Tiny-house living can be big-time wasteful.

Author: Crystal Ponti
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Byline: Crystal Ponti

MANCHESTER, Maine - Tiny houses have cropped up everywhere across the United States - proving their popularity and solidifying their permanence in the nation's housing market.

These small "utopian" dwellings can help people escape debt and reduce their carbon footprint. Tiny houses also offer an attractive alternative to the affordable housing crisis and provide one solution to the nation's homelessness epidemic.

Yet while the benefits are obvious, living the downsized life is not without its challenges.

In 2016, I wrote about my family's experiences living in a tiny home - not by choice, but out of a financial necessity. We still live in this 900-square-foot, ranch-style home on a slab, and I still stand by my original complaints and grievances. Five people and a handful of pets living in minimal square footage is complicated.

At the time I wrote the piece, decluttering and tiny-house living were trending topics that inspired a movement called minimalism. The movement was bolstered by TV shows such as "Tiny House, Big Living" on HGTV, the endless self-help resources available online and traditional builders who had switched to minimalistic construction to profit off this trend. With all the attention the lifestyle has garnered, I'm not surprised there are still people jumping on the bandwagon.

Today, minimalism is enjoying another boost with the rise of the Marie Kondo effect ("To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose.") and from changes in zoning laws across the United States that relax regulations on tiny-house living.

Want to live in a she-shed on wheels? How about a woodland treehouse? Do you shop online? Retailers offer a variety of do-it-yourself "garden house" kits that you can order from the convenience of your living room.

Chances are, no matter how small or unique, you can now live your tiny-home dream. But . . . buyer beware.

For every success story, there is a tiny-home nightmare that reveals the dark side of downsizing. My family has had five years to experience the shortcomings. Claustrophobia, or feeling like you're trapped inside a hamster ball, sudden and drastic temperature fluctuations and quick messes, to name a few.

I work from home, so the feeling of being consumed by our small space is ever present. A built-in storage unit doubles as my desk and TV stand. I conduct interviews and record my podcast in whatever quiet corner I can find, or I resort to cramming myself and my equipment inside an already stuffed closet. The acoustics are ideal. The air quality, not so much.

But it's the weekends, when we're all home, that pose the greatest challenge. Imagine a family of moose trying to maneuver inside an ice shack.

Then there's the biggie: storage. One of the questions tiny-house owners are asked the most is: "Where do you put all your stuff?"

A year before I wrote my original piece, blogger Lauren Modery lambasted tiny houses, asking, "Where are clothes, shoes and towels stored? Do you just have overalls and Birkenstocks and one towel that you share with your entire family?"
Storage is among the biggest challenges of occupying a small space, and the one aspect of minimalism that many new tiny-house owners are unprepared for. The movement advocates tossing everything but the necessities and shopping less, concepts that are not always feasible - or easily accomplished - in every tiny-home situation.

Joshua Becker, founder of Becoming Minimalist, a website that inspires others to own less so they can live better, and author of "The Minimalist Home: A Room-by-Room Guide to a Decluttered, Refocused Life," says: "This seems like an issue of not breaking free from consumeristic tendencies. Owning less is great but wanting less is even better."

While I acknowledge his assessment, we didn't opt for a tiny home because we wanted to downsize our lives. In the process of moving and settling into our smaller surroundings, we offloaded quite a few of our belongings. Since then, we have tried to embrace one of the main reasons people choose to downsize, which is reducing waste. This is where the problematic aspect of lack of storage, despite best intentions, can become a vicious cycle.

I call it the secret underbelly of tiny-house living, because few tiny-home owners want to talk about the wasteful downside of occupying limited space. With a tiny home you're often in a state of relentless purging and forced, in the spur and necessity of the moment, to toss the old to make room for the new. This is counterproductive and completely against the culture of minimalism, but in some instances, like in our home, it's unavoidable.

For a family of five, we have very limited storage and closet space. There is no attic or basement. Although we do have several outbuildings, they house year-round and seasonal necessities, such as the snowblower and other yard and garden equipment, and the kids' outdoor toys and sports gear. Although we don't buy as much as we once did, we are frequently faced with the choice of what to keep and what to throw out, donate or sell.

Seasonal clothing is a hindrance. Boots, snowsuits, heavy winter jackets, gloves, hats and scarves take up more space than most people realize. Our closets double as toy and utility storage. Last winter, short on space, we ended up donating our winter clothing.

Now, with cold weather arriving, we'll once again have to purchase new. That's hundreds of dollars we could have saved.

When in a bind or unwilling to let go of everything, many tiny-home owners rent storage units, which can be expensive and require the additional cost of gas for traveling back and forth to grab something or to store something that's no longer needed. According to Angie's List, "The cost to rent a storage unit can vary greatly. Some smaller ones may run $50 to $55 per month, while larger units can be $300." The average cost of a tank of gas in the United States is $2.50. You can do the math.

Recycling is an absolute necessity when living in a tiny house. We recycle as much as possible, but even this environmentally friendly practice is hard to maintain when you don't have the room to store every single recyclable that ends up in your small space. We break down cardboard boxes. We have a recycling bin for bottles, plastic containers and cans.

We reuse paper and plastic shopping bags. Inevitably, though, we run out of room and something ends up in the trash. Over time, a can here and a box there adds up to a significant amount of waste that contributes to the 251 million tons of trash the United States already generates each year.

Since moving into his 150-square-foot tiny house seven years ago, Ryan Mitchell, managing editor of the Tiny Life, has saved $100,000, paid off his student loans, traveled the world and started a successful business. Still, he says, waste can be problematic. "The biggest thing has been food packaging and trying to minimize it the most I can, but it's inevitable."

There's also the reality that tiny homes have tiny kitchens. To put things into perspective, only one person can comfortably fit in our kitchen at any given time or it becomes a ridiculous game of bumper hips.

We have half the cabinet space of an average home and, because room size is limited, we require a somewhat smaller refrigerator than what you'd find in bigger spaces. Full-size refrigerators range from 10 to 32 cubic feet. For a family of four, experts suggest 20 cubic feet or more. Our family of five wrestles with a 14.6-cubic-foot wonder, like those typically found in a one-bedroom apartment.

We don't have room for an additional freezer or a safe place to store extra perishables because all other spaces are being used, or they are outside and exposed to the elements and hungry critters. Although we're savvy, we often sacrifice some foods (sorry, leftovers) to make room for others.

Casseroles are often the first victims of the purge. Whether still in the pan or spooned into storage containers, they take up too much precious space when it's time to restock the fridge. According to the American Chemistry Council, the average household throws out $840 worth of food each year. We probably toss that in casseroles alone. And we shop for food more frequently too, which, once again, brings up the wasteful gas-and-time conundrum.

Our dining area is the size of a typical full bathroom. If we move the table too much too the left, it blocks access to the front door. If we pull it forward an inch too far, it nearly collides with the couch. So, most days, we have it pushed against the wall until it's time to eat.

Storage and wastefulness also intersect around wear and tear and replacement. As I mentioned, many tiny-home owners are resourceful and opt for furniture and spaces that serve more than one purpose - like a dining room table that doubles as a storage unit. This multipurpose use takes its toll.
"No one warns you that everything is more concentrated in a tiny house, that the natural life cycle of objects accelerates," writes Gene Tempest in a New York Times piece about her experience living in a 492-square-foot apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Our things are aging faster than they did in their previous homes."

Couches have suffered the same fate in our tiny home. With lack of space, we always congregate around this piece of furniture. Seven to 15 years is the average life span of a sofa. Under constant use, our last couch only lasted three years and I would estimate that we're already halfway through the life cycle of our new one.

Within the tiny-house movement, lack of storage, and space in general, can turn into a wasteful cycle. Mitchell, like Becker, also points to consumerism as the culprit. "I think when you go small you have to shift your mind-set away from consuming," he says. "If you're stuck in a buy-then-purge cycle, you aren't solving the problem by purging, you're solving the symptom."

At the end of the day, I'm grateful that we have a roof over our heads, which, by definition, is larger than most tiny homes.

Still, I wish the kitchen was less of a boxing ring and we had an attic between the shingles and ceiling to give us some extra room.

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