Teeny house, big lie: Why so many proponents of the tiny-house movement have decided to upsize

As we were packing up our cottage last summer, my 14-year-old casually observed: “It’s good we’re leaving, while we still like each other.”

For 10 weeks of the year, my husband and I, along with our two sons, live blissfully in Nova Scotia in a two-room A-frame that measures roughly 320 square feet, accounting for the sloped roof. We sleep in the loft upstairs, which adds about 80 square feet. This puts our cottage within “tiny home” range, making us part-time members of a high-minded, green-friendly, cost-saving movement to live small in a world of super-sized mansions. As with many other tiny-home dwellers, we use a compost toilet. We bring in our own water by boat, take sun-heated showers outdoors and cook on the BBQ. On rainy days, we convert the dinner table into a ping-pong table.

I could leave it at that, with my eco-mom credentials secured, my brood stuffed in a birdhouse with the walls closing in. But that would be cheating. Our front view is the open ocean, as big and expansive as it gets. Our sun-drenched deck is as large as the cottage floor, a perfect work space. We regularly head over to Grandma’s house for laundry and a jacuzzi – there’s nothing a tiny-home inhabitant appreciates more than borrowed plumbing. Our boys spend their weekdays at sailing camp. For a tiny house, it’s big living.

But could we stay there, crammed together year round, through fall storms and winter weather? (Assuming, of course, we had insulation.) Could I handle 12 months of banging my head on the roof when I wake up in the morning, clambering down the loft ladder in the dark, having no place to read in private while cabin fever set in?

Talk about the fastest family trip to Paradise Lost.

We’re far from alone – although you don’t hear much about the people who shutter their tiny houses among all the upbeat stories with perfectly staged photo spreads, or those two new HGTV builder shows, *Tiny House Hunters* and *Tiny House, Big Living*. (You too can live small in an oversized world!) The ardour for tiny homes suggests it’s the next best trend in four walls. Certainly, the motivation is hard to fault.

As a society, we’ve been urban sprawling to our detriment, wasting energy, space and interest on sky-high mortgages. And we could definitely kick the knick-knack habit. But how small can we shrink without wreaking havoc of a different kind? Are tiny homes really sustainable?

Maybe not so much. At least, not for everyone. Remember that couple featured in the documentary *Tiny*, which depicted their tiny home’s construction and extolled the minimalist lifestyle? They parked the end result in a field in Colorado and never lived in it together full-time. (In a blog, they explained that they left this out of the movie “so as not to spoil the experience of seeing that story unfold on screen.”) You may also recall Carrie and Shane Caverly, who were featured on TV shows and in newspaper articles for “bonding” in their tiny home? They lasted 18 months before they decided it was “too small” and moved into an apartment. Many more owners rent out their tiny homes or use them only as weekend getaways, and it’s not easy to find a tiny-home builder actually dwelling full-time in the product they’re selling, at least in Canada.

To be fair, the people abandoning their tiny homes aren't trading them for McMansions – their fallbacks are still small by modern standards. And there are certainly people who make a full-time go of it. But it's not hard to find up-sizers, even among the movement's keenest enthusiasts.

And before tiny houses – and shipping container homes – are considered as solutions for affordable housing in cities, that should give urban planners and policy makers pause.

After all, it's one thing to live by choice in a chic shack in a pastoral setting or a warm climate. It's quite another to be forced into a micro-room without a view because that's all you can afford. What might work short-term for a hip millennial in New York, or a homeless person in California, is not necessarily the answer for a single mom.

"I can't imagine anyone with children not going bonkers in them," says Susan Saegert, an environmental psychology professor at the City University of New York graduate school, who studies the effect of overcrowding on families.

Haven't we learned anything from futuristic sci-fi movies? Cramming people into boxes stacked on top of each other, thus turning space into a currency, is just asking for Matt Damon to lead a rebellion.

"We are getting a lot of idealism, and a lot of people promoting this perfect image without having the longevity to endure it," says Dak Kopec, the director of design for human health at Boston Architectural College. "We are not being pro-active, to see what we have learned already from history." The lesson: Fad housing often crumbles into slum-living for the poorest families. When was the last time a trailer park was a coveted address?

Cramped dwellings also take their toll, research shows, on our physical and mental health.

"Everybody needs their space," Kopec says. A lack of space has been linked to depression, alcoholism and poor school performance in children.

"When you start going with tiny spaces, including attics and basements where there is poor light and ventilation, you are really getting into the whole reason we started having standards in the 19th century in the first place," Saegert says. In the late 1800s, community leaders realized that tuberculosis – and an epidemic of misery – was spreading rapidly among workers living in packed, crumbling tenement housing, and set about upgrading standards. More recently, a Australian study published in 2000 found that, even accounting for poverty, the risk for a child to contract meningitis was 10 times higher if he or she lived in an overcrowded home.

"It's very easy to fall into the romanticism of the trailer-based tiny homes," says Marc Davison, one of the organizers of YEG Tiny Home, a community group exploring the idea in Edmonton. Davison himself was inspired by the idea, especially if it meant more time and money to spend travelling. "In my brain, I was thinking: 'We could totally make 150 square feet work.'" He and his wife recently travelled to Portland, Ore., where the tiny-home movement took early root. They soon realized that the model homes they toured were just too small, especially for their pets, and any kids that might come along. "It didn't feel homey. It felt like work, where you had to watch every step, every movement, watch out for bumping your head." Maybe it was feasible in California, he mused, where they could live most of their days outside. "This is not practical in Canada."

Still, there is no shortage of builders trying to make a go of it here. A tiny-home community is in the works in Vancouver, and there's a micro village outside Terrace, B.C. As the country's largest cities look to increase density with lane-way housing and basement apartments, smaller living space becomes a necessary consideration. And some municipalities are experimenting with tiny-housing communities for homeless people – even a transitional, bare-bones shoebox home is superior to a park bench.

Living low-rent (or with a micro-mortgage) is a definite draw. Tiny houses cost a fraction of the average home on the market. Priced per square footage, however, they aren't exactly bargain basement. A 190-square-foot model will cost about $20,000 for an empty shell, and up to $100,000 for a designer edition. (Budget up for the mini outdoor hot tub.) Tiny living usually means getting by with little closet space, a mini fridge and a compost toilet while climbing a ladder each night to sleep. But the finest models are indeed marvels of efficiency and style – well-placed skylights, tables that turn into beds, stacked drawers that double as stairs. A couple in Nova Scotia, who moved into their tiny home in November, have an elevator to lift their dog into the loft bedroom.

What constitutes "tiny" continues to be a subject of debate among devotees. There are examples under 100 square feet. Anything over 500 is typically considered "small." (By comparison, the average size of a new house is about 1,950 square feet, nearly double what it was in 1975.) The tiny size can make building permits tricky, although the smaller models are usually built on wheels, and rarely with permanent foundation. They can, in principal, be parked anywhere – if your neighbourhood bylaw officer looks the other way. Finding a place to put their tiny homes is one of the biggest headaches owners encounter.

But like the wheels on the bottom of those tiny trailer homes, the movement's form falls short on function. If it's commitment to the cause that's being measured, then Allan Cerf, an advertising director in California, was surprised by what he discovered when he set out to research how to live in a tiny home. "The movement seems like a mirage," he says. Even in Portland, which is often seen as a city friendly to micro-housing, "none of the owners I spoke to had ever lived in a tiny home." They used them as rental income, or, in the case of his current landlord, to store bird seed. There was also the constant risk of being forced to move by city officials; one landlady he met, whose tiny-home tenant spent long months travelling for work, moved it onto her property at night to keep its existence hush-hush. Plus, they were more expensive than he expected, and, without land to sweeten the pot, a tiny house showing wear and tear loses resale value. "I should have been more skeptical," he says, looking back. "I have given up the dream – because I found out it was just a dream."

A dream, in fact, that Melanie Sorrentino and her husband, Mark, tried out a few years ago when they parked their 150-square-foot tiny house on a wooded four acres in Eureka Springs, Ark. Their place was as rustic as they come – no indoor plumbing, a bucket of sawdust for a toilet. They lasted one year. "It was insane," Sorrentino says. Rather than the freedom to be creative, she felt stifled in a too-small space. "There is no room for the human; where is the room for the muse?" she asks. For a long time, she didn't want to admit it wasn't working, that they would have been better off putting a down payment on a traditional home. "At the end of the year, I was seriously worried I was going to have a heart attack from stress." One day, she and Mark looked at each other, and decided, then and there, to sell the land, with the house on it, and walk away.

"The tiny-house movement is really good philosophically, but it shouldn't be whitewashed

with cutesy little houses," she says. "My advice for anyone looking at a tiny house – or any lifestyle painted so perfectly – is to try to imagine whether you can grow as a human being in that space."

Be prepared: You can't shrink your home and keep up a large-scale life. So cautions Travis Marttinen, who built his own 187-square-foot home in Barrie, Ont., while completing an architectural technology diploma. He sees people jumping on the trend but expecting to live exactly as they did before. "You need to radically simplify. Not only in the number of possessions, but in lifestyle. You cannot have all of the creature comforts that most people are used to. It simply doesn't work." Marttinen and his wife, Dannilee, and their toddler, Holden, lived in the house for 18 months. They sold it recently after moving to British Columbia. "It was awesome for a time," he says – just not a long-term option for a growing family.

For my own family, meanwhile, it's been a few months back in Ottawa, sprawling out on three storeys, relishing the indoor plumbing. But soon, the countdown to return to our tiny cottage will start. There's comfort in living small, in a place that can be tidied in 10 minutes, that naturally discourages consumerism, and makes you careful with food and water consumption.

But let's be honest. It's the ocean that brings us back each summer. Squeeze that A-frame into a lane-way city lot, with brick walls for a view, and as my boys so succinctly put it, none of us would like each other for very long.