series focusing on the experiences of enthusiasts trying out the tiny house lifestyle.

The “tiny house movement” while finding its inspiration in the mobile self-contained tiny home on wheels has had an influence going beyond this. Pictures of attractive tiny homes with innovatively designed and furnished interiors to maximise space have heightened interest in the merits of living small at some stage, and in some circumstances, in the life cycle. Examples include micro-apartments for young professionals in the city, small granny flats in the garden for a relative (e.g. parent or adult child), transitional accommodation for the homeless currently sleeping out, and laneway housing and other small accessory dwelling units.

This article will focus primarily on the tiny house on wheels, and initial exploratory efforts to create tiny home communities. Subsequent articles will look at some of the other possible more mainstream uses of tiny self-contained dwelling units.



Figure 1 A Tiny House on a driveway in BC.
Credit: Nelson Tiny Homes, Nelson, BC.



2 Design considerations

A tiny house on wheels differs from a recreational vehicle (RV) in that it is typically intended for a year round, long-term living. It looks like a regular house – but in miniature. Since the plan is normally to move it only infrequently, there is not the same requirement for very lightweight materials in its construction as there is for RVs, and many are built to standards of durability and quality comparable to regular homes.

Tiny houses are narrow – typically, Canadian ones are 2.6 metres (8 ft 6 in) wide, this size being dictated by the limitations on width to enable them to be transported by trailer on public roads without a special permit. Similar restrictions also determine the usual height – 4.15 metres (13 ft 6 in). Lengths typically range from as little as 2.43 metres (8 ft) to 7.9 metres (26 ft). With lofts, this can give a usable square footage of over 300 square feet (28 square metres).

Due to their small size, the challenge in design is to maximise available space. Ways of achieving this can include:

- Furniture/fitings that serve more than one purpose
- Tables, or even beds, hinged to walls, which can be raised flush with the wall
- Storage areas under furniture
- Flooring that can be lifted to expose storage space
- A loft, or even two, for sleeping or storage
- Compact composting toilets



Figure 2 Maximising space usage.

Credit: Nelson Tiny Homes, Nelson, BC.



Since buyers of tiny homes often want to customise the interior themselves, or even install their own doors and siding, some manufacturers will offer more than one package, with different levels of completion, ranging from just the framing and sub floor on a trailer, to a fully equipped model.

While tiny homes are considerably cheaper than larger homes, the cost per square foot may be quite a lot more. Typically, costs range between \$20,000 and \$45,000, but depending on the quality of construction, size and fixtures, may be as high as \$90,000, and some claim to have completed a self-build for under \$10,000.

Tiny houses typically weigh in the region of 2,000 to 4,500 kilograms, (approximately 5,000 to 10,000 lbs). A tiny house trailer with the appropriate load rating, brakes and lights can add close to 1,000 kilograms (or 2,000 lbs) to the weight being hauled, and the additional cost can add \$5,000 to as high as \$10,000.

3 Why the interest?

Many advocates see tiny house living as a relinquishing of the acquisitive lifestyle – characterised by the accumulation of possessions, and as a return to a simpler and decluttered existence. They see it as a responsible environmental choice, its construction involving the consumption of much less raw materials, less waste, and less space. Mobility is important to many, which is one reason why tiny houses are commonly built on a trailer.

Those describing the merits of tiny houses often cite the lower costs including taxes and maintenance requirements that enable them to spend less time earning money, and less on housekeeping, giving them more leisure to enjoy the simple things in life—socializing, enjoying nature, volunteering, etc.

4 Impediments to tiny houses

Tiny houses on wheels are currently not a category of dwelling unit which is recognised separately in municipal, provincial or federal legislation, thus the distinction between them and regular homes, recreational vehicles (RVs), and mobile homes is blurred. Officials at the various levels therefore may differ in what category of legislation they consider them, depending on the particular circumstances, but whichever is used, the corresponding building codes, standards, zoning restrictions and other municipal regulations mean that finding a place to legally park a tiny house for living in can be a major challenge. Aside from prohibitions on permanent residence in an RV, obstacles may include a minimum floor area (for example, 950 square feet in RI zones in Halifax), minimum lot sizes, and required connections to municipal services.



Zoning bylaws and provincial codes vary, as do interpretations, attitudes towards tiny houses across jurisdictions, and openness to considering variations in the rules, or even new legislation in support of them.

While RV parks and mobile home parks may appear to be an obvious choice to place a tiny home on wheels, the fact that tiny houses are usually not built to the respective Canadian Standards Association (CSA) codes in a factory certified to build to these standards can make even this option a non-starter for some parks.

Investment potential of a tiny house is also limited, given uncertainty about how long it will last, and code, zoning, certification and safety issues. These factors also make lenders unwilling to provide financing, and make fire insurance policies extremely difficult to obtain. Connections to local services such as water, hydro and internet may also not be available.



Figure 3 Winterized Tiny House in the Nova Scotia countryside.

Built on a 20 foot trailer with a 3 foot extension.

Credit: Full Moon Tiny Shelters, Nova Scotia



5 Factors to consider

Lack of private space, or room for children to play, do their homework or invite friends over limits the suitability of tiny houses for families.

Alongside the enthusiastic blogs of tiny house dwellers, there are in fact tales of those who abandoned the tiny house lifestyle, getting tired of bumping into housemates, and finding it too stressful¹.

Enthusiasts in the U.S. often cite the incentive to spend more time outside and connect with nature – tiny houses are shown surrounded by grassy meadows, with seats on the veranda. While this matches well for a tiny house as a seasonal dwelling, weather considerations in Canada would, for some, dampen the attractiveness of a tiny home as a year round abode in the countryside.

6 Tiny house communities

Those interested in tiny house *communities* see them as an opportunity to be with others with similar values and interests – in a place where they don't have to worry about being asked to move on by zealous officials. Joining together as a group can also provide support in the effort of convincing municipalities to provide the necessary zoning as well as in raising funds to purchase land and create common facilities.

Even in the U.S., where the movement first emerged, tiny house communities are mainly in the planning stage and double as eco villages, located in rural settings. They predominantly cater to people seeking a less regulated lifestyle, and a do-it-yourself ethos, wanting to build a small home that matches their own personality and is environmentally friendly.

In August, 2015, the City of Rockledge in Florida broke new ground in the U.S. by creating a new use within two existing zones, known as “pocket neighbourhoods”, specifically for tiny houses and with provision for tiny houses on wheels. Pocket neighbourhoods would have a minimum of 4 tiny houses and a maximum of 12. Up to 25% can be tiny homes on wheels. Minimum house size is 170 square feet (although the maximum is 1,100) and minimum lot size is 1,200 square feet. Connections to municipal services are also required. Detailed regulations govern other aspects, including setbacks, width, height, trailer specs, tie down requirements for tiny homes on wheels, certifications, and submission of detailed building plans².

¹ See <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/home-and-garden/architecture/teeny-house-big-lie-why-so-many-proponents-of-the-tiny-house-movement-have-decided-to-upsize/article28035056/>

² For the detailed regulations, go to: <http://americantinyhouseassociation.org/model-zoning-for-tiny-houses-from-rockledge-fl/>



In Canada, there are only a few examples of emerging tiny house communities. One of these is Bluegrass Meadows Micro Village near Terrace, BC, which was opened by Hummingbird Micro Homes in October 2015. Residents can rent a tiny house there, buy one from them, or bring their own tiny home. Services, including water, septic, and snow removal are available.

Another tiny/small house community getting off the ground in Canada is Les Hameaux de la Source at Lantier, a small municipality an hour and a half north of Montréal. To address population decline and revitalize Lantier, the municipality approved a sustainable housing development for small and tiny homes. Residents can buy a dwelling unit from the developer, Habitat Multi Generations (HMG), or purchase a lot and build their own. To kick this off, Canada's first Tiny House Festival was held at Lantier in 2015, with an attendance of 7,000 people.

Other municipalities across Canada are showing an interest in tiny house communities as a way of increasing the supply of affordable housing options. Among these is Yellowknife, where councillors voted unanimously that city staff look at ways to enable the creation of a tiny house community, including zoning and bylaw changes, exploring location possibilities as well as seeking community input³.



Figure 4 Lining-up at the Lantier Tiny House Festival.

Credit: Kimberley Mok. From www.treehugger.com/tiny-houses/tiny-house-festival-canada-lantier-quebec.html.

³ To view the presentation to Yellowknife Council and the subsequent discussion, see https://youtu.be/_K0acSRvj84



7 The future of living small

Living in a tiny house on wheels can have its frustrations as evidenced by newspaper articles on tiny house dwellers being required to move on. Existing legislation and codes were written before the modern day tiny home was conceived, putting it in a somewhat grey area legally. This gives rise to differences across and within provinces and municipalities as to how to treat them.

Perhaps the biggest impact of the tiny house movement will be that it has helped to legitimise (and glamourise) living in small spaces as an option for those whose life style or particular circumstances make it a viable and attractive choice. The tiny house movement, with its pictures of attractive, and liveable tiny houses has thus helped dissociate the image of very small homes from that of shantytowns and shack living. This has contributed to an increasing willingness of municipalities to review bylaws that set minimum dwelling sizes.

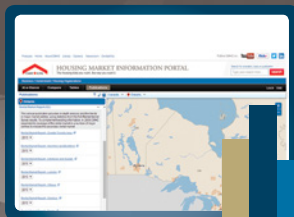
Similarly, municipalities are warming to the idea of laneway housing and other forms of small accessory dwelling units on existing city lots as sources of affordable housing. In addition, the aging of the population will continue to fuel demand for small garden homes so that seniors and adult children can live affordably in proximity to family.

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