



Living Big by Living Small

By Andy Johnson

A saying from one of my professors in architecture school has remained with me for years. He said that the most environmentally responsible building material a person can use is the material that does not get used. This seems like one of the simplest and most profound concepts in green building today.

Green building is now mainstream. Concerns about global warming, rising energy prices, and conflict in the Middle East have heightened our awareness that there may be better ways to live in this world. According to the Department of Energy, buildings account for nearly three-quarters of US electricity consumption and over half of our natural gas consumption. Around 40% of the world's greenhouse gasses come from buildings.

The three main components of green building, energy efficiency, resource conservation, and indoor air quality, all offer quantifiable impacts that can help shape decisions about how to build more responsible buildings. One component of green building that I would like to add to the list is simple: living with less. While this concept has much to do with resource conservation, it is more of a

philosophy of living than a method of building. I call this way of thinking “living small.”

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It's easy to see the environmental benefits of living small. Fewer materials going into a building results in the obvious: decreased environmental impacts from extracting and processing natural resources, manufacturing and transporting finished materials, and developing land. Smaller, simpler spaces can affect a building's energy consumption by decreasing the demand for heating and cooling. A building created with a living small philosophy often receives greater attention to the overall design than a large building with more square footage.

In my practice as an architect, I've challenged myself to design the smallest spaces possible that are still livable by contemporary standards. This is particularly difficult within cultural expectations of wanting more.

Demographic statistics show that 60% of U.S. homes are one- and two- person households. This is a surprisingly large population for whom a big house may not make sense in terms of money, space, and maintenance. Living small offers an alternative that can help bridge the gap between home and spirit that most multi-family and suburban subdivisions ignore. The idea is to create housing and neighborhoods so inviting that even people who can afford more end up choosing less.

The Mindful Homes project in Boulder is an example of the living small philosophy. The project, currently in planning, encompasses four homes,

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all 1300 square feet or under. All the homes are built using green principles: good passive solar access with sun shading for windows, a 2kW solar photovoltaic system, a solar domestic hot water system, well insulated walls

and ceilings, natural light in every room, resource efficient building materials, and non-toxic interior finishes. Each home has an open, flexible floor plan to facilitate a variety of functions within each space. Another important ingredient is built-in storage and large bedroom closets. The finishes are simple and low maintenance both on the exterior and interior. Each house includes two porches – one that faces the city street and one that faces an interior courtyard. The development offers an intimate neighborhood feel with carefully articulated public and private spaces all within the principles of living small.

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Building smaller costs less, leaving more money for energy and resource efficient, healthy-house alternatives, and fine architectural detailing, which all contribute to better quality of life.

Americans face unlimited choices, a bombardment of advertising and a slew of examples of people living with excess. Anyone who has ever huffed a backpack into the wilderness knows the merits of simplifying and anyone with children has witnessed how quickly interest in a new object fades. Living small makes room for living a big life without the mental, physical, financial and emotional toll of supporting excess; a tighter house will lead to a tighter family and a tighter community living in concert with the natural environment.



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