Rafael Chacon and Andy Laue lounge on their deck, drinking tea, completely taken by the view, the stuff of ostentatious Western dream home advertisements — except their deck is attached to a pair of 9-by-14 foot cabins with no running water.

These homes are so small they were rolled here to the Moiese Valley on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana on a pickup’s flatbed.

Called microhomes, the two box-like structures were designed and built by Stevensville writer and woodworker Charles Finn. His inspiration originally came from an off-the-grid cabin he lived in for three years in British Columbia. Finn has crafted six, all told, a minor business that’s more art, he says, than construction. He sells them for about $135 per square foot.

The microhomes are simple yet intricate, tightly crafted from recycled and storied wood, reddened and warm. Some of the wood for the Chacon and Laue homes came from a former goat shed in nearby Dixon. Heritage Timber of Potomac in the Blackfoot River valley supplies most of Finn’s recycled building materials.

Chacon and Laue’s monthly electric bill is about $12 and their entire winter’s gas bill totaled less than $100 (one of the cabins has a small wood stove). The two plan to someday install solar panels and go completely off the grid, Laue says. The sum is an affordable mountain getaway — it helps that Chacon and Laue don’t mind using the neighbors’ outhouse.

“You just don’t want to stamp yourself
too hard into the earth,” Laue adds.
Finn’s microhomes are part of a
global trend of scaling down to live more
cheaply and closer to the outdoors, says
Gregory Paul Johnson, director of the
Iowa-based Small House Society that
dubs itself “the voice of the Small House
Movement.” The homes are imper-
manent and skirt zoning and building
regulations, he says, aligning them with
the ethic of living light on the land.

Johnson lives in a two-story, 7-by-10-
foot microhome, warmed by a boat heater
in Iowa City, built to be a “rustic retreat”
allowing him to “basically be on vacation
every day.” The greatest motivation for
small home dwellers is saving money, says
Johnson, who adds, “Once they acknowl-
edge that it’s a better way to live, they say,
‘Oh, by the way, I’m saving the planet.’”

Chacon and Laue’s microhomes are
on 10 acres facing the massive Mission
Mountains, aglow with March snow. A half-
mile behind them runs the broad Flathead
River. Their neighbors are organic farmers.

Chacon, an art history professor at
the University of Montana, and Laue, a
psychotherapist, live in Missoula, about
an hour’s drive to the south. They come
here on the weekends year-round — toting
15 gallons of water each time — to con-
nect with the land and with each other.

“Our worlds rarely coincide,”
Chacon says. “They coincide out here.”

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A Pair of Microhomes
Square footage: 126 each
Price: $10,000 apiece
Designer/builder: Charles Finn