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(Tiny) spaces of hope: Reclaiming, maintaining, and reframing housing in the tiny house movement

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Alice Wilson** 

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Abstract

This article explores the tiny house movement as a contemporary example of alternative housing practices. Within the stories women tell about their tiny house journeys, we uncover diverse prefigurative practices and politics, which in turn invoke an expanded sense of fairness and agency in and through housing. Framed by Colin Ward's work on dweller-control and self-help, the article draws on interviews with over 30 women from Europe, the UK, US, Australia, and South Africa. Through their experiences, we explore the growing place of the tiny house movement in the popular imagination. Individually, tiny houses offer an imperfect yet compelling alternative for their inhabitants. Collectively, the tiny house movement potentially advances a more just and equitable approach to housing by providing inspiration for those seeking to question apparently unassailable ideas about how we should live.

Keywords

Tiny houses, dweller-control, alternative housing, self-help

Introduction

'I love lazy Saturday nights up here,' Amy says, gesturing towards the bed that occupies the mezzanine floor of her tiny house in Oregon. 'You can see so many stars through the skylight.' She makes tea, while I admire the effusion of plants hanging from the walls

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and the hand-painted ram's head above the fridge. Until last year, Amy had been living nearby in a shared apartment, where the rent alone consumed half her income. But then her sister became ill, and Amy wanted to be able to look after her, travelling at short notice to places where specialist medical care was available and preparing for the eventuality of becoming a full-time carer. Amy saw the tiny house advertised online and bought it almost immediately:

'It brought all of my values into alignment,' she explains. 'I wanted . . . a reduced carbon footprint. I wanted to spend my life doing rather than having. I wanted a space that was aesthetically beautiful . . . that I felt like I could stay in control of; like the cleaning wasn't out of control, repair wasn't gonna bankrupt me.' (Amy, 37, Oregon)

Amy is not alone. The tiny house movement has expanded since 2008, accelerated by the global financial crisis, escalating housing costs, and growing interest in simplified living (Mangold and Zschau, 2019; Willoughby et al., 2020). Defined as smaller than 40 square metres, tiny houses usually have no foundations and many (like Amy's) are built on a trailer chassis (Shearer and Burton, 2019). Combining innovative design and affordability, and challenging the bigger-is-better aspect of symbolic consumption in housing in countries like the US and UK, they require less upfront and ongoing financial investment, materials, and energy (Ford and Gomez-Lanier, 2017). Lower maintenance and running costs mean 'tiny housers' can work less and dedicate more time to other activities (Weetman, 2018). Our first area of focus, then, is how the tiny house movement opens up possibilities for people like Amy to resist the otherwise dominating cycles of work, earn, and spend that prevail in the US and elsewhere.

Amy's tiny house-on-wheels augurs the possibility of travel for herself and others alike: 'It [has] the Pinterest factor to be an easy Airbnb situation,' she explains. According to planning laws, though, her home is too permanent to qualify as a caravan yet too small to qualify as a house. So she lives literally and figuratively out of sight, paying a modest ground rent to a local farmer. Such arrangements are frequently informal and technically illegal: Only those who own land – or who possess the social and cultural capital to gain access to it – can buy into the tiny house dream (Alexander, 2019). Thus, even as they decouple themselves from the mainstream housing market, tiny housers like Amy are dependent on a measure of economic and social capital; the kindness of friends and the ongoing indifference of planning departments (Weetman, 2018).

In seeking to understand how people like Amy are effectively 'making a way out of no way' (Gaber, 2021: 1086), we draw on the ideas of researchers such as Gibson-Graham (2006), Holloway (2010), and Soper (2020), who theorise structural change from within people's everyday experiences. From this perspective, people within the tiny house movement are actively creating something different in the here and now. Yet this takes place against a backdrop of wider economic, social, and political struggles that conflict with and complement each other. This leads us to our second and more critical focus, namely how such experiments in alternative modes of housing and living are constrained or potentially co-opted by the prevailing 'culture of real estate' (Hanan, 2010).

Despite the precarity of her own situation, Amy remains evangelical about the tiny house movement:

Whenever I go back to the tiny house . . . I just cry because I am just so incredibly grateful . . . It feels like this secret that people don't know about. I'm like, if only you knew, you would change your life radically today, if you understood that this level of peace exists.

By visiting Amy's home, we see how tiny houses provide people with what Ward (1990: 35) calls the 'experimental freedom' to resist problematic aspects of day-to-day life. But we also come away with a sense of disquiet, which is amplified by the steady proliferation of picture-perfect bijou dwellings across tv and social media. The way in which Amy talks about the desirability of her dwelling to others and her apparent sense that she is in command of her own destiny both point to the possibility that the counter-cultural potential of the tiny house movement is being gradually hollowed out by hegemonic cultural messaging about self-optimisation and individual responsibility. This article thus explores two interrelated questions: How does the tiny house movement prefigure a viable and visible alternative to prevailing approaches to housing that characterise many rich societies? And how might this alternative mode of living operate alongside and in spite of those same trends, even as it is being colonised by them? Through these questions, we aim to understand what the tiny house movement means for our attempts to envision a more just and equitable approach to housing.

We open with a review of the literature, which discusses the rise of tiny houses and places the movement within the wider history of the financialisation of the housing market. We then situate this development within a wider body of research into alternative housing practices, such as commoning, housing cooperatives, and squatting: This enables us to demonstrate the novel and emerging way that tiny houses can be seen to contribute to folk efforts to reclaim the use-value of their homes from the overweening exchange-value hegemony of the assetised housing market. Next we introduce our findings, based on fieldwork with women living in tiny houses mainly in North America and northern Europe. Our analysis draws on anarchist ideas, particularly Colin Ward's notions of dweller-control and self-help (e.g. Ward, 1976, 1990), in order to reveal how people discover for themselves interim-if-imperfect solutions. In so doing, we also make use of Huron's (2015) distinction between reclaiming and maintaining the housing commons, and by extension, other alternative approaches: This draws attention to the ways in which tiny houses can be analysed as a tool used for living in argumentation with overarching social processes such as the financialisation of housing. In our conclusion, we indicate how our ultimately hopeful analysis extends existing theorisations about the housing crisis in rich countries.

The rise of tiny houses: A critical perspective

Tiny houses presage low-cost living, better work–life balance and a reduced footprint rolled into one aesthetically pleasing package (Colombini, 2019; Shearer and Burton, 2021). The movement is frequently linked to Thoreau's ideas of simple living and its relationship to questions of freedom, sustainability and economic security, and Schumacher's philosophy of 'small is beautiful' for example (Schumacher, 1974; Thoreau, 2008). But, compared to earlier lifestyle movements, tiny houses offer a 'more individualistic, pragmatic, and experience-driven road to finding happiness' (Mangold and Zschau, 2019: 2). Existing research therefore tends to focus on individual motivations for adopting the tiny house lifestyle (Willoughby et al., 2020). We will briefly consider three of these motivations and their significance to understanding the wider movement itself.

First, tiny houses bring home ownership within the *economic reach* of people excluded from the mainstream market, and enable others to reduce their exposure to debt risk (Alexander and Shearer, 2019; Shearer and Burton, 2019). Prohibitive housing costs are not new; Thoreau lamented how they drove people into lives of 'quiet desperation' during the mid-nineteenth century. Then and now we make ourselves 'needlessly poor,' working ever longer hours to pay for houses we have little time to enjoy (Thoreau, 2008: 29).

Tiny houses thus represent not a renunciation of life but an affirmation, freeing people to spend time and money on experiences rather than material goods (Mangold and Zschau, 2019; Shearer and Burton, 2021). From a more critical perspective, however, the tiny house movement effectively ‘continues to shelter economic and class privilege’ (Anson, 2014: 29).

Second, tiny houses require fewer *environmental resources* to build and run. The frequent use of recycled materials for aesthetic or affordability reasons further reduces their impact (Alexander and Shearer, 2019; Crawford and Stephan, 2020). As well as saving people money, tiny houses effectively offer an opportunity to ‘reject the civilised politics of accumulation’ (Anson, 2014: 301). In practice, however, tiny housers may end up merely swapping one form of consumption for another, such as allocating money and carbon to travel more, order more takeout food, or seek out ‘experiences’ (Mangold and Zschau, 2019). This points to a gap in our understanding of whether and how the tiny house movement might offer a genuine alternative to prevailing modalities of consumption (Penfold et al., 2018; Shearer and Burton, 2021).

Third, even as many tiny housers express a desire for self-reliance, they also stress the *importance of community* as they conduct more of their lives beyond the home (Shearer and Burton, 2019; Willoughby et al., 2020). Within purpose-built communities, people share storage, outside space, and laundry facilities, for example (Alexander, 2019). Solitary tiny housers likewise rely on neighbours, community resources like libraries, and shared land (Anson, 2014). Stories of personal transformation are thus intricately interwoven within people’s wider socioeconomic circumstances and beyond (Anson, 2018; Mangold and Zschau, 2019). The tiny house lifestyle is not straightforwardly self-sufficient but facilitated via incursions into the social and physical networks of others who have made different choices (Anson, 2014). Given the way tiny houses surface the continued importance of public spaces and place-based relationships, these forms of alternative housing have been put forward as a ‘better’ way to expand low-cost housing in rural areas and increase infill in underutilised urban spaces (Ford and Gomez-Lanier, 2017; Shearer and Burton, 2021).

In summary, tiny houses exemplify and prefigure new ways of living in smaller, creatively designed and better constructed dwellings (Shearer and Burton, 2021). Whilst their proliferation on social media might suggest that they are just another hipster trend, in many cases (including those explored in this article), they can also be seen as an inventive play for social and economic change (Colombini, 2019). Nonetheless, their embeddedness within existing socioeconomic relations means that they risk becoming a ‘new and charming exterior for the old politics of class identity’ (Anson, 2018: 69). This suggests the need for greater focus on how the tiny house movement alternately embraces and resists the underlying economic and social relations to which it is subject.

Assetisation and the rise of the culture of real estate

In order to understand the backdrop against which the tiny house movement has emerged, we will briefly introduce the ‘culture of real estate,’ which has evolved symbiotically alongside 21st-century neoliberalism (Hanan, 2010). The culture of real estate has retrenched social housing, inflated the cost of private rental accommodation and – in particular – prioritised home ownership (Byrne and Norris, 2019; Forrest and Hirayama, 2015). Housing thus becomes a commodity to be purchased rather than a right afforded to all, a private rather than a public matter (Hohmann, 2019; Wetzstein, 2022). Accounting for the majority of the 21st-century rise in total private wealth, housing (rather than labour) markets become the primary site of struggles over the distribution of income and wealth (Smith et al., 2022). Via this process of ‘enclosure,’ housing becomes a direct conduit for fickle

international financial markets (Ronald, 2008). Homeowners themselves become tied into cycles of work–earn–spend in order to service their mortgage debts, effectively reproducing this asset economy in multiple ways: For example, owner-occupiers with strong investment values are more likely to join resident action groups, in order to secure the profitability of their own housing assets (Cook and Ruming, 2021). As a financialised asset, the primary role of the home is no longer shelter, rather it has become an ‘immaterial site of convergence between personal identification, the internet, and finance capital’ (Hanan, 2010: 177).

Embedded within a wider agenda of privatising public assets, deregulation and advancing market solutions, then, housing takes on an ever more central role in social relations, shaping what Ronald (2008) describes as ‘ideologies of homeownership.’ In Anglo-Saxon societies in particular, these ideologies featured an implicit promise that homeownership would be widespread, equalising, and secure. Yet Arundel and Ronald (2021) suggest that this is a false promise: Rather, an overbearing policy focus on facilitating access to credit for homeownership leaves many people – particularly those living in poverty – unable to access habitable, affordable, and well-located housing (Hoolachan and McKee, 2019). This material process is accompanied by the semantic re-signification of ‘home’ as a privately consumed commodity, which in turn impacts much broader sets of economic and political relations: The underlying practices and discourses of homeownership become normalised, and housing effectively becomes the primary means of situating individuals within the market (Ronald, 2008). Homeowner ideologies thus play an increasingly important role in the expansion of privatisation and marketisation. Researchers are increasingly mindful that mobility between different forms of tenure is often involuntary, which leaves many people in precarious positions on the edges of ownership, impacting on their material circumstances and their mental health (Wood et al., 2023). Outcomes of this experience vary within and between generations (Bentley et al., 2022). Thus, the underlying ideological processes at work are not hegemonic, but establish a set of possible symbolic positions and behaviours for the individuals involved (Ronald, 2008).

This in turn reveals the way in which systemic failings are repositioned as a consequence of personal irresponsibility. The culture of real estate is an example of ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ through which wealth is channelled upwards (Harvey, 2010). Similarly, it illuminates the corrosive character of the neoliberal doctrine that suggests ‘anyone can make it if they try’ (Sandel, 2019). Some people become investor-subjects while others are excluded (Ronald, 2008; Vasudevan, 2011). The rise of homeownership thus effectively individualises risk and legitimates the stigmatisation of renting and minimal provision of social housing (Ronald, 2008; Wetzstein, 2022).

Yet against this inauspicious background, in diminutive yet powerful ways, people are actively creating something different for themselves and others. We will now turn our attention to the significance of some of these alternative housing practices.

Alternative housing practices in theory and action

Housing alternatives such as housing cooperatives, squatting, and, for our purposes, tiny houses, make efforts to ‘reclaim’ housing from capitalist processes of assetisation and enclosure. People engaged in such practices then attempt to ‘maintain’ them over time by nurturing the (non-capitalist) relations on which they depend. These two conceptual processes – reclaiming and maintaining – are drawn from Huron’s (2015) work on the housing commons. In applying them to other housing alternatives below, we in turn identify a third conceptual process, through which such alternatives effectively ‘reframe’ the very notion of housing itself.

Huron's (2015) first point is that alternatives have to be 'reclaimed.' Housing cooperatives or squatting, for example, represent attempts to interrupt the 'circuits' of capitalism (Vasudevan, 2011). Such alternatives thus enable people to resist the enclosure, commercialisation, and commodification of the capitalist city (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015). These diverse practices emerge across widely different geographical and sociopolitical contexts, and become entangled with individual motivations and concrete social needs. Nonetheless, they offer up the potential for people to live lives less bounded by capitalist imperatives (Huron, 2015). Residents of housing cooperatives, for example, might use models of mutual finance to tackle housing exclusion (Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). Likewise, squatters not only occupy but fundamentally re-engineer disused buildings, increasing the size of social versus private spaces (Vasudevan, 2011). Tiny houses represent another such alternative, one that enables us to reflect on the individual actions of women who reject or are excluded from mainstream forms of housing, while also considering how this in turn embeds them within a wider community of alternative practices (Shearer and Burton, 2021).

In other words, we can see people living in housing cooperatives, squats, and tiny houses as part of broader attempts to resist capitalist forms of living by retreating to – or even actively seeking out – the 'cracks' in its facade (Holloway, 2010). That is, they are deliberately exercising their (often limited) agency in order to reject the seemingly relentless assestisation of housing documented above. Moving beyond the alternative housing literature, then, we might suggest that residents are vigorously and knowingly pursuing a form of 'prefiguration.' That is, they are engaged in a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Sitanen et al., 2015). The wider institutional context remains crucial: Even where alternatives emerge in radical opposition to the state, they still need to navigate its apparatus (Lang and Stoeger, 2018; Nelson and Chatterton, 2022). For example, in taking advantage of public funding, cooperatives may open up opportunities but also potentially restrict the agency of their members (Aernouts and Ryckewaert, 2019; Arbell et al., 2020; Vasudevan, 2011). The uncertain planning status of tiny houses complicates their relationship with authorities, while their diminutive size renders their occupants dependent on others for basic services that many would take for granted, such as storage and laundry (Alexander, 2019). The tiny house movement therefore further problematises our understanding of what it means to 'reclaim' housing within an otherwise capitalist landscape.

Second, once reclaimed, these alternative forms of housing must be constantly (re)produced or 'maintained' (Huron, 2015). Again, the wider critical literature can help us here: Holloway (2010) reminds us how using verbs rather than nouns brings relations to the fore. Rather than talk of the housing 'commons,' then, Linebaugh (2008) uses the term 'commoning' to highlight the continuous and relational ways in which alternative housing is produced. The absence of landlords, for example, means residents must make their own repairs to their housing. Thus, Arbell et al. (2020) suggest that in such circumstances people become active participants in rather than passive consumers of housing. This focus on housing-as-process captures the material practices involved, which integrate people, physical space, and knowledge (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015). Through their concrete everyday experiences, people build their collective confidence, and the personal thus becomes political (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Sitanen et al., 2015). Self-help approaches to housing thereby challenge capitalism by default, even when the people involved do not articulate this in politically radical ways (Arbell et al., 2020). The tiny house movement is of particular interest here because it enables us to trace this journey through which the personal becomes political (Shearer and Burton, 2021). For a great many of the women in this article, what started as

an enforced experiment in self-build became a momentous identity-level phenomenon in their lives. The process of self-building enlivened within them new commitments to environmentalism, a reduction in consumerism, and a critical appraisal of the role of paid labour in their lives.

To summarise the review so far, then, Huron's (2015) work enables us to reflect on how commoning enables people to 'reclaim' and 'maintain' housing within a capitalist landscape. By expanding her analysis into other alternative practices, we are in turn able to identify a third process underway, through which such prefigurative examples effectively 'reframe' our understanding of housing itself. Wetzstein (2022) suggests that counter-stories to the marketisation of housing have been deeply discredited, and non-market solutions have been sidelined. In her study of trailer parks, Formanack (2018: 310) goes so far as to suggest that there is a 'mass cultural contempt' for non-standard forms of housing. Yet as Holloway (2010: 3) points out, putting forward viable and visible alternatives is the way that we 'seize the initiative.' If we only protest, we allow the powerful to set the agenda. Thus, Nelson and Chatterton (2022) describe housing cooperatives as aspirational yet 'realistic utopias,' or what Holloway (2010) would call 'embryos of a new world' from which something different can grow.

As discussed above, alternative approaches focus our attention on housing as a relational and material process, which grows out of and fosters a sense of solidarity between individuals, community, and the wider locality. For Nelson and Chatterton (2022), this link between housing and living is captured in the notion of 'dwelling.' They suggest that alternatives like those documented here provide a prefigurative glimpse of a post-growth future, in which housing is reimagined as a way to meet people's needs rather than an asset to be acquired. Tiny houses are usually individually owned (Anson, 2014). However, as indicated in the introduction, their commodity status is liminal and contingent, further unsettling our assumptions about the very nature and purpose of housing.

Rediscovering dweller-control and self-help

Thus far we have seen that tiny houses offer the potential to expand our understanding about how people 'reclaim' alternative positions within the housing market. They also illuminate how people seek to 'maintain' these positions through their own practical and intellectual efforts, namely by undertaking some of the building work themselves and also advocating for others who might want to 'live tiny.' We have also suggested that the incompletely commodified status of tiny houses potentially 'reframes' our assumptions about the very function of housing itself. At the centre of these processes of reclaiming, maintaining, and reframing, we see people attempting to exercise individual and collective agency over where and how they live. This is not a new struggle and – for theoretical inspiration – we enlist the somewhat neglected ideas of the British anarchist thinker Colin Ward.

Ward (1985) suggests that the first principle of housing – whether owned or rented – is dweller-control. He cites with approval John Turner, an anarchist architect with experience of the UK, US, and Latin America:

When dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contribution to the design, construction or management of their housing, both the process, and the environment produced stimulate individual and social wellbeing. (Turner, 1972: 241).

Ward attaches less importance to what housing is but rather to what it does in the lives of its inhabitants. Further, he suggests that the housing people actually yearn for is more cost

effective to build, cheaper to maintain and infinitely more adaptable to people's changing needs and demands than the housing that is available to them, particularly if they are on a low income (Ward, 1990). Ward's work has been more recently corroborated by Wood et al. (2023) who found that exposure to the high levels of payment and investment risk, which characterise the highly commodified housing market, is correlated with significantly higher levels of mental health struggles and a generally reduced quality of life.

Ward's second and related principle is that of self-help. Enabling and encouraging people to build and/or manage their own housing is cheaper and avoids physical and social disruption (Ward, 1990). But this is not the politics of individualism discussed above. Rather, Ward reiterates Samuel Smiles' maxim that 'the duty of helping oneself in the highest sense involves helping one's neighbours' (Smiles, 1866). Again, we can find echoes of this in recent work about alternative approaches to housing, in which individual and communal efforts to improve housing conditions co-exist and reinforce each other (Arbell et al., 2020; Huron, 2015; Nelson and Chatterton, 2022).

In summary, we have demonstrated that tiny houses can be usefully considered as a contemporary expression of alternative housing practices that seek to reclaim housing from the processes of financialisation and, further, to maintain them as an ongoing tool of enhancing agency under conditions of constraint. Effectively refocusing our attention on housing as a social good rather than a commodity, Colin Ward's overlapping notions of dweller-control and self-help provide a useful theoretical underpinning for our exploration of the tiny house movement. It is to that exploration that we now turn, first introducing our research participants, then sharing their stories and what they tell us about how such an alternative narrative is already emerging.

Disproportionately affected: Exploring women's motivations for living tiny

Data collection was conducted between May 2019 and May 2021, and focused on 35 semi-structured interviews conducted face to face (5), via zoom (28), or via email-exchange (2) with women (self-defined) living in tiny houses. Participants were recruited via Facebook posts to tiny house pages, and through an Instagram account run by the first author. Interviews typically lasted for 60 minutes, and focused on the women's motivations for living tiny, their experiences of the tiny house lifestyle and its perceived impact on themselves. Data were transcribed and analysed using codes drawn from both the literature and themes identified by participants themselves.

The study focuses on women because a variety of social systems continue to penalise, oppress, and disadvantage women as a sex class. Women are disproportionately affected by the housing crisis, hold fewer assets, and receive proportionately less income than men worldwide (Howard, 2017; Oxfam International, 2020). Significantly for the purposes of this article, under patriarchy, women are framed as docile, weak, and incapable of those tasks traditionally constructed as masculine, such as manual labour and the use of tools (Johnson, 2001). Despite the well-documented positive effects that building and physical creation can have on self-esteem, such pervasive and lifelong programming discourages many women from participating in projects like house-building (Baba et al., 2017). In the cohort of participants used for this study, 30 out of 35 were engaged in self-building at least aspects of their tiny houses, like drawing up plans alongside an architect or installing

windowsills alongside professional carpenters. Many of the women built the entire tiny home themselves by hand, with sporadic help from friends and relatives.

The tiny house movement remains comparatively small but is an international phenomenon. The women we spoke to came from and lived in mainland Europe, UK, US, Australia, and South Africa. In opening up participation to women from all over the world, we lean on Katz's (2001: 1229) notion of 'counter-topography.' This recognises how places are 'connected analytically to other places along contour lines that represent not elevation but particular relations to a process.' In this case, that process is the assetisation of housing, which has left no country untouched. Katz (2001) acknowledges that different places are affected by such processes in different ways, but she suggests that by linking them analytically, we can enhance people's struggles against them. Indeed, our material reveals striking similarities in the way participants all over the world talk about their reasons for adopting the tiny house lifestyle and what they hope to achieve with it.

The women included in this study presented with a range of personal circumstances. However, they shared a consistent and remarkable reflexivity and self-awareness in the way they discussed how their beliefs and experiences had shaped their decisions to live tiny. Aged from 20 to over 60, a majority of the sample were in their late 20s to late 30s. About half of them were single and only three women had children living with them. A majority were university-educated and most were heterosexual. The income distribution across the cohort of women ranged from £5000 to more than £60,000 per annum. These demographic features are broadly typical of tiny house residents (Mangold and Zschau, 2019; Willoughby et al., 2020).

Those who live in tiny houses are likely to view them as an important part of their identity and, moreover, link their home to an overall lifestyle strategy (Willoughby et al., 2020). All our participants highlighted the self-help and upskilling opportunities offered by tiny house life (Colombini, 2019; Ward, 1990). They also shared a common appetite to advocate for their potential benefits, and to 'spread the word' in the hope of making tiny houses more accessible to people around the world. We will now turn to the complexities of how advocacy for self-help and critique of assetised housing coexist within the tiny house movement.

Tiny spaces of hope: Women's stories from within the tiny house movement

In this section, we introduce the findings from our interviews with women who live in tiny houses. Through their words, we explore how the tiny house movement simultaneously enables and constrains efforts to reclaim agency in and through housing in different, largely rich, societies. In so doing, we draw on the work of Ward (1976, 1985, 1990) and others to explore tiny housing as a contemporary response to the affordable housing crisis and wider concerns about the dominating force of cycles of work–earn–spend. That is, we explore how these women take their own steps to reclaim and maintain agency over their living situation even as the processes of assetisation and commodification outlined above press in on them from all sides. We open by considering how women's experiences of housing float to the surface of their life stories. We then move on to consider the significance of dweller-control in the lives of our interviewees and how tiny houses specifically modulate women's experience of agency over their lives more broadly. Finally, we critically consider the machinations of self-help within the tiny house movement, by appraising how it supplants yet simultaneously reinforces the commodified housing market.

Reclaiming home

Throughout the interviews, our participants positioned housing as central to understanding – and often resisting – the world around them. For example, Anika is in her 50s and lives in The Netherlands. She describes her decision to ‘go tiny’ as the culmination of a much longer journey of nonconformity, in which choices about where to live have played a central role:

People close to me were not surprised anymore. I have travelled a lot. Lived in war zones and highly volatile areas. Lived in very remote and rural places...

For Anika, then, her tiny house experience reinforces her pre-existing lifestyle choices, as well as other people’s assumptions about them. Crucially, living tiny has enabled her to return ‘home’ from her travels, while also remaining to some extent on the outside of Dutch society both physically and socially. The ability to reclaim a sense of agency afforded by tiny houses is therefore crucial to understanding their appeal as a kind of in-between (or liminal) period or place, marked by an inherent ambivalence. This in turn enables us to question apparent certainties and identities (Thomassen, 2013). Anika acknowledges that this can be discomfoting:

It sometimes makes it more difficult to connect to people, as they think you are different. But on the other hand, it also makes it easier to connect, as they think you are different. It’s an ambiguity.

Anika’s observation about relating to others suggests that the process of reclamation is not a simple transition from one identity to another. Rather, she is engaged in a perpetual state of contestation (Thomassen, 2013). Over time, the site of that contestation has shifted from a shared house in an embattled zone of the Middle-East to the comparative safety of a tiny house in Holland, but her housing status has remained central throughout to her sense of both who she is and how she fits into the world around her. Thus, as she settles down in her tiny house, Anika is engaging in what might be called a curious form of ‘permanent liminality’ (Szokolczai, 2000: i; see also Thomassen, 2013). She goes on:

What also attracted me was that because it is small, it’s easier to oversee. We are living in quite an overwhelming world, and it is good to have a safe place in it. If it is too big it doesn’t feel safe anymore... It’s a bit of a feeling that small makes it possible to let my inner self grow more. And also of course it’s that with a smaller house you are paying less. Having a lower mortgage, having lower fixed costs for energy, lower maintenance. So you don’t need to work just to get your bills paid, but you can spend your time on the things you actually value and care about.

Reclaiming a small vestige of agency and safety through the smallness of her home offers Anika and others a way to live at the very margins – or in the cracks – of a housing market they see as deeply problematic. The expense of housing and the way conventional channels of bank-controlled home ownership expose us to massive debt was revealed by interviewees again and again to symbolise the unsustainability of contemporary life (Hoolachan et al., 2017). Anika and others are deliberately exercising their agency in order to escape entrapment within these cycles of work–earn–spend. They are knowingly and deliberately refusing to reproduce the assetisation of housing, instead attempting – albeit falteringly – to dedicate themselves to what they consider necessary or desirable (Holloway, 2010).

Like Anika, Petra lives in a tiny house that she designed and built in The Netherlands. In her mid-20s, she says her living costs are now a third of what they were when she was living in a 'regular' flat:

So many relatives or friends...are now stuck, literally stuck in a full-time job to pay their accommodation, getting all stressed out and can't even invest in their well-being, their creativity, and they still also can't buy a house. (Petra, 27, The Netherlands)

Here, Petra positions large, heavily-mortgaged houses and expensive rental properties as a kind of central motif of the financialisation of housing and the hazardous demands it makes of citizen-consumers (Colombini, 2019; Frayne, 2015; Ronald, 2008). She says her peers are trapped in stressful, unpleasant full-time employment as a direct result of the high cost of rental accommodation. This effectively excludes them from changing or bettering their lives and (ironically) from saving for a home of their own. Petra is thereby expressing her frustration at the relentless logic of assetisation and commodification, which renders housing no longer a human right or a social good but a financial asset to be traded like any other (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015). In contrast, she describes how living in a tiny house provides her with increased agency over her own time. This in turn enables Petra to honour her creative impulses and live a life more in tune with human values rather than economic ones:

Creativity needs a certain mental state to be able to actually get ideas and be creative, and so what I was thinking of is how to invest in my time, to be able to create space next to a part-time job where I could develop my own work and do my own projects. So basically I thought of a way not to get caught into a full-time job...and that was by investing in building a tiny house myself.

Even as Petra refuses to reproduce ideologies of home ownership and assetisation, she draws on the language of capitalism to do so, talking of 'investing' in her time and in building a tiny house.

Anika, Petra, and others are reframing their perceived exclusion from the financialised housing market into a form of active resistance, positing tiny houses as a potential alternative for themselves and others. In so doing, they suggest that what is important about housing is not what it is but what it does in the lives of its inhabitants (Ward, 1990). Crucially, these women draw attention to what Ward (1985) called 'ordinary people's wants, complaints and satisfactions' (43). This enables us to extrapolate wider implications from the individual stories shared here. Drawing on two of Ward's key insights, then, we will now explore how living in a tiny house gives people greater control over their lives, while also enabling them to help themselves and others.

Tiny houses and dweller-control

The stories above show how our respondents have found themselves priced out of the mainstream housing market. The tiny house movement thus represents an attempt by marginalised groups to reclaim some agency over their housing situation. For example, Della describes how the enforced decision to go tiny has nonetheless improved her quality of life:

Before...I worked a crazy amount of hours to pay the bills, so now I do all these fun jobs just to make the money that I need. It's very different. As much as I don't have a lot of disposable

income, I'm not having to work my ass off to pay for a McMansion. I'm not constantly thinking about making sure I have enough money to pay my bills. (Della, 41, Ontario)

Della goes on to explain in detail how she had experienced the overbearing pressure of her highly gendered role of caretaker, wife, and full-time worker before she left her marriage and moved into her tiny house. She specifically contrasts feeling 'trapped' in her old roles and her old home with her life now, which is based on – as she describes it – what her heart really wants:

I didn't come from the happiest of households. . . I was the oldest and so I was like. . .the one that took responsibility and did everything so that it kept the peace. And I found that that did transfer into my later years with my ex-husband, you know, I took care of everything, plus him, and it does get tiring because then you feel trapped in that kind of traditional housewife role, because I'm taking care of everything; paying the bills, making the money, taking care of the household, taking care of the husband.

So it's like I don't need that. I can choose to have my world be whatever I want it to be. I just had to let go of that societal view of everything; husband, success, busy, career and a beautiful home. Once I got past that, I get to be my own independent woman. Quite comfortably just having what I choose and what I want, based on what I actually really want. What my heart wants. (Della, 41, Ontario)

Here, Della acknowledges the growth she had to go through in relinquishing dominant societal ideas about what a good life looks like in order to access her own feelings about what a good life *for her* looks like. Della's story reveals the gendered relational pressures that she was only able to escape thanks to the tiny house: In her telling, the tiny house is highlighted as a tool for reclaiming personal power and changing her life. It thereby represents what Nelson and Chatterton (2022) would call a 'realistic utopia' for her not because of what it *is* but because of what it allows her to *do*.

Thus, even as participants recognise that they are choosing from within a limited range of options, they describe how moving to a tiny house opens up possibilities for wellbeing, creativity, and self-sufficiency. Our interviewees have transformed themselves from what Ward (1990) calls 'recipients' of housing into active participants or 'creators' of housing. This makes clear that what matters most is not ownership per se but control. This comes into sharp relief with Tina, a woman who was forced to leave her home after experiencing domestic violence:

So, four years ago I was in a bad marriage, and it was just one of those things where I woke up one day and I walked out and literally left everything I owned behind.

She now lives in a tiny house parked in some woodland in Alabama. Tina was forced into this situation when her abusive marriage and financial vulnerability left her with few options. Yet she reflects how, even at the moment of crisis, she was asserting her agency over events:

I packed a couple of bags of my clothing and I realised I didn't need anything. It's just stuff you know. My safety and my mental health were way more important.

While other participants foreground similarly unwelcome economic drivers in their narratives, it is often social and environmental considerations that lead them towards the tiny

house movement specifically. That is, the concept of dweller-control helps us understand why Tina and others opt for a tiny house rather than another low-cost option such as a house-share. Tina initially lived in her Toyota Prius for almost a year, and she recalls how she weighed up the alternatives when it was time to take the next step:

I was content, you know, I don't have all that extra baggage that other people have, I don't necessarily want all the nice luxuries, but you know I'm content with who I am and I'm content with what I have. That kind of led me to think, okay well how much can I continue to pare down and what are the important things to me?

She now lives in a van, which she converted by hand after buying it at an auction for \$900. Tina's story highlights how reclaiming agency over her living space was at the fulcrum of regaining control over her emotional wellbeing and quality of life. Like Tina, Anika, who we met earlier, talks about how living in a tiny house enables her to follow and maintain her own path through life:

I also don't like a materialistic lifestyle, that you always need to have more and bigger and higher. Achievement, perfection, growth, wealth. To me, living in a tiny house is a kind of countermovement to say that you actually don't need a big house to have a good life. That you don't need to have all this materialistic stuff.

Here, Anika highlights how dweller-control enables her to live what she defines as a better life. In so doing, she is still tied into the economic property relations of the world outside her front door. Nonetheless, as a tiny homeowner, she is able to reassert the use value of her home rather than its exchange value, reclaiming the lived experience of home-ownership from its casting as a financial asset (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015; Hanan, 2010; Huron, 2015).

The status of tiny houses as an emergent form of alternative housing enhances but also undermines the control that they afford to the people who live in them. On the one hand, living on the edge of societies and their systems and rules, tiny housers are freed from official paperwork, bureaucratic obligations and property taxes. On the other, many live in a continual state of anxiety:

I just know there's always the possibility that someone's going to report it. I know a couple of people who work for the city and their attitude is as long as the neighbours don't complain they don't care, but as soon as the neighbours complain they have to take it seriously. (Kelly, 41, Colorado)

Thus, the agency that tiny housers exert over their living conditions – and their refusal to accept the status of victimhood within an assetised and commodified housing system – does not insulate them from precarity and the deleterious effects this can have on their material circumstances and mental health (Wood et al., 2023). Kelly worries constantly about the possibility of eviction or legal sanctions. Regardless of where they live, our participants recount remarkably consistent difficulties in complying with the law. Tiny houses do not fit neatly into existing ordinances, with the result that more than half the women interviewed believe their homes are illegal. Della describes a similar picture in Canada, where planning laws prevent people from living on wheels year-round – 'you can't live in a van or an RV in the wintertime' – so she has skirted the base of her tiny house to make it look like

a permanent structure. However, in so doing, she is in turn contravening more recent state legislation as her home is smaller than the minimum now allowed by law.

Kelly and Della are struggling to exert dweller-control in the face of interference from their respective local authorities. Housing policies – whether aimed at increasing home ownership or building more social housing – rely on a specific normative understanding of how homes should be designed, constructed, and managed. Ward's assertion that this represents a classist approach, which is largely 'unresponsive to the aspirations of ordinary citizens' (Ward, 1985: 32), is borne out by our respondents.

By way of an example, Della specifically links the challenges of living legally in her tiny house with the conservative and risk averse nature of planning and zoning policy in Ontario:

It's really uncommon where policy is progressive and forward-facing enough to recognise this yet as a way to live... It's one of those things like "not in my backyard"... It's like, 'yeah they're cool but I don't want them around here, they might reduce our property value or something.'

Della suggests that this is a deliberate strategy: Tiny houses are excluded from planning laws in her affluent community because they are seen as threatening its underlying aesthetic. Her story points to the struggle of maintaining housing alternatives once they have been reclaimed, thereby highlighting a context that does not structurally support dweller-control and is inhospitable to alternative housing models that eschew the financialisation of housing as an asset.

Self-help within the tiny house movement: Maintaining a new imaginary

Our respondents are seeking control over their homes and their lives but find their modest aspirations thwarted by the dual forces of the housing crisis and planning policy. Forced out of the regular housing market, many explain their decision to live tiny as a way to (literally) take matters into their own hands:

It really frustrated me when I wasn't able to fix stuff. I had to rely on other people, and then they'd come in there and do something really simple and charge me like [\$120], and I was like that's really annoying. I wanted to be quite self-sufficient in knowing that if something goes wrong with my house, I've literally built it, I can probably fix it. (Aine, 47, Portugal)

This hands-on approach reminds us of Bresnihan and Byrne's (2015) emphasis on housing-as-process, a relational endeavour that integrates people, physical space, and knowledge. Yet Ward (1985) suggests that the spirit and practice of self-help expressed by Aine have been deliberately repressed in rich societies. A combination of rampant speculation and bureaucratic organisation in the housing arena has effectively deprived socioeconomically vulnerable people of their 'last shred of personal autonomy and human dignity' (Ward, 1990: 21). The movement offers a potential refuge for some women marginalised by divorce or unemployment, but remains out of reach for many more. For example, Tina's response to the structurally enabled forces of male violence and the unaffordability of housing was to seek an individual solution by toughing it out in her car and later her van. Yet even this humble response requires a certain level of social and economic capital. Tina is herself cognisant that the liberating possibilities of tiny house living were more easily available to her because of her intersecting privileges:

I'm a white woman and I have a full-time job and I understand that it's easier for me than it is for the vast majority of people who are forced into this situation, or who might benefit from

living this lifestyle and I just wish I could advocate for them more and make it easier. (Tina, 33, Alabama)

Tina's reflection that she would like to open the way for others is reminiscent of Ward's more hopeful perspective. He is troubled by the way self-help has been appropriated to advance the politics of personal responsibility, divert attention from structural inequalities, and facilitate the withdrawal of state support from vulnerable members of society. Instead, turning to the longstanding history of self-help, he reminds us that this latest, free-market incarnation is actually an aberration. Rather, self-help is the very opposite of selfishness since it depends precisely on our willingness to help others (Smiles, 1866).

This underlying message emerges consistently in the narratives of our participants. They frame their individual experiences within a larger struggle for more just and fair approaches to housing. They understand that self-help involves helping others, whether in their community or beyond. Amy, for example, criticises how housing policy deliberately excludes working-class families from living in the 'nicer' areas of town:

What bothers me is that the way that we do affordable housing here is that they'll pop up a bunch of really fast really ugly apartments in a part of town that nobody wants to be in, and we'll section it off and be like anybody who doesn't have a certain socioeconomic level lives here. (Amy, 37, Colorado)

Here, Amy is critiquing the building of cordoned off, low-quality houses. She goes on to argue that tiny houses can be used to ameliorate some of the harmful effects of segregating those on lower incomes into specific parts of town. They offer an alternative way to provide a similar or even higher level of affordability without conforming to this undignified and entrenched habit of creating ugly places for poorer people to live. This is one of the main points of critique that tiny houses provide: While they do reinforce or emulate components of the assetisation of housing, tiny houses also offer more accessible alternatives to address some of the pernicious and enduring problems of social inequality. Like Cook and Ruming's (2021) savvy owner-occupiers, Tina, Amy, and other participants are keenly aware of the personal and wider implications of assetisation and are highly motivated to invest time and effort in their surroundings. However, this motivation does not come from a desire to ensure that their houses are as profitable as investments as possible.

Rather, on a more affective level, Amy gives us a glimpse into the embodied impact of what her experience of reclaiming time, agency, and control through her tiny house project meant for her:

I remember the first evening that I spent in the tiny house. I had gone out and run errands and I got home and I closed the doors. I sat on the couch and you know the term like deafening silence, it was just, it was so loud. There was just like this dull roar of generational chaos that I just felt lifted off of me. I just felt my parents' stress, I felt my grandparents' stress, I just felt like generations behind me just take a breath.

In Amy's telling, the reclamation of her home and the maintenance of her personal sanctum catalysed an experience of generational liberation. Sara is another particularly interesting case, given the social and historical context in which she lives. As a white middle-class woman in a predominantly black suburb of South Africa, her decision to live in a tiny

house is framed within broader structural factors including global white supremacy and the continuing force of colonialism:

South Africa has this land use inequality history. White people just took all the land. So we also kind of like the idea of not owning land for that reason. So we own our house but we've parked it on a friend's property. Sometimes I think we are crazy, all of us in this tiny house. But then I think about our neighbours who live with eight people in a tiny two-bedroom space, and most of humanity lives in small spaces. So I think that is part of my story, I can also make this work. (Sara, 31, South Africa)

Sara's decision to live with her husband and two children in a tiny house on land she does not own will not address the rampant neo-colonialism and white supremacy that oppress black and brown communities in South Africa. But her reflexive self-awareness of her situatedness as a white woman in a particular socio-historical context does speak to a level of interest in the ethics of redistribution and fairness that arose frequently in the interviews. She and our other participants also confirm the 'indisputable truth that defects in your housing are infinitely more tolerable if they are your responsibility than if they are someone else's' (Ward, 1985: 36). Thus, Ward suggests that there is a role for local and national authorities in addressing the unequal access to housing lamented by Sara, Amy, and others. However, he suggests that the state should facilitate rather than provide housing. That is, after furnishing access to land, tools, and infrastructure, governments should invite self-builders to take over.

Conclusion

This article has addressed two interrelated problems: First, how the tiny house movement represents a viable alternative to conventional housing practices in wealthy societies, and second how this alternative mode of living can operate in the face of cultural trends that seek to colonise it. Our article has shared stories of women living in tiny houses across different parts of the world. By drawing on the anarchist writings of Colin Ward and ideas about the prefigurative efforts that tiny housing embodies, we have theoretically reframed these individual narratives as part of a wider movement for change. Our findings confirm that the tiny house movement reproduces aspects of the pervasive consumer imaginary and its underlying values. But the notions of dweller-control and self-help enable us to discern a more hopeful picture, in which the movement's radical potential endures. We will now revisit our research questions in order to reflect on the contribution our article has made to ongoing attempts to envision a more just and equitable approach to housing.

Our first research question asked how the tiny house movement prefigures a viable and visible alternative to prevailing approaches to housing that characterise many rich societies. We have found that tiny houses represent a living tool that enables the people who live in them to contend with larger social processes like the financialisation of housing. Our participants evocatively describe a landscape of bureaucratic rigidity and sovereign power exercised against their interests, whether by the state or private landlords (Byrne and Norris, 2019; Hoolachan, et al., 2017; Ward, 1990). Women who live in tiny houses have thus adapted within and against these behemoth social forces in an effort to live a life more closely aligned with values of personal agency, a reduced carbon footprint, and a quasi-rejection of the imperative to ceaselessly work–earn–spend. As they attempt to '[make] a way out of no way' (Gaber, 2021: 1086), it is perhaps inevitable that their efforts at resistance are partial, fraught, and uneasy.

Despite being effectively forced out of the ‘mainstream’ housing market, our participants acknowledge their comparative privilege in being able to choose a tiny house. Thus, they recognise that these homes presently entrench rather than undermine class relations (Anson, 2018: 69). We have added to existing critical literature on tiny houses by exploring the intersections between our participants’ individual stories and their collective appeal to ways of living that would, if taken up more broadly, dismantle significant portions of the capitalist mode of production. Even in adversity, these women retain some purchasing and political power. They could pursue a consumerist lifestyle if they wanted. That they choose otherwise indicates a growing unrest within a subsection of the Western consumer base. The tiny house movement presents a way for people to fulfil their desire to experience enrichments that cannot be purchased in the market. While this new imaginary has originated among a specific and comparatively privileged group of disaffected consumers, our focus on their collective experiences suggests that they could help set off a ‘relay of political pressures’ for a fairer and more sustainable approach to housing that cuts across class lines (Soper, 2020: 76). It also raises the need for further research on whether and how the tiny house movement might be effectively scaled up so as to offer a decent and more sustainable alternative for a much wider range of people than those we have met here.

Our second research question asked how the tiny house movement operates alongside and in spite of prevailing approaches to housing, even as it is at risk of being colonised by them. Here we have found that the counter-cultural potential of the tiny house movement is being simultaneously eroded by cultural messaging promoting self-optimisation and individual responsibility. That is, ironically, by lionising tiny houses as a quasi-solution to the constriction of the contemporary culture of real estate, participants replicate highly neoliberal ideals about doing more with less and taking personal responsibility for structurally enforced hardship. Our respondents discuss shifting their work–earn–spend budgets and carbon footprints from housing to other areas, including more travel, more takeaway, and more ‘experiences.’ We do not interpret this as a problem, but rather an evocative example of the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in any countercultural efforts that must nevertheless take place with dominant social infrastructures. In doing so, we hope to stimulate conversation around the nuanced ways in which the tiny house movement provides a viable alternative to dominant modes of consumption, and the ways in which it can be seen to shift and retrench prevailing consumer-capitalism and the assetisation of housing. Thus, as an ‘escape route from reality,’ tiny houses are at once liberating and ‘self-negating’ (Frayne, 2015: 215). Their liminal status – physically, legally, and imaginatively speaking – is key to understanding why and how tiny houses simultaneously retain and confound their latent potential for transforming and democratising (some) people’s access to housing.

Counter-hegemonic struggles will always, then, in part cohere with a capitalist logic. That is, even the most trenchant critics of capitalism must still eat and clothe themselves and use resources that are inevitably linked to its modes of production and exploitation. This is where Ward’s anarchism comes in. By enabling us to reveal how people discover for themselves interim-if-imperfect solutions to the housing crisis, we are able to challenge those who say ‘there is no alternative’ (Harvey, 2010). Collectively, the tiny house movement puts forward a compelling and progressive counter-narrative to the status quo (Srinicek and Williams, 2015). Widely seen as aspirational, it is not regarded with disdain like other forms of non-typical housing (Formanack, 2018; Vasudevan, 2012; Wetzstein, 2022). Thus, while social and mainstream media fetishises tiny houses (Penfold et al., 2018), it also permits the spread of their disrupting power. They are not *only* being used by the very

deprived as a tool of survival, but also by affluent consumer-citizens as a mechanism of alternately advancing and arguing with inherited values about how we should work and live. However, this in turn raises the need for further research on the ways in which tiny houses are being put forward as a legitimate alternative to expand low-cost housing in rural areas and increase infill in underutilised urban spaces.

In answering our two research questions, then, we begin to understand what the tiny house movement might mean for our attempts to envision a fairer approach to housing. Yet the imagined world of greater equity, decreased environmental degradation, and enhanced tranquillity that tiny house residents hold in their hearts as they nail down their floorboards and insulate their van walls is worth something, even though it cannot truly be said to exist. The increasing prevalence of tiny houses – arising by both choice and coercion – is a complex response to contemporary crises, which is both individual and collective. Within a context of constrained choice and an affordable housing crisis, our participants nevertheless set about reclaiming components of a bespoke and decentralised approach to housing and employment (Colombini, 2019; Huron, 2015; Ward, 1990). Yet this is not a ‘lonely form of selective empowerment,’ to use Littler’s term (2017: 2). Rather, the women talk enthusiastically about being part of something that is bigger than themselves. Thus, the tiny house movement offers more than what Srinicek and Williams (2015) call a ‘folk’ critique of contemporary modes of living. It offers a challenge to the culture of real estate that is at once human-scale and large-scale.

The existence of tiny houses and the people who live in them is a reminder that we can never defeat hegemonic social forces like the financialisation of housing or patriarchy, but that the notion of defeating by exerting power over an enemy is an expression of the heteropatriarchal value system which has created this oppressive and unjust landscape in the first instance (Johnson, 2001). It is not the point to overthrow or reject neoliberalism, but to go towards the tiny cracks in the facade of an unassailable way of life and to sow our tiny seeds there. These cracks, which exist everywhere, are the margins, the liminal zones where things are sort of the same but not quite the same, sort of better but not quite better (Hollaway, 2010; Thomassen, 2009). They are the places where we might be slightly closer to our imaginations, and this is, after all, the only place we are free.

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