Small rooms or dwellings set the mind in the right path, large ones cause it to go astray. —Leonardo da Vinci

In the fall of 2002 I came out of the woods of Canada—footsore, forlorn, more than a little brokenhearted—and needed a place to stay. For three years, I'd been living in a 7-by-12-foot “cabin,” a tiny one-room structure built on an old hay wagon and easily pulled by a small pickup. Landless in Montana, but not friendless, I decided I should try to replicate my old cabin and hopefully find a place to park it. At the time I didn't know such structures were coming into vogue, popping up across the country under the title, “microhomes.”

The idea that bigger is better is deeply entrenched in the psyche of our nation, and to live in a cabin 66 square feet less than Thoreau did almost 160 years ago placed me firmly in the camp of eccentrics. Still, I knew the benefits—both financially and spiritually—of living little. I would haul water, chop wood, read by lamplight and use an outhouse. Normally considered privations, I chose to see such activities as benefits, and in this respect my venture proved to be a fantastic success. Stationed in Potomac, my cabin rests in a grove of mature ponderosa pines, floating above the rotation of summer wildflowers and winter snows like a ship upon the seas.

The term microhome, I would discover, is an elastic one. In essence they are complete living spaces, easily portable, spanning less than 100 up to a whopping 1,000 square feet. Depending on the owner’s preferences, these houses—far smaller than the average 2,400 square-foot home built in the United States last year—contain most of the amenities of larger dwellings and can include kitchens and bathrooms. Without foundations they fall into the outbuildings category, neatly making an end-run around building codes.

With a quixotic charm fast disappearing from conventional house construction, microhomes are the antithesis of the trophy home, striking a quiet chord of humility in these super-sized times. More and more, architects and builders like me are designing a wide variety of tiny houses, from high-end designer studios to prefab units that can be assembled in a day. They range from funky to romantic to ultra-chic. Prices stretch from $10,000 to $160,000. For $90,000 you can find yourself in a weeHouse by Alchemy Architects based in St. Paul, Minn., whose 700-square-foot home comes with plumbing, tall glass doors, Andersen windows, laminate flooring, recessed lighting and IKEA cabinets. Used as artist studios, guest houses, second homes or simple getaways, the popularity of microhomes stems from their flexibility, quaintness, and soft impact on the environment and landscape.

In 2004, Lori Farr Campbell of Missoula purchased 20 acres of farmland outside St. Ignatius. At the time, building a full-fledged house was beyond her means. She considered putting up a canvas wall tent, but serendipitously stumbled upon a second microhome I'd made that was on display at the People's Market in Missoula. Constructed entirely of recycled lumber, insulated, and featuring a woodstove, oval door, curved roof and two skylights, it was exactly what she needed.

“Every time I go up there,” Campbell says, “I sit there and I think, ‘What the hell do I have all this stuff down in Missoula for? I don’t even need it.’ I have a two-burner stove, I bring up two gallons of water. I’ve got candles galore. I have jars of food and stuff, and I think, ‘God, I have everything I need right here.’"

When Andrew Luse and Rafael Chacon of Lolo bought property in Moiese, they decided on two microhomes, each 9-by-14 feet, and had them set at right angles with a deck built between them. Wired for electricity and structured for eventual plumbing, they designed the units themselves. To enjoy Montana’s big sky, a 14-foot skylight runs the length of each cabin, while a large window donated by a friend makes up the entire east wall in the other. The first serves as a kitchen and the second as the bedroom. Their living room is the great outdoors.

“In both winter and summer the wonderful thing about them,” says Luse, “is that they create just enough internal space and protection to be comfortable, with forced privation and willing self-denial, and what people need, and what they think they need, are almost always two entirely different things. Campbell and Luse both hope to build larger homes on their property some day, but until then their tiny homes serve as escape pods and bird blinds, sanctuaries and shelter. Microhomes will never have a macro-market, but for some people, size does matter, and living little can mean living very, very large.

More on microhomes

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