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MARVELS

A Tiny Revolution

From micro-apartments to folding kayaks, small is big

By HOLLY FINN



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On a smug November Monday—crisp, sunny, 68 degrees in San Francisco—I went kayaking. The bay shimmered as my paddle split the water, and I felt lucky, light, even a little artistic. Such athletic transcendence had nothing to do with me, though. It was my ride: a prototype origami kayak. Yup, origami. It isn't just for paper swans any more.



Inspired by the Japanese art of folding, Oru Kayak is the first completely foldable—and, crucially, unfoldable—vessel of its kind. One sheet of corrugated plastic morphs from a 33-by-29-inch (folded-up) square into a 12-foot-long (stretched-out) boat. In five minutes. As inventor Anton Willis points out, there have been collapsible kayaks before, but they weren't foldable and weren't cheap. (You can

preorder his on Kickstarter for a relatively reasonable \$800). There have been inflatable kayaks, too, "but they're horrible," says Mr. Willis. "They're really shaped like a banana."

The Willis design is elegant, even romantic. At night you could put lanterns inside and—because the plastic is slightly transparent—you'd glow as you row. But it's because the kayak packs so small that it is freeing. You can sling it over your shoulder, take it on the subway, store it in the closet. You can discover, or rediscover, a love of the sea; you can commute by waterway.

Smaller now means more expansive.

There's a proven faith in miniaturization in Silicon Valley, of course. Believers recite Moore's law like the Lord's Prayer. Gordon Moore was the one who rightly predicted the number of transistors on integrated circuits would double every two years, making tiny computer chips ever more powerful. So, yes, we know that the smallest things can expand our world and enhance our life. But beyond computers, it seems, increasingly, that the pee-wee pleases us.

Two weeks ago, the San Francisco board of supervisors approved legislation allowing construction of up to 375 micro-apartments as small as 220 square feet. City code had previously required living rooms alone to be that big. Now the same space would include a bathroom, a kitchen and a 10-by-15-foot living area, for up to two people. (They haven't stipulated the people's size.) This experiment in bantam urbanity maximizes space, allowing more people to live in a city that had priced them out



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Oru Kayak case *TKtk*

comprehend, making us feel more like giants than pawns. The most buoying new book of the holiday season is "Weiwei-isms," a tiddly tome—4 by 6 inches—of quotes from the Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei. ("Say what you need to say plainly, and then take responsibility for it.")

It's human, this impulse to scale down as well as up. When the world moves in startling directions we often turn to the tiny. In the 16th century, the West rose, the Ottoman Empire expanded and Copernicus shocked everyone by suggesting that the sun was the center of things. Meanwhile, miniature portrait painting became the rage. Works as petite as 1-by-1½-inches introduced and connected people, especially suitors, over then-big distances. It was a kind of Match.com, but with wee watercolors. Small was big, and it is again.

of the market.

There are kitschier takes on smallness, too, which tend to be even more delightful. The World's Smallest Post Service transcribes your words into a letter so teensy—just larger than a dime—that the company also supplies a magnifying glass so that your recipient can read them. The new startup Projecteo offers a Lilliputian LED-powered slide projector to display your Instagram photos like an old-fashioned View-Master, but shrunk way down. It's a bitty, nostalgic take on the digital.

Undersized has even become a marketing pitch. Small Business Saturday, an effort on Nov. 24 to sandwich more nutritious local commerce between the big temptations of Black Friday and Cyber Monday (and the new, more altruistic Giving Tuesday) went with the slogan: "Shop Small."

We talk about thinking and dreaming big all the time. We're still American, driving Dodge Rams and ordering "stacks" of pancakes. Our massive debt (\$16 trillion), massive unemployment (12 million) and massive waistlines (36% of us are obese) are, rightly, the issues of the day. We measure success in unfathomable numbers, too: PSY's "Gangnam Style" YouTube video just beat Justin Bieber for most-watched of all time, topping 850 million views.

But we do—and should—love our antidote to the massive: the minuscule. Small things let us focus on what's right in front of us: the present, one manageable corner, objects that we can carry and

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