

## **The Tiny American Dream**

The American dream can be defined as an equality of opportunity that is supposedly available to anyone and everyone. This equality is a 'dream' because it allows every person a fair chance at achieving their aspirations, and thus---hopefully---true happiness. A level playing field towards achieving happiness is the simplest definition of the American dream. Owning a home is a major piece of this American dream, as home ownership provides an individual with a landmark of success and normality, while also allowing all the comforts that come along with a home: safety, comfort, and space for a family. Modern home ownership came to be with the introduction of suburban communities in the late 1940's that have lasted until today as the image of prosperous American life.<sup>1</sup> Following the second World War owning a home was a given; as countless communities were built, and low-interest loans were doled to families in order for them to purchase the home and eventually pay off the loan without much stress.<sup>2</sup> In the 1940's/50's an image was born: the stereotypical image of middle class American success, featuring a white family in front of a small suburban house with a white picket fence lining a luscious lawn.

Today, though, this average, suburban image is becoming obsolete. As house prices rise and salaries remain completely stagnant, home ownership becomes far less feasible for the average American family. Suburbs are no longer reserved for the average American, but increasingly for a competitive few that can afford the luxury. Still, home ownership is a necessity for Americans seeking complete individual freedom and comfort. Thus, an alternative solution must be found in order to maintain the American dream as it has become known. This solution

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, F. M. L. . The Rise of Suburbia . Leicester University Press, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

has been dubbed the tiny house movement. Instead of paying for a massive suburban home, some have turned to a shrunken version of the American dream. The movement is built off the ideal that American comfort and home ownership should be available for all lifestyles, thus these homes are serviceable ‘tiny’ stand-ins for the average home in order to accomodate an advancing American society. This alternative to suburban living grew into a movement being referred to as the “tiny house movement,” and it could well be the future of American home buying.

The origin of tiny homes is a contested topic, but it is certain that it came in reply to suburban American life. The first famous “tiny home” belonged to Henry David Thoreau, and it was in the form of a cabin on Walden Pond. The movement clearly was not began with Thoreau in 1845 at Walden Pond, as it did not take over 100 years for the first real tiny homes to begin to be built. The real, solid idea of a Tiny Home began 20 years after suburbia became the norm of average American life. The first true tiny publication came in 1973, 4 years after the well-known summer of love protests were waged. The 1973 novel *Shelter*, documented small houses around the world.<sup>3</sup> The novel was only about the possibility of living in smaller structures, and was more of a history of other culture’s living spaces than any sort of tiny home anthology. It was not until 1987 with the publication of Lester Walker’s *Tiny Houses or How To Get Away From It All*, that the foundations of the modern movement began to become visible.<sup>4</sup> Walker’s book detailed specific ways to live life small. This novel was built upon by Sarah Susanka’s *Not So Big House* which was a best-seller and inspired one man beyond any other: Jay Shafer.<sup>5</sup> Jay Shafer, a University of Iowa professor, took the movement beyond any of its previous bounds as he

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<sup>3</sup> Nonko, Emily. “A Tiny House Movement Timeline.” *Curbed*, Curbed, 19 July 2017, [www.curbed.com/2017/7/19/15974554/tiny-house-timeline](http://www.curbed.com/2017/7/19/15974554/tiny-house-timeline).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Whitford, Blake. “Full History of The Tiny House Movement.”

sprouted a tiny house community in Iowa, and was even featured on Oprah in 2007 showing off his intricately designed home. Shafer's notoriety inspired a small uptick in the movement, but it was still not quite a phenomenon. Up until 2007 the demographic of tiny homes was simple: free spirits without familial responsibility, nor typical blue or white collar jobs, and they were almost as white. After 2008 the tiny house movement exploded, and this demographic changed, partially.

American homes are no longer as practical as they once were. The massive suburban homes of the past were far more reasonable because there was a large family set to live within. Yet today houses are, "increasing from 1660 square ft in 1973 to 2596 square ft in 2013. Meanwhile, the average family size has dipped from 3.67 members to 2.62 between 1940 and 2005."<sup>6</sup> The square foot per person ratio has even tripled going from 290 square feet in 1950 to 893 square feet in 2003.<sup>7</sup> Nobody needs nearly 900 square feet to themselves. Especially as the population increases and there is a pressing need for more homes for families, there is simply no reason for the massive houses which the average person currently inhabits. To go with the physical growth of the houses, the prices have also skyrocketed. Adjusted for inflation, the average home today costs 9 times more than in 1970, while salaries have remained basically stagnant.<sup>8</sup> Thus, houses are becoming less practical than ever before, and far less attainable.

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<sup>6</sup> Boeckermann, Lauren, et al. "Dreaming Big and Living Small: Examining Motivations and Satisfaction in Tiny House Living." *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, vol. 34, no. 1, Springer Netherlands, Mar. 2019, pp. 61–71, doi:10.1007/s10901-018-9616-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Today, the average American home sells for 377,000 dollars.<sup>9</sup> The cutoff for the top-50% of American earners is 30,000 dollars a year (after taxes)---meaning the exact ‘average’ percentile of American individual is pulling in 30,000 dollars a year.<sup>10</sup> Assuming this person has no other expenses at all, it would take the ‘average’ person over 12 years to fully pay off their home. That means 12 years of doing nothing but working just for a house, that is the current supposed American dream. With a household that has two ‘average’ earners it would *only* take 7 years to pay off the house, but that again does not account for any other expenses which is wildly unrealistic. For a couple that means a tenth of an average life dedicated to one single house, and for a single person it is a far greater chunk. Suddenly, these large houses are becoming a massive burden, not the dream they were meant to be.

In 2008 the housing market fully collapsed leaving countless families to default on loans, and banks to foreclose on their homes.<sup>11</sup> For families whose homes were not foreclosed, these massive homes became nearly impossible to pay off, and became 35 year prisons with the high-rate loans that they had to pay.<sup>12</sup> All of these families needed a place to live, and for a lot of middle class families of a very specific demographic (white, not tethered to an urban area for work purposes) the solution was tiny homes.<sup>13</sup> Tiny homes worked in the housing crisis because there was no need for high interest loans, or in many cases any loans at all. Tiny homes can cost

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Average Sales Price of Houses Sold for the United States [ASPUS], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ASPUS>, April 28, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Wang, Jim. “Average Income in America: What Salary in the United States Puts You in the Top 50%, Top 10%, and Top 1%?” *Wallet Hacks*, Mediavine Finance, 24 Apr. 2019, [wallethacks.com/average-median-income-in-america/](http://wallethacks.com/average-median-income-in-america/).

<sup>11</sup> Green, Richard K. “Imperfect Information and the Housing Finance Crisis: A Descriptive Overview.” *Journal of Housing Economics*, vol. 17, no. 4, Elsevier Inc., Dec. 2008, pp. 262–71, doi:10.1016/j.jhe.2008.09.003.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ford, Jasmine, and Gomez-Lanier, Lilia. “Are Tiny Homes Here to Stay? A Review of Literature on the Tiny House Movement.” *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4, June 2017, pp. 394–405, doi:10.1111/fcsr.12205.

anywhere from a measly 8,000 dollars up to 150,000 dollars (not including land). A practical 350 square foot tiny home with two rooms and one bathroom can be purchased for only 35,000 dollars. That's only about 1-2 years of income for the average person. A house can just be a house again, not a tenth of one's life. A person would be foolish to sacrifice nearly 400 thousand dollars just for a place to live, when these tiny homes are a viable option.

Tiny homes are not always a viable option, though. Tiny homes are not currently practical for every individual. The major problem with the current iteration of tiny homes is one of the major positives of suburbia: location. The suburbs exist as little pockets right off of larger cities, and allow people to commute to the city with ease. The city is, after all, where most jobs are located. Tiny homes are not found in the city, or just outside of the city, or even normally a thirty minute drive from the city. Tiny homes, as of now, are very rural. The commute to the average job is not extremely feasible from a tiny home. Thus, the tiny home as of now is mostly inhabited by those that are not tied to the city for an income.<sup>14</sup> As of now suburban zoning codes prevent these tiny houses from existing within their neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup> One man, Malcolm Smith, built a tiny home, only to be told he could not legally have it on his property due to the fact it was on wheels, and thus an oversized recreational vehicle.<sup>16</sup> The other major problem comes from zoning violations. A developer by the name of Alec Roberts was awarded a 400,000 dollar grant to begin building tiny homes as part of an affordable housing move, but the city of Westchester, New York did not have any allotted plots for Roberts to even build these house due

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<sup>14</sup> Boeckermann, Lauren, et al. "Dreaming Big and Living Small: Examining Motivations and Satisfaction in Tiny House Living."

<sup>15</sup> Matsuda, Akiko. "Tiny Houses Face 'High Hurdles' in the Suburbs." *Lohud.com*, The Journal News, 30 Nov. 2017, [www.lohud.com/story/news/local/2017/11/29/rockland-tiny-house-owners-live-under-radar/849349001/](http://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/2017/11/29/rockland-tiny-house-owners-live-under-radar/849349001/).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

to zoning regulations.<sup>17</sup> They cannot divide land to be owned, nor fix the current size of plots.

Roberts was then left unable to build the homes that he was contracted to build. These are only two examples of many cases that prevents tiny homes from being a practical piece of suburban life.

Not everybody who goes tiny explicitly has to go tiny. Tiny home buyers are economically diverse, but they mostly stick along the line for the top 50% or a little above.<sup>18</sup> However, there is a specific type of tiny home buyer: 97.3% of current tiny home buyers are white.<sup>19</sup> Much like the Summer of Love movement of 1969 it can be inferred that a piece of this movement has been spurred in response to white American suburban comfort and acts as a shedding of material possessions---and the luxuries from which they came. The three most common reasons for tiny home buying also fit into this narrative as they are, “decreased costs, a simplified lifestyle, and increased freedom.”<sup>20</sup> Meaning ‘tiny housers’ are looking for a life with more disposable income, and time not spent keeping up a house. As of now a large chunk of tiny home buyers are minimalists, or people looking to live life to the absolute fullest.

This school of thought towards buying a tiny home is best epitomized through a study that correlated financial security and “subjective well-being.” By surveying people of different economic backgrounds and determining their “subjective well-being” the study reveals there is an extremely curvilinear relationship between the two variables.<sup>21</sup> A curvilinear relationship

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Boeckermann, Lauren, et al. “Dreaming Big and Living Small: Examining Motivations and Satisfaction in Tiny House Living.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Howell, Ryan T., et al. “Money Buys Financial Security and Psychological Need Satisfaction: Testing Need Theory in Affluence.” *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 110, no. 1, Springer. 233 Spring Street, New York, NY 10013. Jan. 2013, pp. 17–29, doi:10.1007/s11205-010-9774-5.

means that there is a direct correlation in the values up to a certain point. No exact monetary values were given, but once a person is without worry over day to day life, and has certain comforts, there is no longer a direct correlation between subjective well-being and financial security.<sup>22</sup> The study offers a few thoughts towards why this occurs, mostly revolving around the stress involved with achieving money, and the time wasted doing so.<sup>23</sup> Tiny homes can be a step towards providing just what is necessary for a person to reach the point where the two variables lose their correlation. Tiny homes can help to save an individual from consistent burden and financial stress, without needing to sacrifice their lives to work.

Without even acknowledging the economic ramifications of tiny homes, they are a viable means in pursuing happiness, especially in an increasingly artificial and suburban American existence.<sup>24</sup> Going back to Thoreau, the alleged founder of tiny homes and the first person to undertake the tiny home movement wrote extensively about doing so; his writing completely encapsulating the motivation for willingly sacrificing the supposed comforts of the typical home. Henry David Thoreau---a founding and defining voice of American poetry---was the first person to actively live in a tiny home in 1845.<sup>25</sup> Thoreau endlessly preached the merits that came along within his self-imposed tiny cabin in his novel, *Walden*. Thoreau invested in the journey not as an attempt at normal life, but as an experiment. Thoreau undertook the adventure, because he, “wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if (he) could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when it came to die, discover that (he) had not lived.”<sup>26</sup> Thoreau

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere: the Rise and Decline of Americas Man-Made Landscape*. Simon & Schuster, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Whitford, Blake. “Full History of The Tiny House Movement.” *Coze Living*, 24 Sept. 2018, [cozeliving.com/tiny-house-movement/](http://cozeliving.com/tiny-house-movement/).

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, Bonnie, and Henry David Thoreau. *Walden Pond*. Commonwealth Editions, 2004.

found he was not fulfilled in his life, and instead turned to his tiny cabin, and nature. One of the most famous American poets, whose work was being consumed and adored, found himself unfulfilled, and turned to the idea of a tiny home to attempt to discover a sense of purpose.

Thoreau found that he was, “rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”<sup>27</sup> Essentially, Thoreau found personal happiness in what he had, rather than what he did not have. Thoreau words ring eerily similar to one of the founding creeds of tiny living: “minimize your life to maximize your life.”<sup>28</sup> All of which boils down to a simple philosophy that one can always have more, but happiness and solace can only be discovered in the absence of the pursuit for greater things, a philosophy that current ‘tiny-homers’ are loudly preaching.

Though Thoreau came from an era long before “desolate” suburban living became the norm, his feeling of unrest is still universal.<sup>29</sup> Thoreau at one point stated, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>30</sup> Thoreau was claiming that every person was silently, desperately in search for something more from their lives. This line eerily echoes with one of the first lines of *Geography of Nowhere*, which was a foundational piece revealing the problems with suburban life. The line reads, “I had a hunch that many other people find their surroundings as distressing as I do my own, yet I sensed too that they lack the vocabulary to understand what is wrong.”<sup>31</sup> The two writers touch heavily on a silence that for Thoreau implies that everybody is attempting maintain an image of happiness, while for Kunstler it means people just lack the words to speak

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison, Trent. “Why Go Tiny?” *Modern Tiny Living*, Modern Tiny Living LLC., [www.moderntinyliving.com/whygotiny.html](http://www.moderntinyliving.com/whygotiny.html).

<sup>29</sup> Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*.

<sup>30</sup> McGrath, Bonnie, and Henry David Thoreau. *Walden Pond*.

<sup>31</sup> Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*.



effectively on their feelings. The silence, and lack of fulfilment from the two eras is exactly the same.

These thoughts rang eerily true in great American works that revolve around the rise of the American suburban era, such as *Revolutionary Road* and *The Swimmer*. Both of those works take a white, comfortable, suburbia with massive houses and doused with liquor, and use them to reveal the depth of discomfort and darkness that existed beneath the surface of the society. *Revolutionary Road* even showed the majority of April Wheeler's mostly unfulfilled life revolved around keeping tidy their unnecessarily massive home. Both stories did not confront the idea that there was anything wrong, instead the main characters wordlessly continued on through an unfulfilled life. These two fictional pieces work in tandem with Kunstler and Thoreau to reveal that the suburban American dream is no longer an equal attempt at happiness, but a continuous silent emptiness taken from a life fulfilled only by big, empty houses, and tireless working to pay for those homes.

Today, *The Swimmer* and *Revolutionary Road*'s message still stand, suburban life leads to a happy appearance, but a true and unmistakable emptiness beneath the surface. The 2014 film *Boyhood* is a great modern comparison to these two works as it is a real, morose look at modern American life. In the film the American experience is captured in an incredible way as the characters all literally age on the screen, and in filming. All three of these works, *The Swimmer*, *Revolutionary Road*, and *Boyhood* give life in a massive house a horrible tint. In *Boyhood* Mason and his mother are the most plainly happy in their small, rundown house at the beginning of the film. Mason and his mother actually spend the middle of their life living in a massive suburban home, but in that house comes unimaginable violence and horrors at the hands of the successful

professor they had moved in with. The film ends with Mason's mother living alone in a small home in the suburbs, and the culmination of the film comes as the matriarch of the family (Patricia Arquette) cries into her small empty home saying, "I thought there would be more."<sup>32</sup> This is the modern version of Thoreau's realization, and the two anthologies of the rise of suburbia, as it reveals a distinct American unrest. An unrest that Thoreau believed could be quelled through a distinct change in lifestyle, one that is, "rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."<sup>33</sup>

Tiny housers today still believe that simplified living without a ceaseless pursuit of material objects is the only true path towards finding happiness. According to Lauren Boeckermann's study of the tiny house lovers that were surveyed they achieved an extremely consistent and high level of happiness with their homes.<sup>34</sup> Boeckermann's study proved that a tiny home can be viable, but as of now the sample size is still tiny. Though, there are five fairly successful television shows about the tiny home experience, they are still just a novelty. The only people undertaking this tiny home lifestyle are those actively seeking it out, and those who are more than willing to live with the drawbacks of doing so.

Though tiny homes have received only positive reviews so far, they are from being a fully viable solution especially given the inability to even live in a tiny home near a city, or legitimate working environment. Right now suburbia is painfully lacking, and if the American dream ever wants to be achievable suburbia is not the answer. This small sample size of positive results are a small beacon that the American dream of happiness is still attainable. The massive,

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<sup>32</sup> Linklater, Richard, director. *Boyhood*. IFC Productions, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> McGrath, Bonnie, and Henry David Thoreau. *Walden Pond*.

<sup>34</sup> Boeckermann, Lauren, et al. "Dreaming Big and Living Small: Examining Motivations and Satisfaction in Tiny House Living."

empty, burdens of suburban homes serve only to continue a cycle of emptiness, but if the American dream goes tiny, maybe it will actually produce the happiness it has promised.

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