

Tiny houses—the big idea that could take some heat out of the housing crisis

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If you could have a new home, exactly to your specification for about a year's average salary wouldn't you take it? Many people, in the US, UK and Europe want to find an alternative housing solution that is cheap and mortgage free but also ecologically sustainable. The solution may be to build so-called "tiny houses" – very small dwellings, often built on trailers, that make the most of unused, unwanted or free sites in the city or country.

The tiny [house](#) is, indeed, tiny. It comes in at less than 25 square metres, but is able to provide comfort and security at minimum cost. These are primarily wooden buildings and can be bought ready-to-use or can be assembled by their future occupant. For as little as [£15,000](#), you can buy a kit, or for up to [£50,000](#) you can get a fully assembled and fitted-out home for two.

Because of their size they can be built on a steel-framed base similar to a trailer or caravan, meaning they can be mobile and therefore capable of use on temporary sites. They are usually single-space dwellings, sometimes with an open loft for sleeping reached by a ladder or steep stair with a shower room below. Most people would choose to set up a permanent or temporary connection to conventional services, but you can also go "off-grid" with solar panels, wood burners, and bottled gas for energy needs and chemical toilets or outhouses for sanitation.

Cutting back

There are now so many tiny house enthusiasts that it can justifiably be described as a movement, with online forums for practised and aspiring builders to share ideas and experiences. These houses are both cute and eccentric. Perhaps they [tap into a common aspiration](#) that people had as children to build a fort, a tree house, or a den. However, they also meet the deep human need to find a home that is just right for us. For those who have built their own Tiny House there is a special sense of connection to something made by their own hand, tuned to their own needs, even if they have used other people's plans and commercially available components.

Tiny house advocates are attracted for both practical and cultural reasons. Although the idea of sorting out your main living expense for the price of a family car is undoubtedly a key motivation, it is also about empowerment of the individual to step outside the corporate idea that

"bigger and more expensive is better". Tiny house owners no longer aspire to an island kitchen unit or a wide screen TV in the basement, and it's fair to say that buying stuff slows right down when you have nowhere to put it.

It is also about environmental responsibility and sustainable living. These buildings, simply because of their size, use considerably less energy both in their construction and running costs. The inclusion of other simple efficiencies such as LED lighting, super-insulation, and water reclamation simultaneously boosts ecological credibility and lowers monthly bills.

A sustainable life

We might think that this sort of living stems from ultra-modern, post-capitalist thinking, but in truth, it isn't a new concept. The historic roots of the tiny house movement are in the traditional buildings that 17th-century settlers first built when [homesteading North America](#) and before that in earlier [European rural precedents](#). These were simple, often one room buildings, built on minimal stone foundations and made from local timber hewn to shape.

The modern versions are often built to the same or better construction standard as full size houses, but contemporary American tiny house owners relate to the early settlers' way of life using minimal resources, and to Henry David Thoreau's book [Waldon: A Life in the Woods](#), an important and influential record of the author's experiment to live a sustainable life.

However, there are hurdles to overcome in tiny house living. A major issue is identifying suitable and available sites. In both Europe and [North America planning legislation](#) is clearly aimed at conventional buildings with expensive, long-term connections to services such as water supply,

drainage, electricity and gas. Obtaining permission to set up a tiny house in an urban area close to employment and resources isn't easy.

In the UK, the problem can be even more difficult with [planning permission](#) hard to obtain unless the building type meets recognised size, type and materials guidelines. The mobility aspect of many tiny houses can be a bonus here as in theory it enables owners to take advantage of temporary sites with the capacity to relocate when permission expires, or their requirements change.

The crucial question, of course, is whether the tiny house helps solve the larger housing problem in the UK, where housing charity [Shelter estimates 250,000 dwellings](#) are needed each year. It is a possibility if planning restrictions on dwelling size and typology can be relaxed and construction companies are willing to take on such low cost work on the small sites these buildings can utilise. However, a fundamental problem of providing any affordable accommodation in property hotspots would also need to be addressed by government legislation, ensuring these desirable little residences were only occupied by their owners and not gobbled up by absentee investors.

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