

Living Little, Living Large

BY CHARLES FINN

ALITTLE OVER TEN YEARS AGO, I sat down at a friend's kitchen table to sketch the first drawings of my new home. A self-taught woodworker and modest carpenter, I planned to build it myself.

At the time, I had just come off the road, a long, hard, atypical journey, the last bit of which saw me hitchhiking out of Alberta, Canada, to Missoula, Montana—a place I had never been. In less time than it takes to grow a beard, I could see I was going to like the place: its friendly bike lanes and barmaids, bookstores and brewpubs, the changing light on Mt. Jumbo. But I had no income, no job, and only the promise of a house-sitting position for the winter. Taking a long swig of beer, I wrote my notes for my new home on a large yellow legal pad. Given the situation, and like my journey, they were far from the norm.

I've never been able to trace to its roots my liking for small places. Perhaps it's because I'm of small stature myself, vertically challenged as they say, 5' 7" on my good days. "Small is beautiful" is a dictum I often heard growing up in Vermont, a state that prides itself on its smallness (if it was pressed flat, the joke goes, it would be the size of Texas). Perhaps such thinking leaked into my subconscious. Later on, I found living



TOM ROBERTSON

Right: Finn in his first cabin.

Inset: Finn's second Montana home sported a second story.





Reducing the impact: reclaimed materials and a woodstove.

in dorm rooms in university didn't bother me, at least the size of the rooms didn't, and that the three years I spent in Japan in my 20s suited me fine, the diminutive size of nearly everything there a nice change. In Japan, I liked the sparseness of the rooms, too—the aesthetic of less. It would color my thinking for years, and continues to do so.

That afternoon in Missoula, half drunk on Moose Drool, I listed the attributes my home needed to have. First and foremost it needed to be small—very small—small enough to be portable, something I could build on a trailer and pull with a pick-up. Practicality dictated it not be plumbed, and I chose not to wire it, preferring to live by the light of oil lamps as I had in the past. Good fortune smiled on me in the form of Heritage Timber, a salvage and reclaimed lumber company 40 minutes east of Missoula in Potomac. The cabin I was slated to house-sit was there and belonged to Gary Delp, owner of the company. With a generosity that exceeded even

rural standards, he allowed me full access to his wood yard and woodworking shop, saying I could use any discarded, oddball or short piece of wood I could find, from 1x4s to 4x4s and beyond—all for free. The only other notes I wrote that day consisted of “wood stove” and “wide windowsills,” the former for obvious reasons, the latter for my cat so he could sit and look out.

The definition of microhome varies. What I drew up was 98 square feet. To put that in perspective, Thoreau (hero that he was) lived in a whopping 150 square-foot cabin. God knows what he did with all that room. In more recent years, 2007 to be exact, the average square footage of a new, single-family home built in the U.S. came in at 2,521, its highest ever. It's down slightly from that now, in the ballpark of 2,400. Meanwhile, in 2000 and unbeknownst to me, something called the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company popped into existence—and a movement was born. Living off-the-grid as I was, it took a while before word got to me. But by then it didn't matter. I was an old hand.

That winter, I built my house—cabin really—and in the spring Gary was kind enough to let me move it onto a corner of his property among a beautiful stand of ponderosa. Without fail, everyone who came to visit raved about the cabin, the newly refinished, reclaimed lumber lending it an instant charm, they said. It made it look like it had

been there for years. Never a fan of uniformity, I purposefully mixed and matched the species and widths of the interior paneling, painstakingly giving it another layer of uniqueness. I incorporated crosstrees from telephone poles as exposed rafters (insulator holes and all), and I made the door a head-bumping four feet tall, a throwback to the Japanese teahouses I'd been in with their squat doors designed so Samurai had to leave their weapons, and hence their violence, behind. The result of these features was that the cabin became an extension of me, of my personality and philosophy—exactly what a home should be. The reality of living little, however, I warned my guests, is not for everyone, but if they could learn to pare down, embrace the idea that less was more, the joys they experienced would far, far outweigh any inconvenience they might encounter.

Like many bachelors before me, I bathed in the Blackfoot river and bummed showers. I built an outhouse with a maple

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floor and windows on three sides. I chopped wood, carried water, learned the birds and forgot about nearly everything else. I loved it. My cabin was not only a physical structure, but a psychological one, a guardian of identity. As time went on, I felt my sense of self shrink (in a good way), congeal, as if to fit the space I was in. I enjoyed the compactness involved and the discipline it required to live in such a small space, the closeness and intimacy it all but forced upon me. I also found living in one room propelled me outdoors more and more, to live under no roof, to wander and walk on a daily basis.

In his famous *The Poetics of Space*, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes, "... if I were asked to name the chief

benefit of a house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the daydreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace." Those long winter evenings, snow drifting down, I spent dreaming, locked in conversation with my cat, or musing on the pop and crackle of the wood in the stove. My thoughts, what few there were, hovered nearby, making it easy to concentrate on things, my writing in particular. I found I did things slower and better, more mindfully than I had before. I did one thing at a time—wash a glass, put a jacket away, shelve a book—and then did the next. I watched myself do these things, too, and was conscious of watching. I felt whole, my life enchanted. Without radio or television

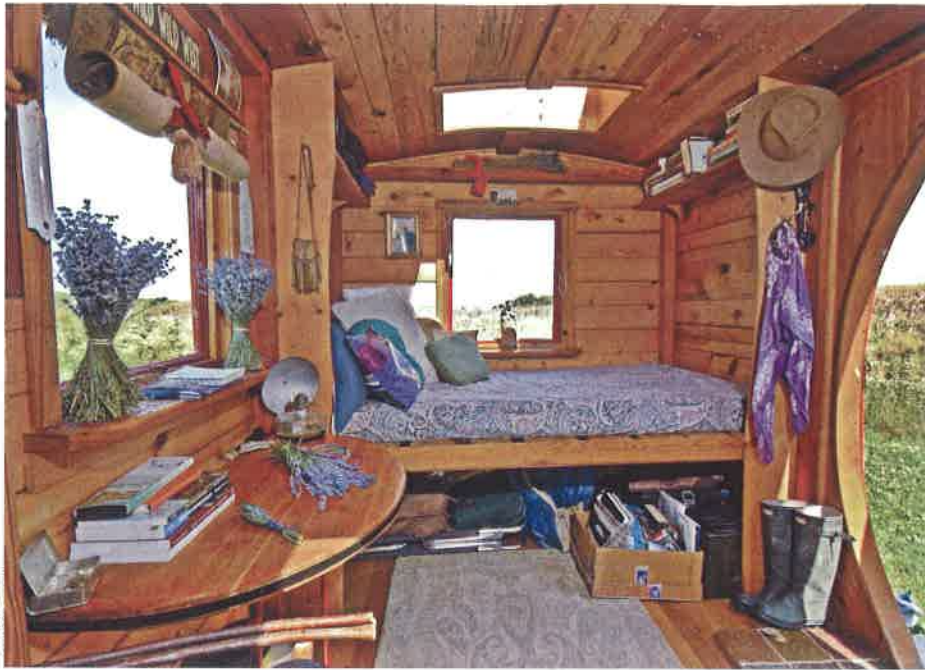
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Author Charles Finn built this house for a friend.

to interrupt my days, my concerns were few. Instead, I read and wrote and went for walks: drunk on the wine of solitude, inebriated by the micro and macrobrews of weather blowing through.

Without fail, the smallness of my domicile played a part in everything I did, and when it came time to go to Missoula, an extreme calmness accompanied me. At the same time I felt raw and vulnerable, susceptible to the vagaries of city life and its fits of traffic. Returning to Potomac, I'd walk up the trail, placing my feet over the hoof prints of deer, and it was like crossing an invisible threshold. Stomping the mud and snow from my boots on the minuscule porch, I'd open the door and reach through the inky black to where I kept a box of Strike Anywhere matches. Rule number one was always return that box to very same spot, or I could spend a good ten minutes groping around. With one

 An advertisement for 'The Big Sky' jewelry. The background is a scenic view of a mountain range under a blue sky with light clouds. In the foreground, several pieces of jewelry are displayed: a necklace with a large dark blue gemstone surrounded by diamonds, several rings with blue and yellow gemstones, and another necklace with three blue star-shaped pendants. The text is written in elegant, cursive and serif fonts.

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match, I'd light each of the three oil lamps before the match went out. Then, bowing to my cast-iron master, I'd crumple paper, break kindling over my knee, and strike another—and that's when I knew I was home.

My cabin, my little house, was an island of sanity. That's how I came to view it. Tacked on the wall I kept a favorite quote from the painter Vincent Van Gogh. In 1888, Van Gogh rented a house at 2 Place Lamartine in Arles, France. That September, in a letter to his sister Wilhelmina, he wrote:

“My house here is painted the yellow color of fresh butter outside with raw green shutters; it stands in the full sunlight on a square which has a green garden with plane trees, oleanders and acacias. And it is completely whitewashed inside, and the floor is made of red bricks. And over it the intensely blue sky. There I can live and breathe, think and paint.”

My cabin was nothing of the sort, material or color-wise, but the feeling was the same. Far from feeling claustrophobic, as might be expected in such a tiny place, I felt expansive, that I could breathe better and more fully, think more clearly, and that I was somehow living better, too. About the same

time, I learned of a story that dovetailed nicely with the Van Gogh quote. In the version I heard, a Native American man is touring a large modern home in the 1800s. The white homeowner is obviously proud, expanding on the house's many virtues, not the least of which is its grandiose size. Coming to the end of his tour and waving his hand magisterially, the owner asks his visitor if he wouldn't “like something like this?” His guest pauses, studying the ground, then lifts his face and looks the homeowner straight in the eye. “I wouldn't have enough love to fill it up,” he says.

I no longer live in the cabin. Love of a different kind filled it up and its single bed just didn't do the trick once I was married. So I sold it and built another, one just slightly larger than the first. It sports a loft with a King-sized mattress and sits on the same spot as the first. My wife and I visit whenever we can, using it as our base when we're in Montana. Over the next few years, I went on to build half a dozen other one-of-a-kind cabins for people who wanted a tiny dwelling. As always I made them entirely from reclaimed wood and materials.

If there was one thing, one overriding factor or thing I felt or came to understand while living in a tiny space, it was that, at least for a time, I had my priorities straight. ▀



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