

## Homes & Real Estate

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### **Size matters: Small homes can offer big gains**

Building a small house consumes far fewer resources than constructing a big house. Large homes also encourage excessive consumption, because a big house typically gets filled with stuff.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

The challenge in making small homes cool is epitomized by those popular TV commercials in which the guy sitting with the little kids asks, “What’s better, bigger or smaller?”

Of course the kids yell, “Bigger!” Who wouldn’t prefer big over small?

Many of us, actually. Small homes clearly make sense — environmentally and personally.

Building a small house consumes far fewer resources than constructing a big house. Large homes also encourage excessive consumption, because a big house typically gets filled with stuff. On a more personal level, small homes are less expensive and easier to clean and maintain.

Partly for those reasons, small houses and small apartment and condo units have become popular, and even trendy, in the Northwest. But many folks still resist considering a small home.

Proponents of small homes can be their own worst enemies. When you even imply someone’s house is too big, it can easily come across as self-righteous and judgmental.

For example, here’s an email comment from a reader following a previous EcoConsumer column about small homes: “Your article suggesting to me that I buy/build a smaller home ... is a stunning example of the elitist attitude of the ‘intelligentsia.’ ”

The best way to promote small homes is to simply choose to live in a small home yourself, without bragging about it or judging those who have big homes.

But you may want to extol the merits of a small home if you’re selling one, for instance. In that case, you should emphasize efficiency, convenience and savings.

Resources have proliferated for building, buying and living in a small home. Online or at the library or bookstore, you can find home-shopping advice, plans for small homes, and tips on small-home storage and maintenance.

Seek out architects or designers who specialize in small homes, recommends Elizabeth Coe, a residential green-building consultant and owner of Ecoe Company, based in Indianola in Kitsap County. Tour a few small homes to get a sense of the possibilities.

Multifamily housing is the most resource-efficient choice, Coe says. But if you decide a new

single-family home is the best fit, “My advice is to take the number of square feet you think you’ll need for a comfortable, functional home and reduce it by 20–25 percent,” she writes on her blog. To make that reduction, re-evaluate whether you really need both a family room and a living room, for example, or a third bathroom.

The definition of a small house varies greatly, depending on how many people are in your household, your location and other factors. Less than 1,200 square feet is a good place to start. A new single-family American home averaged 2,505 square feet in 2012, compared to 1,660 square feet in 1973, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The latest trend in multifamily living is microhousing, also known as “aPodments” (a trademarked name). These units typically have 140 to 200 square feet of living space, with shared kitchens.

Recently, these units have become highly controversial locally, and the city of Seattle is working on new regulations for microhousing. Some residents of neighborhoods with existing or planned microhousing have complained vehemently about parking and traffic impacts, as well as the overall increase in housing density.

From a renter’s perspective, a tiny unit might be just fine, and microhousing may be the only way to afford living in certain desirable neighborhoods. When considering microhousing, or any multifamily unit, be sure to get a sense of how much noise might come in from adjoining units. That can be one of the biggest challenges with apartment living.

Whether you live in a pod or a palace, try to be tolerant and nonjudgmental. We all deserve a warm place to sleep, and we should get to choose where that is.

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