

TINY HOUSES SIMPLER, EASIER ON THE ENVIRONMENT¹

Keila Szpallier[©]

The McMansion era seems to be coming to a close, and houses are getting a tad smaller. The reasons are economic, environmental and cultural. Today, the Missoulian introduces readers to some local folks who are proud to be living and working in modest spaces, and provides an overview of the small-house trend from local and national spectators. Come spring, Julia and Chris LaTray plan to break ground on a 400-square-foot studio. The small, straw-bale dwelling will be their home while they build a permanent residence on their Six Mile property. Even the larger home, roughly 1,000 square feet including home offices, won't be big by modern standards. The LaTrays want to design a home for the way they actually live - and not someone else's idea of how they should live. They also want to build small to shrink their carbon footprint and save money.

With energy costs on the rise, Julia LaTray believes smaller homes will become more the norm. "It's going to come down to economics," she said. "People can't afford just what we consider nowadays to be a regular-sized house. It just seems like there's no choice but to build small." Among the most extreme examples of downsizing is the 89-square-foot pad of Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. founder Jay Shafer. That teeny abode in California isn't likely to catch on like wildfire in the Big Sky State, but even here, the McMansion seems to be going by the wayside. Ed Coffman, with Lambros Real Estate, said a few years ago some folks weren't as attracted to a smaller home with fine craftsmanship as they were to a sprawling house. "They wanted to buy the biggest house they could for their money," Coffman said. "We're starting to see that trend change a little bit."

When the market got a boost this spring from the federal tax credit, most of the homes that sold were in the \$200,000 and under range, Coffman said. "Lots of them in that Canyon Creek area sold with the tax credits because people could afford them," he said. These days in Missoula, that \$200,000 benchmark is "the sweet spot." In Canyon Creek, the homes are 1,700 square feet, 1,400 square feet, and many are 1,200 square feet or even smaller. In fact, most of the homes sold in Missoula are in the 1,000-square-foot to 2,000-square-foot range, according to the Missoula Organization of Realtors. This year, they represent 57 percent of the market. "While larger homes are a part of the market in Missoula, the numbers are definitely not the bulk," said Ruth Link, MOR public affairs director.

In 1950, the median-sized new house was 1,100 square feet and would typically have two or three bedrooms, said William Lucy, professor of Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia and author of "Foreclosing the Dream: How America's Housing Crisis is Changing Our Cities and Suburbs." By 2005, the median size had doubled to 2,200 square feet, even as families got smaller, Lucy said. Homes went from having just one bathroom to two bathrooms and maybe more, from small kitchens to big ones, from shared bedrooms by the kids to individual bedrooms, and the houses added rec rooms and offices and studies and sometimes all of those rooms.

Then, in 2007, the average size of a home in the United States peaked at 2,521 square feet, according to the National Association of Home Builders. The association noted the trend

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flattened one year later, and in 2009, it dropped for the first time in decades to an average 2,438 square feet. "There was a steady upswing for 55 years, and then I think it stopped," Lucy said. "So that doesn't really make the point that people are looking for radical changes, but it does suggest that the mood has shifted."

The change reflects economics, but he said it also reflects cultural sensibilities, people's self image and the idea of prestige. Take the idea of automobiles: "Which is more prestigious today? A Ford Expedition or a Mini Cooper?" The tide has changed, and there's a few more people who think highly of being aware of the environment and global carbon dioxide emissions. So the taste in cars adjusts accordingly. "People who are embarrassed by being in the Ford Expedition are increasing, and people who are embarrassed by being in a Mini Cooper are decreasing," Lucy said. "That's sort of a trend, but I think the SUVs still have the majority at the moment. But we'll see what happens."

In the 1950s, the houses in the famous early suburb of Levittown, N.Y., were 800 square feet, and Lucy said 1,400-square-foot homes were considered big at the time. Sustainability clearly plays a role in the shift, however slight, to smaller homes now. "The planet does not need 2,200-square-foot houses as a norm," Lucy said. He believes it's a bit of a stretch to think a complete reversal will take place. The growing number of people 55 years and older want to downsize, but how small will they really go? And Lucy said there's a more challenging question, too. "Where will the smaller housing units be?" he said.

Typically, he said people who downsize don't want to live 20 miles out of town; they want to live in town where they can drive less and walk more. But cities have developed in ways that make it hard to fit new homes that are 800 square feet or 1,100 square feet. That brings up the "granny flat" idea, which makes some people nervous because it might not be "granny" who moves in, Lucy said. It's a debate that's taken place in Missoula and likely will again. Coffman, with Lambros, said builders don't make as much money on the smaller homes. Still, he believes more houses such as those in Canyon Creek will spring up, and in places like the Mullan Road area where there's land. "You'll see those types of clustered developments. You'll see smaller lots in smaller places because of affordability," Coffman said.

For the LaTrays, the move will be to the country. Chris LaTray's parents have land up the Six Mile, and he and Julia will help them out. They expect their living space in the studio to be roughly 300 square feet - since the walls are so thick in straw-bale construction - and they'll share the home with four dogs and two cats while they build their actual house. The larger home will end up with some 1,000 square feet of livable space, and it all will be put to use. "One of the things that we're (planning is not) cutting the house up into different rooms," said Chris LaTray. "It's going to be one big, open space." The only thing that will be sectioned off is the bathroom. That's different, and more efficient, than their current home, a place that's 2,600 square feet. Julia LaTray, a clothing designer, said the dining room functions more as a fabric-cutting room now. "The living room is basically the dog-congregating room - not the people-congregating room," she said.

As they downsize, the LaTrays will make room for the things that are important to them. Chris LaTray is a writer, so the new home will have built-in bookshelves. But the move into a small house will mean getting rid of a lot of stuff, too. "If you have the space, you fill it," Julia LaTray said.