

# For some, tiny houses just the right size

By Steve Campbell  
MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

FORT WORTH, Texas — They had the land and the plan ready for a 3,000-square-foot retirement home.

But sticker shock and a sour economy spurred Lee and Donna McCollough to downsize their dream into a 336-square-foot “country cabin.”

“It was mostly an economic move. But it’s serving our lifestyle very well,” said Lee McCollough of their home near Schulenburg in South Texas.

Built from vintage salvage materials by Tiny Texas Houses of Luling, McCollough said the “turnkey package” cost \$70,000. “It’s great,” said the 62-year-old retired electrical technician. “People are impressed with the construction and coziness of it. It’s built like an Igloo ice chest.”

Tiny home proponents call it “super downsizing,” but that’s just the extreme edge of a growing movement away from suburban castles and into “right-sized” homes that require less energy, upkeep and money, experts say.

“The era of the ‘McMansion’ could well be over as home sizes have been trending downward recently, with a significantly higher number of architects reporting demand for smaller homes this year,” Kermit Baker, chief economist for the American Institute of Architects, said in a news release.

In a June survey by the National Association of Home Builders, 59 percent of respondents said they are building smaller homes, said Stephen Melman, the group’s director of economic services.

As the economy sank in 2008, new homes started shrinking, Melman said. Census data showed the average new home declined from 2,600 square feet in the second quarter of 2008 to 2,373 square feet in the third quarter, he said.

“This isn’t the worst thing in the world,” Melman said. “People are buying the home they need. ... Energy costs are up and people are interested in cutting costs.”

Brad Kittel of Tiny Texas Houses is addressing those needs.

In 2006, he started the company to use materials from his salvage business. Using wood from old homes and barns, he built a 160-square-foot cottage to make a point.

“I wanted people to understand that salvage antiques aren’t just for decoration. Once I built the first one, everybody liked it. It got a better response than I thought it would,” said Kittel, 53.

“I figured a 12-by-20-foot would be the biggest when I started, and now we are all the way up to a 12-by-33,” he said. “That might be too big.”

One couple is considering a frontier-style “dog trot” cabin that combines two small boxes with an open breezeway under a shared roof, he said.

Kittel’s homes, which are built in Luling and trucked to home sites, drew initial interest as artists studios and weekend retreats.

Now, the economy has people viewing them as full-time dwellings. Kittel has built about 30 of the petite abodes, and six more are in the works. They range in price from \$38,000 to \$90,000.

Kay Love was the first to call one home.

Love, 62, who owns a cattle company, has a 1,300-square-foot home in Austwell, Texas, but she wanted a second place near her family in Stockdale. Now she lives half the time in a 300-square-foot “Victorianish” home.

“I planned to build a big house and then decided I didn’t need a big house,” she said. “I am real happy

with it. I’m not environmentally correct, it just works for me. I had lived on a boat, so small things don’t really bother me. The house is comfortable; it sits in a pasture on the top of a hill with a nice view. It just fits.”

Kittel’s not the only builder squeezing into this tiny niche.

Jay Shafer, who has lived in a 100-square-foot home since 1999, has become a Pied Piper of the micro movement.

Four years ago, the 44-year-old former art teacher and health food store clerk started Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. in Graton, Calif., which sells plans for small homes and builds tiny portable ones on wheels. He’s written *The Small House Book* and teaches courses on building small.

Interest in his homes is driven in equal measure by the economy and the environment, Shafer said. His home plans start at \$995 and the houses on wheels run from \$35,000 to \$60,000.

For such Spartan spaces, those prices sound steep but Shafer says building small is akin to “tailoring a suit.”

Kittel says it’s like “boat building considering the time and effort it takes.” The small houses take four to six months to build, he said. “It’s more labor-intensive because you are not using a 4-by-8-foot sheet of Sheetrock to cover the wall. Our cabinets are built into the house the old-fashioned way.”

And it’s not just small operators tapping into downsizing.

Lowe’s, the big-box home improvement retailer, sells kits and plans for Katrina Cottages, first designed as alternatives to the Federal Emergency Management Administration’s trailers.

“The program continues to draw interest from a variety of customers across the United States,” spokeswoman Maureen Rich wrote in an e-mail.

Minuscule homes aren’t for the material minded.

“A guy came in and was talking about downsizing and he said what I’m doing is super downsizing,” Kittel said. “And admittedly, for most people it is that. If you are coming out of a conventional lifestyle with a 2,000-square-foot house and two people and you are moving into one of my houses, you are super downsizing.”

Shafer says getting rid of possessions takes an adjustment. “You look at what makes you happy and get rid of everything else,” he said.

Besides, all that stuff is just an encumbrance, he says.

“Living in a small house, I’m a lot more free to do what I want to do,” Shafer said. “Some people live in a very large debtor’s prison.”

Melman, of the home builders association, thinks downsizing is here to stay. “There’s a huge baby boom bulge coming out, and most of them are going to be empty nesters. They don’t need five bedrooms, they need two bedrooms,” he said.

The economy, energy prices and demographics are changing conceptions about housing, he said. “It’s becoming more of what you need. People are seriously considering a better fit.” That’s what Cheri and Scott Carpenter of Fort Worth are doing. They have one child and live in a 2,700-square-foot home but think that a house one-third smaller would simplify their life.

“We talked about it and decided we had too much house. We like to take vacations and we would like to have less maintenance,” said Cheri, 40, a literacy coach for the Fort Worth school district.

For now, they’re just hunting. “I’m picky,” she said.

The McColloughs have moved in, but they still own a home in Dickinson so there’s some “super downsizing” to come.

They do have a built-in fudge factor — a barn that serves as Lee’s shop and “man cave.” He admits that consolidating will be challenging.

But so far, they aren’t feeling cramped. “The only problem is if we have six to eight people over it’s kind of small,” he said. “The impressive thing is that it will sleep six very comfortably. It has a separate bedroom, a kitchen and a full bath with a claw-foot tub.”

The kitchen features a double refrigerator and a four-burner gas range. “They have those little refrigerators but we needed a beer fridge,” Lee said with a laugh.

With a covered front porch and a small “breakfast” porch, the couple spends as much time as they can outdoors.

“It’s not for a person that wants the great indoor space, it can cramp your style there,” he said. “We could live here forever.”

And when it’s too hot for that, they can crank up the air conditioning without flinching — it cost about \$50 to cool the cabin in June.

## Staging tips that can help sell a home

By Mary Beth Breckenridge

AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Staging a home for sale can set it apart from the competition and make it inviting to the greatest number of buyers. Kiplinger’s Personal Finance has these suggestions for staging your home for less than \$1,000:

- Stage it virtually. This option is aimed at empty homes, because photos of bare walls and floors can make online shoppers lose interest. You just snap photos of the empty rooms and send them to a virtual stager, who uses computer imagery to “furnish” them. The photos can be posted online or used in marketing materials.

Kiplinger’s says prices range from around \$200 for three rooms to \$325 for five rooms, although rates vary by city. Type “virtual staging” into an online search engine to find companies.

- Pay for a plan, but provide the muscle. Many stagers will work as consultants, touring your house and offering suggestions on presenting it. Barb Schwarz, founder of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says the average fee for a consultation is \$350.

Then it’s up to you to do the cleaning, decluttering and rearranging. Kiplinger’s suggests renting a portable storage unit if you have a lot of stuff to store. One company, PODS, will deliver the unit to your driveway for \$75, transport it to a secure storage facility for another \$75 and charge you a monthly storage fee of around \$150, depending on where you live, the time of year and other factors.

- Add some pizzazz. Sometimes a few decorative extras can update or neutralize a home’s decor. You may be able to negotiate with a staging company for decor items such as wall art, area rugs, lamps or other accessories. One company Kiplinger’s checked charges roughly \$250 per month, with a three-month minimum, plus one month’s fee for setup and breakdown.

- Focus on a few rooms. Hire a stager to redo just the entryway, main living area, kitchen and master bedroom. Stagers usually charge \$75 to \$125 an hour. Ignore secondary rooms, or do them yourself once you’ve seen how the pro works.