

Some Find Living Small Better than Living Large

by Emmet Pierce

Copley News Service If you're looking for an unconventional way to lose weight, Gregory Johnson has a diet plan that could change your entire lifestyle. The 42-year-old technology consultant has lost 50 pounds during the three years he has lived in a miniature home in Iowa City. After years of squeezing into a dwelling only 10 feet long and 7 feet wide, Johnson finds that he no longer has trouble squeezing into his trousers. "I tend to be more active," he explained. "I am not sitting in my house waiting for the laundry to be done. I am getting on my bike and riding to the Laundromat." He also has changed his diet, shunning frozen pizza and ice cream in favor of grains, fruits, nuts and grasses. He insists that scaling back has given him a new sense of freedom. The wood-frame structure, which includes a sleeping loft, covers about 140 square feet. To save space, he has downloaded his reading and music collections into a computer, which runs on batteries. "I don't have electricity," he said proudly.

"I don't have running water. I get my water in containers and it is gravity fed." The rustic cottage sits on a lot shared by his grandparents' house. It can be towed from site to site like a trailer. In fact, it has a lot in common with recreational vehicles. "I've always had a fascination with RVs," Johnson said. "You see how efficiently the space is used. I thought, 'Why don't we design homes that way?'" When you live in a tiny house, no space is wasted. "As soon as I turn around and start working at the desk, the kitchen is the office. There is no duplication of empty floor space. I don't think people are happy with the long list of things they have to stay on top of with maintaining a large home. It's overstressing America." Johnson is bucking the prevailing housing trend. In the early 1950s, 1,000-square-foot houses dominated U.S. residential construction. Dwellings began to grow in the early 1970s. Johnson is one of the founders of The Small House Society, a group that advocates downsizing homes and living in concert with the environment. Although he has embraced the small-home lifestyle, doing so wasn't easy. "I have trouble getting rid of even a Post-it note," he said with a laugh. "I am one of those people who has trouble letting go of things. When you move into a minimalist space, it changes your spirituality. You become, by necessity, less attached to things." Johnson's dwelling was built by himself and Jay Shafer of the Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. Johnson estimated his costs at \$15,000. Prices vary with size and amenities, however. Spending \$30,000 on a small dwelling "would give you an all-season home, as opposed to a summer cabin, with amenities like a restroom and a working kitchen," he said. Johnson isn't alone in his drive to downsize dwellings. Recently, New York architect Marianne Custato won national attention with the 308-square-foot Katrina Cottage. The sturdy dwelling, which has an estimated cost of \$35,000, has been proposed to replace Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers during national housing emergencies. Keeping homes small and efficient improves affordability. Kenneth J. Meinert oversees Operation Home Delivery, Habitat for Humanity's rebuilding effort in Gulf Coast areas damaged by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Plans call for building 1,000 homes through June 30, 2007. Since 1997, Shafer has been building homes ranging from 50 to 750 square feet. According to his Web site, each structure is made to order. The tiny homes include kitchens, bathrooms, sleeping areas and living areas. The Northern California company's Web address is www.tumbleweedhouses.com. More information about The Small House Society is available at www.smallhousesociety.org.

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