



# Tiny living: What it's like after the honeymoon period

By Kathleen Pender | June 24, 2016 | Updated: June 25, 2016 2:40pm



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Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle



Ro-El Cordero (left), Jason Schmidt and Andrew Buck explore a tiny apartment during an open house at the Cubix building in San Francisco.

One of my strange obsessions is watching TV shows about people building or buying tiny houses — generally 400 square feet or less.

These shows check back with the tiny-home owners shortly after they've moved in, when they are still infatuated with their adorable doll houses. They never show what happens after the novelty has worn off: Have they divorced, put the dog — or kids — up for adoption, filled their yards with plastic storage sheds, torched the thing?

Curious what it would be like to live long-term in something the size of a dorm room, I spoke with residents of Cubix and the Book Concern Building in San Francisco — two of the nation's oldest tiny-home communities. Both condominium developments were built at the height of the last housing bubble, before tiny living became a cultural phenomenon.

Most of the residents I spoke to said they bought or rented a micro-unit because it was affordable, not to make a statement. But many came to like the discipline and freedom that comes with simpler living.

The Book Concern, at 83 McAllister St. near Civic Center, was originally the home of a Methodist book publisher but was being used as Church of Scientology offices before San Francisco developer Group I converted it to condos. It has 60 units that originally ranged from 260 to 500 square feet. Some owners created additional living space by converting storage lofts into bedrooms.

Group I President Joyce Ou said she wanted to build something that teachers and other middle-income people could buy. The first 13 units sold in late 2006 for \$258,000 to \$458,000. The rest sold in 2007. "My timing was perfect," Ou said.

Timing was worse for Cubix, at 766 Harrison St. in the South of Market area.

Built from the ground up, it has 98 studios ranging from 250 to 350 square feet. The first seven sold in December 2008 for \$245,000 to \$338,000, according to property records. But the housing market collapsed soon thereafter, and the developer went bankrupt. Unsold units were

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foreclosed on, and a few sold for less than \$200,000 in 2010 and 2011.

## **Ignore the haters**

Eric Wolak bought a 258-square-foot unit from the bank for \$259,000 in August 2010. When he saw Cubix, “I thought, ‘This is genius. This was half the condo for half the price,’” said Wolak, 27.

Things got tighter two years ago when his girlfriend, now his wife, moved in. “Our friends thought we were crazy, especially when we got a dog,” said Anna Wolak, 26. They had bets on how long the couple would stay, and “When something came up on Facebook about tiny homes, everyone would send us the article.”

The condo “had a really nice kitchen, a really nice dishwasher, the doors had a nice soft close,” Anna said. “Even though it was small, it was fairly high quality. It was tiny but mighty.”

But it was not without challenges. The two-burner stove “was really a one burner, because if you put a pot on one, you couldn’t fit one on the other burner at the same time,” she said. “Our oven was kind of a convection/microwave oven. We called it the Easy Bake oven.”



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle



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The dining area can be seen, of unit 813, which is an apartment that is currently on the market in the Cubix building, in San Francisco, California, on Sunday, June 19, 2016.

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The couple hosted many dinner parties on the rooftop deck, including a Thanksgiving dinner for 20 people. They used the grills on the roof to cook a turkey and a duck, and did all the sides downstairs, using the stove, the Easy Bake oven and a combination pressure cooker/slow cooker.

The couple recently moved to Seattle, “partly because we were looking for a little slower pace of life and to be closer to nature,” Anna said. They rented a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment with more than 1,000 square feet for about \$3,000 a month. They considered another tiny place, but couldn’t find one with enough room for overnight guests. At Cubix, few friends wanted to spend the night.

The couple **put their Cubix condo on the market** two weeks ago at \$419,00 and accepted an offer last week. The **last unit sold** in the building went for \$420,000 cash, said their Realtor, Pat Patricelli of Vanguard Properties.



Anna's advice for people considering a tiny home: "If you are going to live with somebody else, make sure it's a person you really enjoy spending time with. Make sure you have some way of escaping." The Wolaks added a sleeping loft in the unit for alone time. "Make your purchases wisely," she said, and "don't listen to the haters."



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle



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Cece Lok looks out at the view from the porch of a tiny apartment, during an open house at the Cubix building, in San Francisco, California, on Sunday, June 19, 2016.

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## No pack rat here

Jarrold Aldama has been renting a 330-square-foot unit in Cubix since 2010. "Living in that space has really kept me from collecting (stuff) I don't need," he said. "It helps me lead a very minimal life."

As a busy, social single guy who owns and runs a hair salon, he's not home much. When he wants to entertain, he uses the glass cabanas on the roof. "Downstairs, there is a cafe. If I want something to eat, or just to have more living space, I can use that," Aldama said.

Wayne Patanian bought a 278-square-foot Cubix condo in 2009 for \$220,000. He met another owner at a gathering on the roof and married her in 2011. For six months after the wedding, they used both units. “I enjoyed my little man cave,” Patanian said. But he eventually rented his out and moved into Tara Patanian’s unit.

It took some adjustment. “We liked going into different neighborhoods and picking up trinkets. That’s something we do less and less of,” he said. “But once you are set up, it’s kind of stress-free.”

Patanian leases his old unit for \$2,220 a month. He became the building’s maintenance coordinator and knows most of the residents. He said that living small “was not the original intent for a lot of people,” including himself. “It was like, for 200 grand, I can own a home in San Francisco,” he said.

But now that he’s used to compact living, “I’m part of the movement for sure.” He and Tara went to Portland to learn about building a tiny home on wheels and are looking for land where they could put one.

## Book Concern

The Book Concern Building has a wider variety of floor plans, ranging from studios to two-bedroom units. The most recent sale, in October, was a 270-square-foot unit for \$468,000. The largest unit (678 square feet) sold a year ago for \$720,000.

Looking for something affordable in the heart of the city, Joel Miller bought a 414-square-foot studio in the Book Concern for \$315,000 in 2013. He moved here from New Jersey, where he owns a 900-plus-square-foot condo that he rents out.

When Miller moved into the studio, “I had an anxiety attack. I went from a penthouse condo looking at the Empire State building



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle



Tony Casabat works in his 400-square-foot Book Concern unit, which he bought in part as an

to looking at a wall with bamboo trees.

investment.

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Then I realized, once you fix it up, make it what you want, it's a cool environment," he said.

When you can view your entire house from one spot, "you really embrace the space," Miller said. The downside is "when you see furniture or artwork" that is too big, "you have to compromise."

Miller, a flight attendant, has decided to move back to New Jersey and **has listed his unit for \$499,000**. He considered renting it out, "but I just don't see myself moving back." At age 54, climbing a ladder to his loft bedroom is getting old.

Miki Ilaw solved that problem by installing a \$6,500 spiral staircase in the Book Concern unit she bought in August. She also added \$4,200 worth of closets because "women need closets," she said.

Ilaw once lived in a 5,000-square-foot house but had to downsize after a divorce. She said her real estate agent "kept showing me condos in my price range, but they were boring, boxy apartments." The Book Concern "has a lot of character" although the neighborhood is visited by "homeless and junkies."





Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle



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The view from unit 813, a tiny apartment in the Cubix building, in San Francisco, California, on Sunday, June 19, 2016.

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## Upside potential

Tony Casabat agrees that the neighborhood “is a little tough sometimes, but it’s changing.” He bought a Book Concern unit in part for investment, and the area “has some upside potential.”

Casabat owned a home in Walnut Creek and originally used the unit as a pied-a-terre, but now lives there mostly full time. He sold the Walnut Creek home but still has a place in Palm Springs.

The tiny condo, which he bought in 2013 for \$415,000, “is easy to straighten up,” but “organization is critical,” he said. “Oddly enough, it’s not easy to clean (because) you have to move things around.” On the plus side, “When I travel, the doors close, and there is nothing much left to do.”

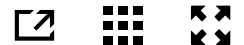
San Francisco developer Patrick Kennedy toured Cubix and the Book Concern Building before



designing his micro-unit apartment complexes, including the Panoramic. The 160-unit building has been rented to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and California College of the Arts for student housing.



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle



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#### IMAGE 1 OF 4

The lofted bedroom is one of the crucial touches in a tiny apartment in the Cubix building, of the nation's oldest tiny-home communities.

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Based on his tours, “we incorporated more closet space,” especially a broom closet, he said. He put in full-size — not bar-size — kitchen sinks and apartment-size — not under-counter — refrigerators. He added larger windows, a desk area and wall space for a TV “so you don’t use up valuable floor space.” He put in good soundproofing between the bathroom and bedroom and between the unit and hallways.

His firm is now developing a complex with 200 tiny, two- and four-bedroom units in San Francisco. “Anyplace with a downtown that’s worth living in without a car, we will see a movement to smaller units to sort of share the wealth,” Kennedy said.

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