

My new home is tiny – or is it?

Description

Since moving to this area to work at Virginia Tech, my wife and I have chanced to meet at least two separate families each living in what's been described as "tiny houses." (One of them has been covered by news outlets such as [Huffington Post](#); [check out their blog here](#).) So when we came across a builder who could build us a 12' x 28' cabin for a very reasonable price, the idea of living in it did not seem completely unreasonable.

A bit of background: at the time, we had a couple of needs to meet. In the short-term, we needed a place to stay on a great piece of property we bought in Floyd, VA until we could build our "big house" – a 1200 square foot ranch we've been planning for years. In the long-term, we'll need a "man cave" where I can put my music equipment and home entertainment system, so that it doesn't mess up the big house.

[Amado's House](#) unknown

Amado's brand-new little house near Virginia Tech.

These cabins are 300 square feet of standard stick-frame construction with a real wood exterior and tongue-and-groove pine interior walls. We designed one with a minimalist bathroom and a galley kitchen that, to us, seems an ideal solution to our short-term and long-term needs.

It's a solution that comes with a cost: for at least the next couple of years, we'll be living in a space smaller than a typical two-car garage. But working for an office that leads projects that raise the standard of living in developing countries has given me a different perspective on our so-called tiny house.

Small in the United States

Getting worldwide statistics on house sizes proved to be a challenge, but there's no shortage of data on homes in the U.S. and other developed nations.

How big is your home? In the U.S., homes went from an average of 983 square feet in the 1950s to 1,780 square feet in 1978 to a peak of 2,479 square feet in 2007. The median size of a new US home in 2010 was 2,169 square feet. A 2011 report by the National Association of Realtors shows only 1 percent of buyers purchased a home of 1,000 square feet or less. By American standards, I and my cozy cabin are clearly on the fringe.

Lately I've been comparing the size of our living space to a studio apartment in New York City. Turns out, even that is inaccurate. An article from 2009 reported that the average NYC apartment is about 1300 square feet. Another, from July 2012, gave me this surprise: "Under current zoning laws, all

apartments must be at least 400 square feet, but Mayor Bloomberg said he plans to change the zoning laws to make studio apartments that are between 275 and 300 square feet legal.”

We're too small to pass NYC code! Which makes me wonder how the [four apartments featured here](#) get away with being 210, 175, 90, and 78 square feet, respectively. Somebody's got to hold down the low end of the curve. Glad it's not me.

Small in the Developed World

An article from 2009 that listed the average floor space of newly built homes across several countries. I've done the conversion from meters-square to feet-square:

- USA: 2303 sq ft
- Australia: 2217 sq ft
- Denmark: 1475 sq ft
- France: 1216 sq ft
- Spain: 1044 sq ft
- Ireland: 947 sq ft
- UK: 818 sq ft

The UK-based agency that generated these statistics came to the conclusion that the UK was way behind, and needed to catch up!

No surprise that data for Canada tracks well with the U.S. The average size of a Canadian house in 1945 was just over 800 square feet; in 1975, it was 1075 square feet. A source from 2003 cited the average size of a house in Canada as about 1800 square feet.

These homes are still not small enough to put my new home into perspective. But consider this: the “small” 1,000 square foot home that only 1% of Americans bought in 2011 is “average” for people in Spain or Ireland.

Big in the Developing World

I knew from anecdotal evidence and the stories of my colleagues returning from abroad that living spaces are dramatically smaller in parts of the developing world. But I could find little hard data I could use to see my new tiny home from a truly international perspective. I did, however, find illuminating stories. Like [this one from Oxfam](#), about a day in the life of a boy from Mali:

“There are two rooms in my home. My mum, dad, and little sister sleep in one, and I sleep in the other with my younger brother and another boy who sometimes stays. Eight households share our compound: five families and three single men. I sleep on a mattress on the floor. Usually I have my own mattress, but at the moment I'm sharing with my brother because we have a visitor staying.”

[Habitat for Humanity Kenya](#) describes the homes of people living in poverty in Kenya:

“...normally one or two rooms, made up of mud and wattle, and in the rural areas, grass thatched. With time, the mud wall develops holes, the roof leaks and the dirt floor harbours parasitic insects that infect the inhabitants of the house. The one or two rooms house between 5 and 8 family members and are therefore overcrowded.”

I finally got some figures from [Habitat for Humanity Philippines](#). These are not average home sizes for the country; these are the sizes of the homes they build that represent dramatic upgrades for the people they build them for. There's a Duplex design with a standard floor area of approximately 301 square feet. They make a Rowhouse unit that has a 183-to-194 square foot floor area at the ground floor with a provision for loft of about 91 square meters, totaling about 274-to-285 square feet floor area. And there's a Walk-Up Apartment building design in which each living unit is 226 square feet.

So, finally, a point of comparison: my home is on the high side, compared to the types of homes that Habitat for Humanity Philippines is building to give the poorest people there a decent place to live.

Size doesn't matter

You wouldn't catch me trying to convince you anything about the size home you live in – whether you ought to live large or small, whether 900 sq ft is too much or 2400 sq ft not enough. I'm not an evangelist for tiny-home living. I would not even have told you that I prefer tiny-home living. I'm all about designing and developing websites, and singing, writing, and recording music. My point is that, to a large degree, the size of my home is incidental to those activities.

Is my home big enough? Ask a boy from Mali, a family in Kenya, a family in the Philippines.

Category

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