

Living small

Size matters. And for some Madison homeowners, smaller is better

[Ann Grauvogl](#) on Friday 04/11/2008



Julie and Craig Martyn make the most of their 600 square feet: 'We try to make every nook and cranny functional and not have wasted space.'

Credit: Timothy Hughes

In a bigger-is-better world, Julie and Craig Martyn are positively countercultural.

They're happily ensconced in one of Madison's smallest houses: 600 square feet of living space, plus a bit of room in the basement.

"It's just kind of affordable this way," says Julie of the comfortable, colorful one-bedroom (big enough for a queen bed) with a living room, dining room, three-quarter bath and kitchen. "We have what we love, not just filler things."

Julie Martyn bought the house, on Madison's near west side, seven years ago, when she was single. Craig's lived here with her for 4½ years.

"What more do we need than this small footprint?" asks Julie. "With the small rooms, we try to make every nook and cranny functional and not have wasted space."

Julie says she and Craig "like being together all the time." A small house means less maintenance and lower utility bills. And the 1933 cottage with a small front porch has got the "cute factor."

Yes, there are compromises. The Martyns cycle clothes up from the basement through their single, small, shared closet. "It would be nice to see more of my clothes at once," Julie says. They also use the basement to store extra cookware, along with everything that would go in a garage, which the dwelling also lacks.

"Your lifestyle adapts to the space you're in," says Craig. "It encourages you to make the most of what you have. It's easy in this world to want to keep up with the Joneses. A small space encourages you to live within your means."

This is the kind of story many of us could read with guilty fascination, like some sort of key to contentment: Get rid of the excess stuff, Grasshopper, and you will be happy.

And it's true there are choices here — financial, environmental, spiritual and emotional — that others can emulate. But small-house dwellers, for the most part, are not into proselytizing. They're not saying everyone should live in a very small house; it just works for them.

The delightful surprise is that people who live in very small houses — 300 to 600 square feet — can love them dearly and be just as proud as any mansion owner. They might bump into each other now and then; they might think about an addition. But most are not interested in having either more space or more stuff.

So what if they have only one small closet? They get to know and use every inch of it. So what if they have small kitchens or bathrooms or bedrooms? They have all they need.

Sonya Newenhouse, president of Madison Environmental Group, equates living smaller with living better. "If you simplify with beauty and care for the environment, you will be free," she says. "You'll live a luxurious life because you'll have the resources and the time."

As she prepares to begin marketing Casa Kit Homes, Newenhouse is betting that people are ready to choose to live small — not out of economic necessity but because they realize the planet cannot support bigger and bigger houses.

The kits, modeled after the Sears Roebuck homes of the last century, will provide plans and some materials to build 600- to 1,200-square-foot dwellings.

Newenhouse is now building a Casa Kit development on seven acres in the city of Viroqua, in Vernon County.

"I believe there's a niche market of people who want to live beautifully and care for the environment," she says. "It's not about decreasing your lifestyle, but decreasing the idea of what you need. When you free yourself from your stuff, you actually can become freer."

Living small raises large questions. How much stuff do we need to live well? How do we wean ourselves from the notion that he or she with the most toys — and room to store them — wins?

Newenhouse and her group are (pun intended) a driving force behind Community Car, a vehicle-sharing collective. She's gotten rid of her own car, just as she's gotten rid of her dryer.

"We can make a difference in our houses," she says. "We can literally reduce our footprint."

There are 201 houses in Madison that are 600 square feet or smaller, according to Jo Ann Terasa of the Madison City Assessor's Office. Some are not quite so small because they have finished attics or basements for extra space. Many of the smallest are rentals.

Most homes in this group are between 500 and 600 square feet. Only three of the 201 are under 400 square feet, and 39 are between 400 and 500 square feet.

Most were undoubtedly built as family houses, although there's a 520-square-foot home in University Heights that was a carriage house. And then there's the house that Linda Lyon rents.

"I tell people I live in a two-car garage," Lyon says, "and they either think I'm making a joke or they think, 'You poor thing.'" Neither is true. Lyon found the 480-square-foot former garage on Madison's west side almost three years ago, when it was advertised as a cottage. "I knew this was the place for me when I saw it the first time," she says.

It feels like a cabin, with rough cedar walls and a toboggan leaning in the corner. Other decorations include pictures of the time Lyon spent with the Inuit in Alaska, a Colombian rug, and a functional duck decoy made by a friend in Maryland. She likes things utilitarian and neat, so she put her bed in the main room, which also serves as living room and dining room. Her office, which can be messy, is in the smaller, second room.

A wildlife biologist and part-time grad student, Lyon wouldn't live much bigger even if she could. "To have respect and concern for wildlife and the environment," she says, "I think it's important to have a smaller, modest-size house. I like wide open spaces when I'm outside, but when I'm inside, I like to feel warm and cozy."

The biggest clusters of Madison's smallest houses are in assessment districts 37, 38, 39 and 73, east of the Yahara River between St. Paul Avenue and North Sherman. David Mollenhoff, who wrote the definitive book, *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*, isn't surprised.

Mollenhoff delivers a mini-history lesson about Madison's boom in the 1850s to become Wisconsin's second-largest city, the bust of the 1857 depression that depleted the population by 40%, and the post-Civil War need to grow the city again. Factories would bring jobs, but also soot and grimy workers, and the university and professional communities weren't interested, Mollenhoff says.

Norwegian John Johnson changed minds when he built a machine tool factory that needed smart people to run it. He paid well, says Mollenhoff. "Even more shocking to the west-side powerbrokers was the fact these workers bought homes, and even more mind-blowing was they sent their kids to the University of Wisconsin."

So the Madison Compromise was reached. The west side became the premier residential district, home to the university, and the east side became a factory enclave where many of the workers' homes were built on filled swamp. A 1901 newspaper ad proclaimed "Homes for Working Men" in Fair Oaks, near the factories.

"The small homes concentrated here have very much to do with the fact this is the factory side of town, and the factory workers couldn't afford the big houses," Mollenhoff says. "They were not built to be ecologically responsible; they were built as the best you could afford."

Kitty Rankin, city preservation planner, says people back then needed housing near where they worked: "You didn't have a horse, you didn't have a car, everywhere you went you walked."

South Madison, on the southeast corner of Lake Wingra, has another group of small houses. It, too, was filled marsh, where developers build cheap houses for Madison's poorest people. Assessment area 17, near the corner of Monroe and Glenway, consisted of subdivisions built in the town of Madison and later annexed, Rankin says. No building permits were needed, and the houses tended to be smaller.

Rankin finds a picture of what Madison's historic small houses looked like at the Friends of Third Lake Ridge website. Photographs taken from the Farwell Mansion on Spaight between Paterson and Brearly show dozens of tiny houses.

"People couldn't afford anything bigger," she says.

Smaller houses are all the rage in books like *The Not So Big House* and *Little House on a Small Planet*. The March issue of *Dwell* magazine featured homes under 1,000 square feet. In Madison, the smallest homes are older: Only eight were built after 1949. That's no surprise. Historically, people lived smaller.

English settlers in America built 168-square-foot cottages with 70-square-foot sleeping lofts, according to Lester Walker's *Tiny Tiny Houses*. Philadelphia's bandbox townhouses were three stories tall with 100 square feet per floor, plus room for a kitchen and dining in the basement. Thomas Jefferson lived on one 210-square-foot floor of the Monticello honeymoon cottage for a year, then finished the second floor when he married, still waiting to move into the big house.

In the 1950s, the average new American home was 986 square feet. In 2005, the National Association of Home Builders reported it had jumped to 2,434, and less than 4% of new homes being built were 1,200 square feet or less.

The change in how much room we expect to live in shows up even in small homes. "It's really a single person's house," says Donna Gilson of her 591-square-foot east-side Madison home. But this small house, built in 1926 as a garage and temporary dwelling, once belonged to a widow who raised three children in it.

Gilson found it in 1995. She was then in her 40s, and this was the first house she looked at. She was moving from an apartment, so the scale seemed right, even though the place was a "dump." "It's like when you meet a person you click with or you don't, there's a feeling about houses and buildings," she says. "I'm not a very big person, so it feels fine to me."

The house gives her a bedroom big enough for her double bed and bureau, a library with a wall of bookshelves and a futon for guests, a living room with a love seat and chair, and the second-biggest kitchen she's ever had. She's lucky: She has two closets.

"You can't be real acquisitive," she says. The upside: "You don't need a lot of stuff."

Gilson keeps things simple, leaving the walls light, limiting her art and furniture. She painted the dark woodwork a lighter color, installed birch laminate flooring. In the summer, her backyard patio becomes an extra room.

"I love it," she says of the house she's transformed. "And I sort of feel it somehow appreciated that someone tried to make something of it."

One little-known downside of a small house is that it can, subliminally, reinforce the message to think small, says Jacquelyn Patricia, a 30-year feng shui practitioner.

"Small houses are usually on small plots of land, and usually [are filled with] small things," she says. "Right there is the subliminal message, 'Can't go big.' And can't go big is going to translate in a lot of ways." In work, in play, and in love, it sometimes makes sense to think big.

Patricia thinks people who live in small houses need ways to interrupt the smallness. Instead of using several small chairs in a small living room, she'll have one large seating place, such as a deep, L-shaped sofa that also encourages people to sit and talk and connect. Then she'll put a large painting on the wall. These "larges" give people the message that they deserve everything they want.

On a practical level, there are things people can do to make a small house feel larger. For instance, Patricia advises taking down the upper part of the wall separating the kitchen and dining room. She also recommends having the same flooring throughout, as demarcation lines compartmentalize a living space.

"You don't realize there's a stop until you take a stop away," she says. "When it's gone, you'll breathe differently in your own home."

Patricia says small houses keep people connected because there's nowhere to hide. They force people not to keep stuff they don't use that creates stagnant energy. Simplifying helps people rest and connect. Less is more.

Hang on only to what you love or need. Clear out things that make you feel slightly bad. In a small house, especially, Patricia recommends keeping "what will pull you forward into your dreams and goals — how you hope you'll live in the next 20 years of your life."

Sonya Newenhouse agrees living in a small house takes creativity and good design. You'll only need one sofa, for example, and fewer chairs. But they can all be beautiful. And buying anything new means getting rid of something old: "I've heard people say it's the bring-in and bring-out philosophy."

She suggests finding out what you can give up to live smaller. Try going without a car for six weeks to see what it's like. Try renting out a room or living in part of your house or without a dryer.

Could you give up a tub for a large shower stall? A dryer for ample clotheslines? A dishwasher for two large sinks? A dresser for built-ins? A couch for a loveseat? A larger refrigerator for a smaller one? "If food spoils in your refrigerator," says Newenhouse, "your refrigerator is too big."

A renter in one of the city's smallest houses (less than 400 square feet!), who prefers to remain anonymous, gets it. Her 15-by-15-foot main room is bedroom, living room, family room, den and dining room. The remaining five feet of house has room for a very small kitchen and a bathroom. She painted the bedroom side of the big room darker and gave the windows different curtains. She thought she'd put up a folding screen to separate it from everything else, but didn't have the room.

"People walk in and say, 'Wow, this is small,'" she says. In 12 years (and she has no plans to move), she's learned she can seat eight for a party — four at a card table, two on her bed and two on two more chairs. She has no sofa, no regular table to eat on, but she has four nearly ceiling-high bookshelves, a desk for writing, a computer table, a dresser, a hutch, and still shares her space with a dog, two cats and shelves of miniature African violets.

"I'm very organized," she says. "I don't accumulate a lot of things. Every single available little space is used for something."

Robert and Deborah Luther fit themselves, as well as a large dog and a cat, into 396 square feet on the main floor; there's another 156 in the not-quite-finished upstairs.

Robert bought the house west of John Nolen Drive on the shore of Lake Monona 20 years ago. "More or less, I was looking for a place to keep my boat," he says. When he and Deborah were married, "I threw out half of my stuff so she could move in. She threw out the other half of my stuff."

He opened up the living-room view with a wall of windows and sliding door, adding a screen porch almost a third as big as the rest of the downstairs. "In the summer, it's like the house extends out to the pier," Deborah says. It feels like a mansion.

Even better, it takes Robert only about 25 minutes to clean the place from top to bottom.

The house, with an abundance of windows and knotty pine walls and ceiling, feels expansive. Switching to a flat-screen TV helped clear a path from kitchen to living room. An antique dining room table from Deborah's grandmother opens enough to seat six.

Robert uses a cupboard on the main floor as a closet and dresser. Deborah has a small dresser and a tiny closet (the only one in the house) upstairs. Robert would get rid of the jukebox in the corner, figuring he could double the living room's square footage. But Deborah likes it, so it stays.

Realtors call often because the house is on the lake, but the Luthers aren't interested in selling. "All around the lake they're tearing down houses like this," Robert says. "Pretty soon, the average person won't be able to live on the lake." He doesn't want that to happen.

Mollenhoff sees hope in what he calls "a fascinating little groundswell of people who remind us we don't have to have a living room with 20-foot-high ceilings and massive amounts of glass to be happy."

The need to live smaller is clear, as the planet's population rises past the 6.5 billion mark. "That means we have fewer resources per capita," says Mollenhoff. Being equitable means figuring out ways each of us can use fewer resources. A key element is how we live and the resources consumed for our homes.

Big, historically, has been considered good, and small inferior. But, Mollenhoff says, "That's no longer an appropriate way of looking at the world. We're reaching a point where people who build McMansions will be considered immoral."