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It takes a less-is-more attitude to embrace smaller houses

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

Successful people live in big houses. If you live in a small house, you must be poor or crazy.

Or maybe it's those archaic stereotypes that are crazy, as the virtues of smaller homes become increasingly apparent.

Large homes contribute to global warming, due to all the resources used to build them and fill them with stuff, and all the energy used to heat and cool them.

In these troubled economic times, the savings from buying and living in a smaller home loom large. And more folks are discovering that living in a big house doesn't make them happier.

But the classic American ideal of the big, roomy dream home isn't easy to shake. Even with growing environmental awareness the past few years, homes keep getting bigger. New single-family houses built in the Western U.S. in 2007 had an average size of 2,456 square feet, compared with 2,322 square feet in 2004 and 1,710 in 1985, according to the Census Bureau.

Many experts expect that the new interest in smaller houses — and the current economic slump — will slow down or halt this bulking-up of home sizes.

So, with more people considering this option, what's it really like to live in a small home?

Cozy in Kitsap County

"It's efficient," according to Kinley Deller, a green-building specialist for King County. He and his wife, Patti Pearson, built an 800-square-foot house in 2006 near Kingston in Kitsap County, where they live with their two young daughters.

That efficiency has tangible benefits, since everything in the home is close at hand, and cleaning takes less time.

There's also more of a sense of family community, Deller said, because "we're not spread out throughout the house."

It can occasionally feel like too much togetherness, however, when someone needs more space or privacy, he said. Another downside: "No place to throw everything when company's coming." In their old house they had a backroom for that, but no more.

Not having much room for overnight guests is another issue — both a pro and a con, he said laughing. And their two



Small house resources

- Small House Society: www.resourcesforlife.com/small-house-society
 - Case study — "Built Green" 1,100-square-foot home: www.builtgreenwashington.org/study.php?id=10
 - Sarah Susanka, "The Not So Big House" (Taunton): www.notsobighouse.com
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small children can get a little stir-crazy in the winter.

But overall, Deller said, the environmental, financial and other advantages of their cozy little house far outweigh the disadvantages.

What's a house for?

As more Americans question the prevailing ethic of rampant consumerism (even the hit animated movie "WALL•E" addresses this), the smaller-home movement ties in perfectly.

"A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it," said recently departed comedian George Carlin, in one of his most famous routines. "Your house is a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get — more stuff!"

Deller, a self-proclaimed former pack rat, can relate. His main advice for anyone considering a move to a smaller home: "Get rid of your junk. Focus on the things you need and use in your day-to-day living."

Smaller but not tiny

Most media coverage of the smaller-home movement has focused on itty-bitty houses, such as an Olympia woman's 84-square-foot home. But that obviously is not realistic for most of us. This trend will likely reach its true potential when more people embrace less dramatic downsizing — for instance, when a three-person family chooses a 1,200-square-foot home instead of a 3,000-square-footer.

The Iowa-based Small House Society recommends asking yourself these questions when considering how small you can go: How many children do you have or plan to have? Will you have frequent guests? Will anyone work or telecommute at home? Do you have special requirements, such as wheelchair accessibility or an art or music room?

Lean and green

Though inherently greener, small houses often boast other eco-friendly features as well, such as energy-saving appliances and recycled or less-toxic building materials. This seems to be a positive side-effect of smaller homes, as their owners' green sensibility manifests itself elsewhere.

Even if you live in a large home now, you can still make it green and efficient, and possibly plan for a smaller home in the future. You also might consider finding housemates or creating a new living unit in your large house, to lessen its impact.

As with hybrid vehicles, small houses often have an eco-snob factor. But the movement isn't about being judgmental or "tinier than thou," the Small House Society says on its Web site, adding that "size is relative."

But it does matter, and downsizing benefits us all.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.