



Tiny houses, big impressions

Keeping life simple—and affordable—by building small

BY MARY-FRANCES LYNCH

ZACH MELANSON

Community Forests International co-founder and program director, Daimen Hardie, outside the Whaelghinbran Nomadic Cabin.

The general housing trend over the past decades has followed the idea that bigger is better, although some Atlantic Canadians are shedding space and downsizing to a tiny scale. Tiny houses aren't new in Atlantic Canada; our architecture is firmly rooted in being small.

The region's First Nations peoples lived in portable birch bark wigwams, sometimes housing multiple families. In Newfoundland, the 'tilt' was introduced in 17th century fishing stations and was a rugged shelter made of vertical spruce logs, forming a small rectangular room covered with a sod and branch roof. At sea, Maritime fishermen were accustomed to bunking up in tight quarters on schooners like the *Bluenose*, while on-land, small cabins like the 1853 Grand-Daddy cabin in Meteghan, Digby County, the oldest recorded in *Backwoods Cabins of Nova Scotia*, remain common for rural Atlantic recreation.

Today, to go *tiny* is certainly a lifestyle choice, and one that attracts those wanting to live year-round or seasonally in a more sustainable manner, keeping life simple, affordable and environmentally light.

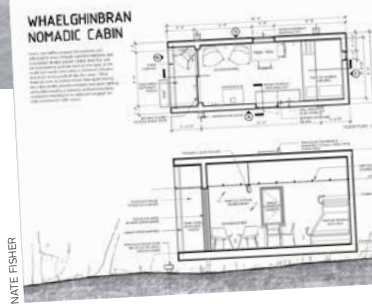
Tiny shelter campus

Daimen Hardie and his colleagues at Community Forests International have a vision to reconnect people with nature while tackling climate change. To them, the answer is small, literally. The organization runs a biannual competition where architects, designers, and DIY enthusiasts pitch a design for a tiny shelter less than 184 square feet, to be built at their Rural Innovation Campus in Sussex, NB. Each year there is a different theme given to designers; in 2016 the theme was, "Can a building clear the air?"

"One of the main design criteria, in addition to being tiny, all-season, and low carbon, is to draw inspiration from



Above: CFI's Daimen Hardie and Estelle Drisdelle planning a cabin location. Right: floorplans for the 2014 winner.



COMMUNITY FORESTS INTERNATIONAL

MATE FISHER



MARY-FRANCES LYNCH

■ Jessie Litven is building her tiny house in Halifax's north end. Among her resourceful innovations is the use of PEI-milled sheep's wool for insulation.

the Maritime building tradition – not just early Acadian and English styles but also the traditions of the region's first architects, the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq Nations," says Daimen.

The Whaelghinbran Nomadic Cabin won the first competition in 2014, meeting the criteria with an innovative design expressing the region's Aboriginal and Acadian architectural roots. The design was based on a portable wigwam that blends into the surrounding Acadian forest. The team put its portability to the test, building the shelter in Sackville and, with a few white knuckles, watched it be transported 150 kilometres to Sussex, where it arrived safely in one piece.

Last year's competition saw big numbers. With more than 60 entries from 24 countries, a German design called "Be a Part of the Nature" took first prize. "It combines some very old building technologies to create a very peaceful, inspired space that will nestle perfectly into the sloping forest floor onsite," says Daimen. The shelter uses reclaimed lumber and straw insulation, has a moss roof, and outer wood cladding that has undergone a Japanese technique called *shou sugi ban* where the wood is charred, leaving it resistant to rot, pests, and fire. The shelter joined the Whaelghinbran Nomadic Cabin at CFI's fledgling campus, providing accommodation

for environmental education students, giving them a chance to live the lessons of tiny living first-hand.

Small, on the Rock

Jess Puddister and Tim Ward are building what they believe to be Newfoundland and Labrador's first tiny house, in a contemporary sense at least. Tim is no stranger to small spaces having grown up in South East Bight, a remote fishing outpost accessible only by boat. Of his parents' upbringing he says, "Each family had two parents and seven children in a house of 1,000 square feet, so a little over 100 square feet each. And that was the norm."

For Tim, growing up was much the same. He remembers houses being small and busy (especially during kitchen parties) with a tight-knit community feel, all features that he says shape his desire to live tiny today.

The first he and Jess heard about the modern tiny house movement was when they struck up a conversation with a Nova Scotian tiny house dweller on a flight to Ireland. By the time they landed, a seed had been planted that would a year later grow into a full-blown tiny building project. "The main benefit for me that comes from living a tiny house life is freedom," says Jess. As a recent university graduate, it means freedom from accumulating more debt, leaving room for her and Tim to

What is 'tiny' and how does it measure up?

- Tiny houses are typically between 100 and 400 square feet
- Average size of a new semi-detached home in Canada in 2012 was 1,900 square feet and 1,800 in Atlantic Canada
- A tiny house can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000—depending on materials used
- The average Canadian home cost \$508,567 in March 2016—while average costs in the Atlantic region were \$258,563 in Newfoundland and Labrador, \$223,520 in Nova Scotia, \$194,094 in PEI and \$154,371 in New Brunswick
- Buildings contribute their fair share of harmful greenhouse gas emissions—30 per cent of the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions come from the building sector



JESS PUDDISTER

■ Tim Ward working on the wall of the tiny house he and Jess Puddister are building in St. John's.

be entrepreneurial and travel while maintaining a base in Newfoundland.

The couple have been building their 210 square foot home in a warehouse outside St. John's and, upon their return from travel in Japan, will add a few finishing touches before they move in. "I very much look forward to when our house is complete and we can invite people over," says Tim.

Creative catalyst

Like Jess and Tim, Jessie Litven is a fearless do-it-yourselfer, building her tiny house in Halifax's north end. She doesn't see size as a limitation, rather a creative catalyst. She got resourceful in many ways, from practical foot-activated sink taps and a manual laundry machine to save water and power, insulation from PEI-milled sheep's wool, re-used windows and doors, to use of milk-based paints.

"The quality of a space has very little to do with square footage," says Jessie, who had been thinking of going tiny for a few years. After months of research, she designed the house and sourced the materials with the criteria of local, environmentally-friendly and re-used where possible. The fact that she is building it with the help of handy friends mean that many memories will shape her space. "It forces you to think about what makes you feel happy in a space; what do you really need?"

Tiny builds

At the age of 50, Dawn Higgins realized that she didn't really need that much after over a year backpacking through Europe and South America. Coming home to Lunenburg, she wanted a smaller house that reflected her newfound freedom and couldn't fathom settling into a large house with a mortgage. She and friend James Constable built her tiny house and launched into the building business with Full Moon Tiny Shelters.

Nearing four years in business, the company is working on its eighth



■ A tiny house with a tiny garden.

■ Thoughtful design means no wasted space.

custom-designed shelter in a roster of four-season homes, cottages and studio spaces of less than 200 square feet. With Dawn downsizing again to a backpack and travelling abroad, James and his partner Jennifer now run the business. They draw on their experience of living and working on boats, maximizing every inch of space and providing quality craftsmanship in their construction. According to James, "In a small space you can afford to do things right, have a host of hand-made details and customized living space that you can't always afford in a larger house."

A tiny-friendly community

Seeing that people are more interested in new and different ways of living, James believes that full-fledged tiny house communities are the way of the future. Timothy Habinksi, warden of Annapolis County, has the same vision: "It seems to me that facilitating the creation of tiny home communities is low hanging fruit if you're looking at economic development for a rural



municipality." The municipality is putting a plan in place for tiny house preparedness, easing the way for permits, to make it possible for people to build and dwell in tiny homes in the county. There's been a proposal for a dedicated tiny-house community but it hasn't yet been confirmed. Such an initiative makes sense for an aging demographic looking to downsize while also addressing the county's priorities of energy efficiency and home affordability.

To some, new tiny houses cropping up in the region represent an environmental solution and affordable alternative, while to others they remain a common connection to the early dwellings of our region. Whatever the reason, the movement is building a new and strong foundation of tiny homes on the Atlantic landscape. 🐾