Back in 2005, when I first wrote in this magazine about tiny houses, they were a novelty for many people, and an extension of the pursuit of a minimalist lifestyle for others. But that was before the recession and the escalation of concern about climate change spiked interest in the idea of reducing one’s costs and one’s possessions (and therefore one’s ecological footprint). So a full-fledged tiny house movement has developed in recent years, and it continues to grow stealthily. There are an increasing number of people attending workshops and open houses, and visiting blogs, in order to learn about living in and building tiny houses. And there is no lack of alluring examples to be found online.

Like any disruption of the status quo, there are barriers to building very small houses, including building codes, zoning bylaws, and financing constraints (see sidebar on page 14). Some people are working on those issues, but in most cases they are working around them. One tactic often used is to build the house on a steel frame with wheels, mimicking an RV. However, some people wonder why you wouldn’t just live in a real RV or boat, instead. Then there are those who think that, in colder
climates, the ubiquitous tiny condo spaces are preferable than standalone tiny houses, since they use resources more efficiently.

One interesting development accompanying the increasing interest in small and tiny houses is a return to village-scale living. We are, I think, at the beginning of a new movement that will see tiny communities of tiny houses popping up. The ones currently in place or being planned include an urban demonstration project designed to advocate for tiny houses, planned communities designed to accommodate the homeless, a few attempts at developing what are legally RV parks, a boutique “hotel” that’s a collection of four tiny houses on wheels, and more upmarket developments of cottage-style housing – small but not tiny – designed to fit within existing regulations. There are also some existing eco-villages that allow tiny houses to be built.

When you’re living in a small space, it’s nice to get outside and important to know (and cooperate with) your neighbors. So grouping tiny houses into neighborhoods or villages makes sense, allowing for shared amenities and central gathering spaces.

Boneyard Studios

Boneyard Studios, founded in 2012 in a dense, walkable, urban neighborhood in the Washington DC area, is a micro-village of four tiny houses on wheels, with the largest measuring just over two hundred square feet. The houses are situated on
what was a vacant, triangular alleyway lot full of overgrown grass, broken concrete, pooling water, garbage, illegal parking, and occasional criminal ac-
tivity like the dumped stolen vehicle they had to have moved.

Now, in addition to the collective’s three tiny houses and one they’re looking after for a friend, the rehabilitated lot houses a small fruit orchard, green open space, a community garden, a cistern for garden watering, and a shipping container that’s used for bike storage and a workshop.

Calling themselves Boneyard Studios, friends Brian Levy and Lee Pera (joined by Jay Austin shortly thereafter) hope to demonstrate creative urban infill; promote the benefits of tiny houses; model what a tiny house community could look like; build capacity of tiny house designers and builders; and advocate for DC zoning/code changes to allow construction and habitation of accessory dwelling units and tiny houses.

Since, under current city restrictions, the houses cannot be lived in full-time, Boneyard Studios acts as a showcase for what could be.

Tiny Houses for the Homeless

The idea that community matters is at the root of the emerging tiny village philosophy, which addresses affordable and sustainable housing at the same time. Local non-profits have embraced the idea of tiny houses grouped in a village format as a way to help the growing number of homeless or low-income people. The model is reminiscent – and somewhat based on – the self-organized tent cities that have become a common way for the homeless to provide for themselves. A group will typically

Bureaucratic Constraints

Regulations restricting the construction of tiny houses vary from place to place. However, it’s common that to be in compliance with building codes and therefore occupied full-time, a house must be built to a dictated minimum size, usually eight hundred square feet. (Basic principles of design state that there should be an absolute minimum of 200 square feet per human occupant.)

During his tenure as a building code regulator based in Colorado, Tom Meyers was building official for the US Department of Energy’s Solar Decathlon from 2005 to 2011. He also served as the Chairman of the International Code Council’s International Residential Code (IRC) B/E Committee for the 2006-2012 editions and as a member of its Fire Code Committee for the 2015 edition. His blog at http://sustainablebuildingcodes.blogspot.com includes information about tiny houses — the kind on foundations, rather than wheels — and the code.

He points out that the IRC (often used as a basis for local codes) prescribes minimum areas for dwellings: “At least one room must be 120 square feet in area. All other habitable rooms except the kitchen must be 70 square feet in area. Minimum room width and minimum ceiling headroom must be seven feet... Traditional tiny houses simply cannot comply with the IRC if they are determined to be dwelling units.” Meyers would like to see these minimums removed from the code, which some jurisdictions use as the basis for their local regulations.

Of course, there are other considerations beyond your local building code. Zoning regulations and/or restrictive covenants on property may also preclude the construction of a tiny house. Meyers’ advice? "Always do your homework first. Know the rules before you build or purchase. Understand the loopholes provided by the code and local case law. Query your code official on the requirements prior to bringing your building on the site. Be prepared to surmount some hurdles before enjoying your new-found minimalist venture.”
acquire a piece of land with the co-operation of local government, then fundraise and construct a group of simple micro-housing structures surrounding shared, common space.

Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon is a transitional housing community with thirty micro-housing units for otherwise homeless individuals and couples. In Austin, Texas, Community First! Village, a program of Mobile Loaves & Fishes, is a twenty-seven-acre master-planned community that will provide affordable, sustainable housing and a supportive community for some two hundred disabled, chronically homeless people. It has been in the planning and fundraising stages for nearly ten years and breaks ground this year. There will be tiny houses, mobile homes, teepees, refurbished RVs, a three-acre community garden, a chapel, a medical facility, a workshop, a bed and breakfast, and an outdoor movie theater.

Quixote Village in Olympia, Washington is a two-acre community of thirty tiny cottages and a central community building that includes showers, laundry facilities, a shared kitchen, and social and meeting space. With the help of government grants, fundraising, a donation of municipal land and zoning changes, and support of the faith community, the village replaces a tent city housed in church parking lots. On the new site, residents hope to plant a vegetable garden and fruit trees, and to start one or more micro-enterprises that could bring in income to support the Village and its residents.

Pocket Neighborhoods

In 1996, architect Ross Chapin and developer Jim Soules collaborated on building the Third Street Cottages, a cluster of eight small cottages around a shared garden in Langley, Washington. The cottages were tucked off a busy street, which seemed to Ross like a pocket safely tucking away its possessions from the world outside. He began calling it a “pocket neighborhood” and the term stuck.

Third Street Cottages was the result of involvement of people on every level who paved the way: a forward-thinking state government, a pro-active
The small houses in the Greenwood Avenue Cottages Pocket Neighborhood face a common area but retain their own personal space as well, Shoreline, Washington. Architect: Ross Chapin, Architects, Developer: The Cottage Company

planning director, an innovative architect, a sensitive developer, an enlightened banker, and a supportive community. Facing the same growth pressure as many towns across America, the City of Langley, WA (pop. 1,100) adopted the innovative “Cottage Housing Development” (CHD) zoning code provision that made these small homes possible.

The code’s aim is to preserve housing diversity, affordability, and character, and to discourage the spread of sprawl. It allows for up to double the density of detached homes in all single-family zones — providing the ground floor area is less than 700 square feet and total area including the second floor is less than 975 square feet. The cottages must also face a usable landscaped commons, and have parking screened from the street. To ensure good fit within existing neighborhoods, each project proposed is reviewed by the planning and design review boards.

The Third Street Cottages, designed by Ross Chapin Architects and developed by The Cottage Company, was the first to utilize this innovative code.

The award-winning community of eight detached cottages is located on four standard single-family lots. The homes are approximately 650 square feet, with lofts up to 200 square feet, and are conveyed as condominium ownership. The design imperatives were to provide well-defined personal space while fostering a strong sense of community.
Entry to the community is through “implied” gates into the semi-public Commons, which is a shared garden area edged with a perennial border and a low split-cedar fence. A swinging gate opens to each private yard, and a walk leads to steps, the front porch, and front door. The porch railing is at a height just right for “perching” and is adorned with flower boxes to further define a personal boundary. Within the cottages, the layering continues with active spaces in front and private spaces in back.

To ensure privacy between cottages, the houses “nest” together: the “open” side of one house — with large windows facing the side yard — faces the “closed” side of the next, which has high windows and skylights.

The first line of defense for personal security is a strong network of neighbors who know and care for one another, and the houses are situated to encourage that. They also have ample porches that extend living space and encourage interaction with neighbors in the adjacent Commons.

Parking is intentionally situated away from the cottages but screened from the street. When residents walk from car to home, they can interact with neighbors and enjoy the landscaping in the Commons, which is the locus of community. In the middle is a combination of flowers, vegetables, and lawn, while to the side is a workshop with terrace on the roof. A tool shed provides a place to store shared garden tools.

A variety of singles, couples, and small families have been attracted to these pocket neighborhoods. They, like everyone else interested in small or tiny houses and the communities they create, care about increasing their connection to community while decreasing their impact on the environment.

Questions & Answers with Architect Ross Chapin About Pocket Neighborhoods

Q: Just what are pocket neighborhoods?
A: Pocket neighborhoods are clustered groups of neighboring houses or apartments gathered around a shared open space — which can be courtyard, a lively pedestrian street, or even conjoined backyards — that provides a clear sense of territory and joint stewardship.

Q: How is a pocket neighborhood different than a regular neighborhood?
A: A pocket neighborhood is not the wider neighborhood of several hundred households connected by an impersonal network of roads, but a close knit realm of a dozen or so neighbors who interact on a daily basis around a shared garden, quiet street or alley — a kind of secret garden, or secluded neighborhood within a neighborhood.

Q: What kinds of people are attracted to live in a pocket neighborhood?
A: Anyone who wants to live in a close, tight-knit neighborhood. Although not for everyone, an ever-growing segment of the population wants a stronger sense of community. For them, pocket neighborhoods offer a longed-for alternative.

Q: Why are pocket neighborhoods good for children?
A: Children need increasingly larger zones of play as they grow up. A baby explores the room their parent occupies, while an older sibling is free to play in the next room, or in the back yard. At some point, though, a child’s desire to explore the world beyond the front gate is blocked by the real and perceived “stranger danger” and traffic. Children are then chauffeured to friends’ houses and organized activities until they can drive on their own. Too often, children feel painfully isolated and lack access to safe, unplanned play.
Pocket neighborhoods provide a protected, traffic-free environment for a child’s widening horizon—a place for unplanned play alone and with other children, and a place to have relationships with caring adults other than parents. This matches their growing curiosity, need for increased responsibilities and maturing social skills.

Q: Why is shared outdoor space so important?
A: The shared outdoor space at the center of a cluster of homes is a key element of a pocket neighborhood. Residents surrounding this common space take part in its care and oversight, thereby enhancing a real sense of security and identity.

During the daily flow of life through the common space, nearby neighbors offer “nodding hellos,” or stop for a chat on the porch. These casual conversations can eventually grow into caring relationships and a meaningful sense of community—all fostered by the simple fact of shared space.

Q: Community sounds good, but does it come at the expense of privacy?
A: While there are many examples and kinds of pocket neighborhoods, privacy is an essential ingredient that allows residents to have a positive experience of community. In a classic pocket neighborhood, there are several increasingly private layers of personal space between the shared commons and the front door.

To ensure privacy between neighbors, the cottages nest together: the open side of one house faces the closed side of the next. You could say the houses are spooning! The open side has large windows facing its side yard (which extends to the face of neighboring house), while the closed side has high windows and skylights. The result is that neighbors do not peer into one another’s worlds.

Q: What are the design principles?
A: Successful pocket neighborhoods start with the central idea of a limited number of dwellings gathered around a shared commons. As the number grows larger than eight or twelve homes, new clusters form around separate shared commons. Multiple pocket neighborhood clusters can form a larger community. These communities are not isolated to themselves, like a gated community, but connect and contribute to the character and life of the surrounding neighborhood.

Q: Why are pocket neighborhoods important now?
A: The fabric of social health in our society has been fraying, in part because many people lack networks of social support. Pocket neighborhoods help mend this broken web of belonging, care, and support. The protected setting encourages informal interaction among neighbors, laying the ground for caring relationships. An elderly neighbor may need assistance trimming a hedge. Another person needs help looking after the kids while going for a short errand, or feeding a cat while away on vacation. Neighbors become what they used to be, the ones most available to respond to daily needs. They are also the ones to hear a story, admire a newly planted garden bed, or reminisce about old times. All of these encounters strengthen webs of support and friendship, which are the basis for healthy, livable communities.

Q: Is zoning an issue for pocket neighborhoods?
A: Most towns and cities have zoning regulations that limit housing to detached, single family homes on large private lots with a street out front. Forward-thinking planners are seeing pocket neighborhoods as a way to increase housing options and limit sprawl, while preserving the character of existing neighborhoods. The zoning section of my pocket neighborhoods website [see sidebar, next page] has more information about this.
The Eco Trailer Park

Zoning and building codes are the bane of tiny house advocates, and are perhaps the next frontier for so-called smart growth and eco-development. But for now, many enthusiasts have settled for hidden, backwoods lots or trailer parks. And, says Canadian eco-architect Andy Thomson, that’s not such a bad thing. He points out that the trailer park is probably the most overlooked form of sustainable and affordable housing.

Thomson says he has had a love affair with trailer parks since 1995 when he realized it was next to impossible to design off-grid homes to be compliant with obsolete building codes. He then discovered that RVs, tents, and trailers fell under different standards.

So he began designing to the trailer code, creating a different kind of small, green, affordable, pre-fab home. He realized that trailers are inherently greener than conventional housing (because fewer resources are used to build them, and for heating, lighting, and cooling). And trailer parks satisfy eco-development goals and provide an affordable alternative to conventional housing with minimal disruption to existing flora and fauna. He also points out that trailers do not require permanent foundations or expensive infrastructure and landscaping, and roads are often designed to preserve their park’s natural features. (See Thomson’s website www.earthstream.ca for much more information, including photographs, about his well-developed concept of an eco trailer park.)

Thomson and other architects have many designs ready to go as soon as developers get over the trailer park stigma and see it as the truly green community it could be. We have heard of a few such projects at or just beyond the dream stage across North America, reinventing the trailer park into a true tiny house community. So it’s just a matter of time!

Learn More

Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small Scale Community in a Large Scale World by Ross Chapin (Taunton Press, 2011)

Tiny Homes: Simple Shelter by Lloyd Kahn (Shelter Publications, 2012)

The Small House Book by Jay Shafer (Tumbleweed Tiny House; 2nd edition, 2009)

Little House on a Small Planet by Shay Salomon (Lyons Press, 2009)

Tiny House Design & Construction Guide by Dan Louche (Tiny Home Builders, 2012)

Small is Beautiful by Wendy Priesnitz in Natural Life Magazine, May/June 2007
www.naturallifemagazine.com/0706/smallhouse.htm

Nomadic Small Space Living by Wendy Priesnitz in Natural Life Magazine, November/December 2005
www.naturallifemagazine.com/0512/nomadic-small-space-living.htm

www.tinyhousecommunity.com
www.pocket-neighborhoods.net
www.boneyardstudios.com
www.earthstream.ca
www.tentcityurbanism.com
www.tiny-themovie.com
www.tinyhousetalk.com
www.tinyhousemagazine.co

An eco trailer park could provide all the right conditions for a convivial, green neighborhood of tiny houses like Andy Thomson’s miniHOME.