

Home, squeezed home: Living in a 200-square-foot space



View Photo Gallery — Big plans for 'tiny houses': In an alleyway in the Northeast Washington neighborhood of Stronghold, a row of "tiny houses" is being built to showcase a potential option for affordable housing in the District.

By Emily Wax, Published: November 27

Step into an alleyway in the Northeast Washington neighborhood known as Stronghold, and you will see a vegetable patch, a campfire, a view of the Capitol and a cluster of what neighbors call "those tiny people, building their tiny houses."

The people aren't really tiny, but their homes are — 150 to 200 square feet of living space, some with gabled roofs, others with bright cedar walls, compact bathrooms and cozy sleeping lofts that add up to living spaces that are smaller than the walk-in closets in a suburban McMansion.

"This is the dream," says Rin Westcott, 28, who lives in Columbia and came out on a wintry Saturday afternoon bundled in a flower hat to help her friend Lee Pera with a tiny-house raising.

Pera, 35, wore safety goggles as she treated the cedar boards of her "little house in the alleyway," one of three under construction in what is thought to be one of the country's first tiny-house model communities.

If these affordable homes — which maximize every inch of interior space and look a little like well-constructed playhouses — are the dream, they represent a radically fresh version of what it takes to make Americans happy.

Tiny homes first drew national attention when the [Tumbleweed Tiny House Co.](#), now based in Santa Rosa, Calif., launched the concept in 2000. The idea gained visibility when it was featured in several national magazines and, in 2007, became the focus of the [Tiny House Blog](#), established by self-proclaimed "lover of tiny spaces" Kent Griswold.

The small homes, some on wheels, don't warrant many trips to the Container Store. There are no kitchen islands, three-car garages or living rooms that are never lived in. In fact, their increasing popularity could be seen as a denunciation of conspicuous consumption and a rejection of the idea that more is, well, more.

The group behind Stronghold's tiny-house community calls itself [Boneyard Studios](#). "As property values and rents rise across the city, we want to showcase this potential option for affordable housing," the group writes on its Web site. "We decided to live the questions: Can we build and showcase a few tiny homes on wheels in a DC urban alley lot? . . . Not in the woods, but in a true community, connected to a neighborhood? Yes, we think. Watch out left coast, the DC adventure begins."

There's one problem: The city's zoning laws don't allow residential dwellings on alley lots unless they are a minimum of 30 feet wide, or roughly the width of a city street. D.C. is currently discussing lifting the 30-foot restriction. So, as Boneyard Studios continues to advocate more progressive zoning laws, it is using the property to showcase what could be.

"We want to inspire thinking about this as a possibility in the District," says Brian Levy, 37, one of Boneyard's founding members, who is building his tiny home in Stronghold but currently lives in a rowhouse off of U Street.

Although the diminutive homes are made of high-quality materials, they are priced for a flagging economy. They sell for \$20,000 to \$50,000, less than the down payment on a two-bedroom condo in a trendy D.C. neighborhood.

"They're a statement that no one needs to be trapped in a mortgage they can't afford in a house that's too big for them anyway," says Amy Lynch, a consultant with BridgeWorks, a Minneapolis-based company that studies generational trends. Lynch says tiny houses signal the end of America's love affair with enormous homes. "The baby boomers raised their children. Now, they're looking at all this stuff they have and thinking, 'What has meaning for me now?' Plus, these tiny houses are small enough that you can clean — actually clean them!"

Here in Stronghold, the tiny houses also signal a culture clash between generations with different ideas about which American dream to aspire to.



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Jay Austin sipped Darjeeling tea as he looked over his construction plans. Austin, 23, sees the tiny home he's building as perfect for Generation Y — underemployed, credit-crisis kids who know they will probably never achieve the "Mad Men" —era American ideal of a one-income family with a large house in the suburbs, two kids and two cars.

"I saved for four years for a down payment. Then, I realized I could buy a whole house for that money," says Austin, who works in planning for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "These also give us the luxury of mobility; if I need to move for another job, I don't have to pack a single bag."

Still, some of the neighbors in Stronghold — where 1,800-square-foot renovated rowhouses sell for half a million dollars — are befuddled by the tiny-house movement, largely because they spent their lives trying to upsize.

"A midget could catch the devil in one of them teeny, tiny little houses. I just don't understand the point," says James Harris, 70, who worked for 40 years in the maintenance department for the

Smithsonian Institution and, with his wife, Patricia Harris, 65, a longtime D.C. school administrator, saved to pay off the spacious rowhouse they bought 38 years ago.

"It's our little piece of Washington," Patricia Harris says.

Her family is descended from freed slaves; they moved here from the South with a dream to own land and a house big enough to raise children and entertain guests. "These tiny houses feels like we are going backwards," she says.

Market researchers say first-generation immigrant groups and middle-aged adults in the working and lower-middle classes are still traditionalists, often aspiring to larger homes in the suburbs where there are good schools, which are seen as the most direct path into the middle and upper classes. Their children, however, want to move back to the cities.

From 1950 to 2000, the size of the average American house increased by 230 percent, but home sizes have been declining since 2007, according to "[The Small Spaces Trend](#)," a March 2011 report by the Atlanta-based marketing firm Kleber and Associates.

The 1980s were all about "me architecture and big-hair houses," where space was valued over style and location, says Monty Hoffman, chief executive and founder of PN Hoffman, one of the District's largest condo builders. But today, Hoffman says, micro apartments are seen by many developers as the future of urban centers.

"It's no longer about impressing your friends with your huge 1980s castle, it's more about your lifestyle: What restaurants and fitness centers and community life can you walk to? It's not about driving everywhere and staying inside and spending hours watching TV," Hoffman says. His group is designing 350-square-foot apartments that will be built on the waterfront in Southwest Washington.

It's hard to say how many tiny houses have been built nationally, but Jay Shafer, founder of the Tumbleweed Tiny House Co., says he sold more than 1,500 sets of plans. Shafer's self-published "Small House Book" has sold steadily since it came out four years ago. (Shafer sold Tumbleweed in September and started the Four Lights Tiny House Co., headquartered in Graton, Calif.)

During his first five years, Shafer says, he sold 10 sets of plans per year. But tiny houses' popularity took off after the housing bust and economic downturn in 2008. "Americans still like our stuff big and cheap, so a 100-square-foot house is not for everyone or big families. But people in tiny homes save a ton of money on heating and AC," Shafer says.

Shafer recently moved from his 90-square-foot house to a "by comparison palatial 500-square-foot home" after his wife had their second child.

Despite the fact that tiny houses are, well, tiny, affordable-housing advocates are researching the possibility that attractive micro homes could one day complement or replace stigmatized trailer parks and low-income housing, especially in places such as the District, where they could be built in unused vacant spaces such as alleys.

"I like the concept, and I'm intrigued. But it's so small that it's only good for a single person or a very much-in-love couple," says George Rothman, president of Manna, a nonprofit affordable-housing builder and developer. "There's also the issue of land and zoning, and those are huge issues."

There are no micro loans for micro houses, because most tiny homes don't qualify for mortgages. Some banks do commonly offer personal, unsecured lines of credit, and some tiny-home owners get significant lines of credit from places such as Home Depot. But there's also the issue of buying land.

Boneyard Studios' Levy purchased his 5,200-square-foot lot in Stronghold for \$31,000. There are dozens of vacant lots around the city that are on the market for less than \$50,000, which means the tiny abodes could be a good option for people building affordable housing down the line, Levy says.

So far, he says, the tiny-house trend has drawn a cross section of fans to the Stronghold community — especially young couples who are living with their parents.

Eating a brunch of black-bean burritos on the construction site in Stronghold on a recent Saturday, a couple who hope to build a tiny house in Loudoun County came by for some tips.

Brandon Pilarski, 36, a waiter, and his partner, Leigh Anne Rochelle, 28, a waitress, are living with her parents in Loudoun.

"Just knowing that I don't have to wait 20 years to have a house paid off is really wonderful," says Rochelle, who is working on whittling down her large amount of clothing so it will fit in their new tiny house. But just in case, "we might keep a little storage at my parents' place."

Their dream house may be tiny, but they still live in America, after all.