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Ideology v. Reality: The Tiny House Movement in America

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I. Introduction

The American Dream of the previous generation comprises an idyllic picture of prosperity packaged in a white-picket fenced, two-story house in a safe and suburban neighborhood. But what if the cost of education, property, transportation, and a tough job market bar the way to this idealized way of life that promises happiness and success? For some, the solution to freedom from the consumerism and materialism of America is the option to downsize that white-picket fence and recycle those symbols of perfection into a symbol of practicality: literally creating new walls and a new life. Tiny House living has become a small but vibrant movement in America, creating an option for some who wish to live simpler, more frugal, and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. However, there seems to be a markable divide between motivations and philosophies creating a schism in the community. On one side, we see grassroots efforts to truly create sustainable, unique, and personalized efforts to live small. On the other, the consumerist society of America has produced businesses selling pre-fabricated and mass-produced kits to aid those desiring a new lifestyle. For better or for worse, the Tiny House movement creates three questions that will be answered in breadth throughout the entirety of this thesis. How are these two opposing trends in America shaping the future of this movement? What do the lives of Tiny House dwellers look like on both sides? What is the predicted future outcome of the Tiny House movement in light of the two different philosophies?

II. Literature Review

A surprising lack of peer-reviewed research articles concerning the Tiny House movement led to an examination of key elements that provide stepping stones leading to the movement itself.

Philosophical beginnings- Thoreau

Walden (1854) by American transcendentalist thinker Henry David Thoreau is perhaps the first spark of the Tiny House movement in response to a consumerist and materialistic culture in America. Thoreau is one of the first to popularize the thought that we as humans should attempt to live simply, in the midst of nature and buck against the status quo. Thoreau is prolifically quoted with the convicting words “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (1854). While not every Tiny House dreamer wishes to live in the woods; ‘woods’ can be replaced with the idea that we as humans should not live so stagnate and stationary; that we should strive for a greater meaning and richness of life in some way. At the core, Tiny House living can offer that enduring sentiment. Thoreau’s timeless classic calls for and candidly examines a simple and raw lifestyle and serves as a fantastic bible for the heart of this movement. April Anson (2014) agrees and assesses Thoreau’s’ politically-charged agenda; concluding that he “reflects the consequences of civilization’s politics, emphasizes community, and explores critical paradoxes central to issues of mobility and waste” (p. 301).

Modern Thoreauvians

Circulating in pop-culture is the documentary “TINY: a story of living small” a well-made film by Merete Mueller and Christopher Smith frankly describing their process and journey through building a Tiny House , and profiles six others whom have succeeded in their endeavors to down-size. Honestly describing his search for simplicity and freedom, Smith admits to knowing little-to-nothing about construction and provides an average-joe persona to illustrate his venture. Entertaining and thought-provoking, this well-known documentary serves as a vital

corner in the puzzle piece to the Tiny House Movement in America; motivating and educating the general public about such a decision and possibility. Brad Kittle is a prime example of the incredible ingenuity and high standard of sustainability, functionality, aesthetic appeal, and personal purpose in this movement. On his webpage, Kittle (2012) claims that with his philosophy of “Pure-Salvage Living” he believes “that there are presently enough building materials sitting on the ground to build much of the next generation of housing”. All it takes to make it so is pure human energy, spirit, and the desire to build something that will last for several lifetimes.” Kittle and Thoreau’s vision share similar qualities, and form the idealistic grass-roots flavor of some Tiny House dwellers. As a mode to live more simply, sustainably, and naturally Tiny Houses attract people with Thoreauvian sentiments.

Consumerism and a Derailed Ideology

Instead of the grass-roots desire to build a personal living masterpiece, the market for pre-fabricated houses has created a successful niche in the economy. Research by Schenk (2015) sought to compile the major options for a pre-fab house. Between 1908-1940 pre-packaged house kits could be bought from Sears and Roebuck Company and assembled using detailed instructions (Cooke & Freidman, 2001). Although not usually under the “tiny” definition of around 400 square feet, this is not a new idea. Cottage Kits however are another name for the ability to purchase a packaged house to set up yourself. Welch (2012) honestly warns consumers of the pitfalls of pre-fab housing and to assess realistically time, money, location, and function of your cottage. In addition to a flat-packed pre-fab box full of walls and doors, another facet of this market holds Jay Schafer’s company Tumbleweed Tiny Houses in Sonoma, California, as an example. In this system, consumers click online through window options, sink upgrades, loft specifications, toilet type, etc. all in an easily accessed web interface. Weeks later, the

component parts of the house will show up stacked on the trailer you are to use as a foundation, or for about \$10,000 more they will deliver the already-assembled house on wheels to your door. Many smaller companies are popping up that operate in a similar fashion.

Bureaucratic Reality

Idealism frequently gets slapped in the face with the reality of bureaucratic quagmire. Logistically, the plans for a Tiny House in most American cities are thwarted by yards of red tape including zoning laws, city planning, water/electric standards, building codes and misunderstanding neighbors. Many city ordinances require homes to be 1,000 square feet at least. Tiny Homes are often defined as 300-400 square feet. Dawn Withers (2012) penned a substantive and academic argument entitled “Looking for a Home: How Micro-Housing Can Help California” that wonderfully enumerates the benefits of micro-living for the whole community and serves as a foil to the critics. She de-tangles the political issue surrounding micro-living and argues for their vitality and service to the community, especially the fact that they “should not scoff at the idea that they may provide much-needed housing for students, single adults, the elderly and mobile labor” (Withers, 2012, p. 151). Her journal article provides a fantastic argument and example to the academic world that Tiny Houses are not just a romantic ideal, but a sustainable and intelligent decision.

Economic Sustainably

The bureaucratic barriers to Tiny Houses parallel economic problems in America, and create further uncertainty that the vision espoused in *Walden* can be achieved in present times. The option of a Tiny House cursorily seems like a fantastic solution to the debt-ridden and economically burdened. Lower middle-class sectors of Americans cannot simply afford the luxury of home owner-ship and are caught in a crippling rent cycle. Dreier dives deeper into the

wage-rent disparity and the huge issue that: “working families face a severe shortage of affordable housing. Wages are rising, but housing costs are spiraling upward even faster” (Dreier, 2000). As part of a larger call to downsize the McMansion, Tiny Houses fit into the discussion about the use of micro-living. In large cities, micro apartments are the solutions to people desiring to live in trendy neighborhoods but at an affordable price (Pinho, 2016). Furthermore, Tiny Houses can help those who want home ownership and independence. Gerald Macreannor’s company in Pocket, England is providing small flats at a great price. He astutely observes that while cheap housing is useful, economically the repercussions are that “smaller homes lead to higher densities; higher densities lead to higher land prices and higher land prices lead to crazy purchase prices. Each time a micro- flat is sold, it sets up a chain reaction that nudges up the price of everything else” (Architects’ Journal, 2016). In response to the growing list of TV shows lauding Tiny Houses, *Popular Mechanics* (2016) takes a cynical approach to the future of this movement in light of the desire to downsize financially, asserting this is an “anachronism” and states that “many of these wee cottages are sold by companies charging well into the five figures for what are essentially wood-frame camp trailers that can be moved” (p. 100). This succinctly sums up the argument that banks hold power over Tiny House investors: these dwellings are not investments that carry real economic value. In the economic realm, Tiny Houses have not yet gained credibility and cannot fully serve shining beacons for affordable housing in reality.

Tiny Houses for the Homeless

A notable off-shoot in Tiny House function is the potential to provide low-cost housing, independence, and positive improvements in the homeless communities of America. These few but publicly proselytized hopes for the homeless are a unique ideology that is not very concerned

with Thoreau's thoughts but centralized on practical pursuits for others. Countless reasons and support has been garnered for these communities and several successful venues operate in America, including Occupy Madison Village in Madison, Wisconsin and Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon. Many problems do exist with these ideas including cost, efficiency vs. effectiveness, and city governmental codes. Mingoya (2015) compared these two villages in a case study and concluded that "Tiny House Villages shift a civic responsibility, for better or for worse, into the hands of the private sector and into the hands of the homeless, themselves" (p. 74). Through a visit to Dignity Village, Wyatt (2014) explored the lives of the members and the implications for a city to create a similar village. Throughout her research and others, the important issue of the divide between reality and idle aspiration is stark in Tiny House homeless endeavors. Wyatt (2015) observes "diversity can be like Mother Theresa or that admired relative we often choose not to stand too close to because she makes us look selfish, petty, and forces us out of our comfort zones as we challenge assumptions and decide whether we want to live in the stench of reality of not" (p. 40). Tiny Houses are recognizable as a solution to the homeless populations in America; but not without great effort, cost, and cooperation within cities.

Walden's historical precedent has charged many Tiny House dwellers like Brad Kittle to live simply and sustainably. This ideology has become expanded and unsettled with bureaucratic challenges, economic sustainability issues, the rise of pre-fab kits, and the use of tiny as a solution to the homeless population. From these elements, main questions include: how are these two opposing trends in America shaping the future of this movement, and what do the lives of Tiny House dwellers look like on both sides? The ideology of the Tiny House movement will continue to shift, and this study will seek to determine its future face in America

III. Methodology

This thesis project sought to examine the personal and business aspects of both the grass-roots movement versus commercialized pre-fabricated motivations. Qualitative research methods best illuminate the research questions. Brattlinger and her colleagues define qualitative research as "a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context" (2005, p. 195). Qualitative research methods have been said to be suited for studies that have the goals of (a) understanding the meaning, for participants, of selected experiences, (b) understanding the particular context in which the participants act, (c) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, (d) understanding the process by which events and actions take place, and (e) developing casual explanations (Maxwell, 2005, p.22-23). To best represent both sides with depth and insight, a case study research format will be used to zoom in closer to the business and personal motivations behind two sets of people. A case study "provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus permitting a more holistic study of complex social networks and complexes of social action and social meanings" (Feagan, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 6).

Specifically, interviews were conducted with four Tiny House owners. Interviews were conducted with targeted individuals; two interviewees were self-built tiny home dwellers and two were pre-fab model tiny home dwellers. Interviews took place in a location at the discretion of the individual. The list of interview questions can be found in the appendix. Interviews were audio recorded, with verbal consent obtained before each interview. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Once interviews were recorded, the Principal Investigator transcribed them using the raw audio tapes to accurately record the content of the interviews for maximum research potential.

The Principal Investigator found other similar interviews and literature present and exercised the “constant comparative method” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). She positioned these interviews against other interviews or articles to first buttress findings and find continuities. Next, the Principal Investigator examined each interview individually and utilized “descriptive coding” in which a main idea was extracted and noted. If descriptive codes intersected, those ideas were regarded as themes and grouped as “interpretive coding.” Then, “overarching themes”, defined as “[...] recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question,” were annotated (King & Horrocks, 2011, p. 150). After codes and themes were noted for each interview individually, interviews were put through cross-case analysis to obtain themes and findings. The Principal Investigator also conferred with her honors thesis advisor regarding the research about these analyses, looking at potential evidence that the Principal Investigator did not come up with originally as a possibility (Brattlinger et al., 2005). With these interviews, an in-depth picture of the Tiny House movement in America produced insightful deductions about the future of the movement and ideology fueling different types of Tiny House owners.

As with every study, limitations exist. Though the target number of interviews, four, was small; this was so that the participant’s interviews could be examined as deeply as possible in the timeframe for this thesis. The data obtained was also reflective in nature; the participants espoused their views on Tiny Houses with no previous encounter with the interview questions. Finally, the Principal Investigator acknowledged her own lens through which the data is collected, analyzed, and presented. While this will be elaborated upon in a reflexive manner, it should be noted that an otherwise identical study with another Principal Investigator could present a slightly different set of findings.

Participants

Interviewees were found through internet searches and subsequent email inquiries. All participants confirmed prior to the interview that I had consent to record them, that they lived in a Tiny House, and that they had either built their home DIY style or purchased a pre-fabricated unit or had it contracted. Interview I, with a homeowner whom I will call Cathy, lives in a 78 - square foot house built and designed by her and constructed with her own hands and volunteer friends. Interview II, with an owner whom I will call Sam, built and designed his 250 - square house with his own hands and volunteer friends. Interview III, with homeowners whom I will call Jim and Sarah, researched builders and pre-fab units and purchased their 399 - square foot home from a vendor locally. Interviewee IV, whom I will call Pam, contracted a builder for her 480 - square foot house. Interviews took place over Skype, in person and over the phone. Interview length remained generally in the same time frame (30-45 minutes). The age and gender of these participants varied, and were not seen as crucial to the reliability of this study as it is focusing centrally on ideologies of DIY builders and pre-fab hone customers.

IV. Discussion of Results and Findings

To best illuminate the phenomenon of the Tiny House Movement in America, I decided to talk directly to homeowners about their fueling ideologies, complex stories, and catalytic reasons for beginning their journey to live small. Interviews were transcribed and coded. After a thorough examination of codes placed into categories, the overlapping categories from each interview were extrapolated to form six overarching themes about the lifestyle and opinions of this interview group as a whole. Overall, baseline opinions about financial independence, revitalization of the American Dream, environmental sustainability, and intentionality coupled with minimalism were shared throughout all interviews, but sentiments regarding community

and personal identity were not as strongly shared. I will discuss these six emergent themes in detail alongside interpretive findings to lead to the predicted future of this movement in light of whether one builds or purchases a Tiny House. Additionally, The documentary “Tiny: A Story of Living Small” by Christopher Smith and Merete Muller and countless blogs and articles were extra sources consulted that are consistent with my interviews, and further validate the findings enumerated in this research.

Financial Implications

When asked about the personal reasons and motivations for living small, the financial practicality of a Tiny House was all four candidate’s first words. With the median new home price in America at \$292,000 in 2015 and median household income \$55,775, home ownership is not a feasible reality without taking out the common but lengthy 30 year mortgage. (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). Working a lifetime to pay off this investment in a dwelling was simply not a digestible calling for any of this studies’ four candidates. The American housing market compared to household income on a graph looks like a mountain range- with high points signaling success and prosperity for some, and deep valleys that hit families hard with unemployment and strife, it is no wonder that a desire to live apart from the shifting market produces a strong motivation for a smaller house (see figure I). These four people decided to weather those mountains with a stronger sense of security and skill than the average American, because they have eliminated personal debt and mortgages, or greatly reduced it. Now, as the market rises and falls, these people do not have to live by that same rollercoaster.

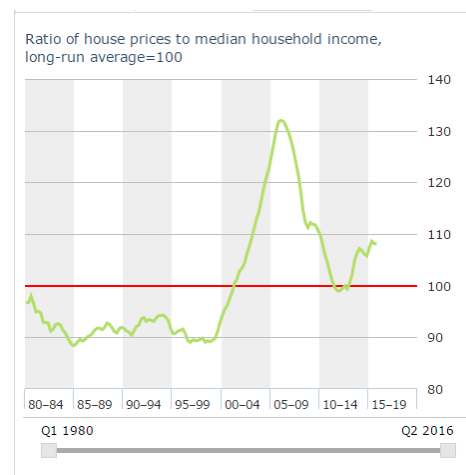


Figure I

Investing \$20,000 to \$50,000 to achieve homeownership enables a Tiny Home owner to have the financial capability that could include simply living within their means debt-free, using income to travel frequently, saving for future investments, or spending fewer hours at their job to have ample time for different pursuits. No matter the nuanced manifestation of freedom that climbing from the hole of mortgage and debt provides a person, spending less on a home through owning a Tiny House certainly promises to improve personal finances.

Mortgage freedom. In each interview, the word “mortgage” was mentioned at least five times- one interview mentioned the word six times. As a commonality, moving to a Tiny House to escape from the oppressive weight of a 20 or 30 year mortgage was a quick response from all interviewees. Under pressure from family and friends coupled with low interest rates, Cathy said “I had bought into a 30 year mortgage as a single woman, and I was tied down to my mortgage.” Working to pay of a mortgage was oppressive and contributed to a feeling of limitation as well as financial and personal stagnation. As a young adult, Sam echoes the same pressure of an impending house and mortgage: “coming out of college, can’t find a job, and two options: a 30 year mortgage or 1,000 a month on rent you will never see a return on.” After a few years of negative living conditions post-graduation like “a roommate that turned out to be a drug dealer, the slumlord landlords, bedbugs- everything that could go wrong in an apartment,” Sam decided to change his reality and chose to build a Tiny House. Both Cathy and Sam built their Tiny Houses through savings and selling property and currently both live free from debt.

Although the next two interview candidates purchased their pre-fabricated Tiny Home and still have a small sum to pay off, escape from mortgage was an immediate response, as well. Jim and Sarah purchased their Tiny Home out of the desire to save money through living in a smaller house and “live cheaper- pay off debt, student loans, and just kinda be eventually debt

free.” They even had “lived in some pretty big houses before, some nice houses” but ended up “wanting to downsize and not have a 30 year mortgage.” Once again, the same familiar phrase rang true in the words of Pam who advises people to “build what you can afford, and stay away from mortgages, because mortgages are complicated.” Although Pam and her husband are still paying off their contracted pre-fab Tiny House, she and her husband are quickly working towards the “ultimate goal of a Tiny House- to be as debt free as possible.” Regardless of other factors and motivations, the oppressive nature of mortgages are a huge selling point and important key to the success of this movement in the future, regardless of the dwelling type- self-built or pre-fabricated.

Shorter-term mortgages in both pre-built cases. Although all interviewees expressed feelings of oppression and disdain for a long term 30 year mortgage, it is important to note that both Jim/ Sarah and Pam still are paying off their Tiny Homes, and have managed to find financing options. The two interviewees who DIY built their home are currently living debt-free. The words of Cathy lead to the reason for this difference between those who built their own house versus those who purchased one:

I nearly had a six figure salary and I chose to walk away from that and let it go, and the mortgage, and those of us that have done that realize that it is a choice, and try to be very mindful of that opportunity and know that not everyone is in that position. Some people don't have a relative that they can borrow the cash from, or the place to put it, or they don't have a house that they can sell to make money off. I just like to be mindful that some people don't have the choice to go build a Tiny House as easily.

This implies a difference in social class and social capital between a DIY builder, and pre-fabricated owners. Not everyone can provide the cash to build. The ability to build a Tiny House

and then subsequently live debt-free takes either a significant lump sum of cash or a two-to-three year period of building the house in small increments like Sam had to do. Sam “put down the money [\$12,000] for just the trailer and the walls, without a place to build.” For him, it took “three years between deciding to build the house and actually having the house, just of planning and the whole, ‘this is my whole life savings and I don’t know what the hell I am doing [...] but screw it, let’s write the \$12,000 check.’” The traditional DIY builders had the social and economic privilege to live debt free through their ability to put down a large sum of cash, but the pre-fabricated owners did not experience this immediate freedom. Still, both Jim/ Sarah and Pam claim their financial situation is improved and “are not really worried about money.” Pam is optimistic that although they are still on a finance plan, they “hope to get it paid off very soon.” DIY home builders are almost forced to have the lump sum of cash on hand or have a private loan, since in the case of ones on wheels, “banks are reluctant; right away, there’s your collateral going down the highway... [laugh]” (Cathy). Interestingly, Sam positively mentions the advent of the Tiny House community seeing “more and more professional builds.” Which he thinks will help future Tiny House dreamers who can’t finance such a project on their own. In his eyes, “getting a loan for a professional build would be much more of a possibility” since loans are not yet available for DIY builds like his. While indeed the desirability of a Tiny Home is escaping the long-term mortgage, the advancement of professionally-built pre-fab homes will lead to a greater number of Tiny Homes due to the better financing prospects. The driving force and goal to live debt-free is shared by all participants, but not totally eradicated in the cases of Jim/Sarah and Pam. Tiny House s certainly represent financial freedom for these people- yet this reality is open to very few, and in this case, only the DIY builders with the capital available. While

financing for pre-fabricated options indeed opens the Tiny House movement up to those who cannot afford to front building costs, the reality of debt, although smaller, is reinforced.

Employment. Under the umbrella of financial implications, the subject of employment for Tiny House owners must be discussed, as an interesting difference between attitudes and modes of employment arose between the two DIY builders and the two pre-fabricated/contracted owners. While all interviewees shared quickly the fact that financial freedom was their first motivation for living small, Cathy and Sam mentioned an intense dislike of their previous job and quality of life that it afforded them. Both of them mentioned job dissatisfaction as a major catalyst for the search for independence from a mortgage and rent payments due to the unsatisfying jobs they worked in order to pay for their housing situations. Cathy voiced independence in terms of employment as a huge deciding factor to downsize:

...a big part of it was to be really independent. I had worked at a law firm for over 26 years. I had worked for the same attorney for 20 years. He had started to talk about retirement. Then I would have to start looking for another new law firm after being at one for 26 years, and I was sort of annoyed that my stability was tied to this one attorney's decisions. So one reason was independence.

Job stagnation coupled with Cathy's love of travel and desire for "ability to change her surroundings" ultimately sent her to a personal tipping point to escape from the job, life, and mortgage that had built a cage around her. The catalyst for Sam's disengagement from mainstream life was even more remarkable:

So I went to college and was working full time at an agency, going to school full time, and freelancing part time. Was basically working like a 100 hours a week for the last two and a half years of college, was exhausted all the time, finally graduated, and I was all

excited because I graduated debt-free with a 4.0 and had a good job and all that. Three weeks after I graduated, I had wanted a motorcycle for forever and I'm like 'this is my graduation present to myself.' Got the motorcycle, had it three days, lady was texting and driving, and ran me over. Completely shattered my femur, broke my ankle, had my fibula sticking out, year and a half recovery, three surgeries, and it made me realize. I have done everything right. Graduated college, debt-free, got the good job, got the life, and just like that- could have died! Made me realize I don't want to work for 40 years and die the next day and just not have a life that I enjoy.

Achieving the wisdom that life is more than your career, Sam's near-death experience helped him to wake up to see the futility of his life and find a way to live life to a fuller degree. These DIY owners had an intense feeling of dissatisfaction in life in reference to their job and therefore seemed to mirror an equally intense desire to do something completely out of the norm and endeavor to build a new house. Jim/Sarah and Pam however did not mention any form of job dissatisfaction or feeling of slavery to their occupation as an emotional catalyst to break free from the struggles of our economy and nation's hurting financial institutions. They both seemed content with their current jobs and career paths as a whole. Jim/Sarah and Pam's less drastic decision to purchase a smaller dwelling in response to positive financial benefits mirrors their choice to buy a Tiny House rather than build one. Although it may not be the case for all DIY homeowners, an intense desire for change leads to a high level of motivation and personal investment that building a Tiny House requires. Passion and commitment fuels difficult work.

Business opportunity in house itself. Some DIY builders believe the idea that their Tiny Home is becoming a viable business in itself. Cathy altogether quit her six-figure job as a

paralegal, and now makes a living off her blog, by offering tours of her home, public speaking engagements, and consulting. Sam also has made money off his home itself.

I have lived here 15 months, and last year, I made \$4,500 off the house doing exhibits, and a reality show filmed it, and rented it for the three of four months I was traveling. So now, I have broken even in a little over a year.

One can truly make money off the home that they built with a certain degree of passion and commitment due to the availability of festivals, conferences, events, and workshops that this movement facilitates. Sam has marketing business where he sets his own hours that enables him to “sit in a hammock on a nice day and do whatever.” Both of these DIY builders seem to have built substantial money-making ventures from their Tiny House and the lifestyle that it affords, yet the two who purchased theirs do not have the same passion and entrepreneurial drive that Cathy and Sam have. A possible conjecture as to why their house can produce a viable business is due to the DIY passion and authority they have through experience to consult and mobilize others in the movement. Their personal experiences become valuable economic assets in their portfolio- partly due to the unique and personal effort it is to build a Tiny Home. Purchasing a home, even if it is a small and unconventional size, just does not hold the same unique opportunity for exhibits and speaking engagements. Anyone with the money could purchase a Tiny Home, but building your own that has potential to be marketed and shared with a larger community is a different story.

Revitalization of American Dream

All of the people interviewed have come to be critical of the American Dream. A large and spacious house to mirror personal and perceived success was really an empty promise that only led to the financial quagmire of mortgages, property taxes, and locational stagnation. To

these people, the American Dream as it pertains to housing was a prison wall that needed to be re-constructed into a reality that fit their lives.

Re-working the definition. Miriam Webster says the American Dream is “an American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism and especially material prosperity” (2017). In general, material prosperity is highly connected to a great house in a desired neighborhood, attained by hard work. By this thought process, Tiny Houses are indeed a great manifestation of hard work and dedication, though smaller in size. Just because the size of the house does not fall in line with a textbook picture of this social ideal, the fueling ideology of hard work and determination to achieve the kind of life you want is strongly present in the conversations I had with all four interviewees. The ideals of achievement and home-ownership through hard work keep Tiny Housers wedded to the American Dream. This hard-won status can be seen in how they work to elevate themselves above other nontraditional forms of housing. Cathy’s pride about her home and the work she has done to attain it manifested itself when she compared her achievement with Tiny Homes and homeless communities:

I get really bent out of shape when people put Tiny Houses and homeless in the same sentence. I’m not opposed to solutions for the homeless, but Tiny Houses are not it. If we get pigeon holed as homeless, then the movement is never going to take off in normal neighborhoods.

Sam also began to speak passionately when discussing the misconceptions he faces in conversations with those who aren’t yet knowledgeable about his lifestyle, “This is not a mobile home. This is a portable dwelling, but if anyone says it’s a mobile home, I go, ‘no those are at the trailer park. This is a nice place.’” The “type” of people who live in a mobile home are not the same according to Sam; living in a Tiny Home “is not a lazy person’s job.” Jim and Sarah

and Pam and her husband all have worked full-time jobs their whole life, and made it clear that their lifestyle is not due to the inability to have a “normal” house, but a choice. Their prosperity does not lie in the size of their house, but their hard work and ability even to live in an unconventional, small space. Tiny Homes serve as a new way to attain success and an “opportunity to live the kind of life that I wanted” (Sam). Since all candidates live in America, this social code is imbibed in each of them, and cannot be escaped. Without the American Dream and belief that all people can work hard to achieve their goals and dreams, the extra work, time, and lifestyle change a Tiny House requires would not be a desire. In some ways, a Tiny House has the physical attributes of a mobile home or RV, but the psychological attributes of a common American home. Tiny Housers even elevate themselves as superior because they choose to live this way, and have succeeded in purchasing or building their own homes- unlike the homeless or mobile home residents who are deficient and fail to achieve the American Dream. The ideology of lifestyle and heart of the person who is living in it makes a small portable dwelling a Tiny House instead of other similar options like an RV or mobile home. This is due to the enduring marks of the American Dream on life goals and dreams. In terms of the Tiny House movement’s future in American culture, as long as the American Dream still pervades as an enduring social sentiment, Tiny Houses should still remain as viable option to work hard, attain success, and have an equal opportunity to achieve your personal goals.

The elements of personal and perceived success are still present, as they have a great jobs and are achievement-oriented, but the cutting ties to taxes and mortgages both physically and psychologically free these people. But, is the American Dream really being demolished? Isn’t the framework and purpose still the same? Most Americans, though of course not all, would agree that wealth, prosperity, and home ownership are desirable. Tiny House dwellers are simply

downsizing the financial ties to their house and replacing it with the status markers of hard work, ingenuity, uniqueness, and pride. Now, the identity may not be in the largeness of the house, but size itself is still a factor in taking pride in the smallness of the house. The wheel of the American Dream has not been truly broken or re-invented, just given a new coat of paint consisting of the same ingredients of success in conjunction with home ownership.

Intentionality through Minimalism

The driving question “what does life look like on both sides” is illuminated wonderfully in this section through exploration of what it truly means to downsize and live with much less than the average American. Waste has certainly been a by-product of affluence in America. The previous lives of this interview set could be labeled as average in terms of consumer patterns. They would not classify their previous life to be environmentally negligent or pathological pack-rats, nor hyper-conscious tree-huggers with a suitcase-sized box of possessions. However, now that they have chosen to downsize for primarily financial and personal reasons, intentionality with physical possessions has led to an increased awareness about the American attitude toward “stuff.” In the words of Pam, “you’re learning to think consciously, it’s something American consumers are not, they just don’t usually do.” Like Thoreau’s purpose to build a cabin in the woods and “live deliberately” to extract more meaning from life, the key buzzword in these interviews, intentionality, directly mirrors his ideals (1854).

Purposeful possessions. When your living space is cut into a small fraction of what it used to be, items and their volume become exponentially more important to consider. All owners in this study discussed quite positively the journey to downsize their possessions and the subsequent liberating feeling it is to live well with less. For anyone subscribing to the Tiny

House movement, life looks much more purposeful and full of deliberate choice to contribute to success and happiness. Certain essential personal items from their “normal” home had to be retained in each of these participant’s new Tiny Home. For Cathy, items like hot water, a refrigerator, a fan, and an abundance of natural light are still important features in her new Tiny Home. Sam has hooks to hang bikes on the ceiling of his home, and has added beer on tap to his kitchen. Sarah made sure their home had good closet space and room for their two inside dogs. All interviewees seemed happy with the realization that they need less than they thought. Instead of having too much, Pam voiced a helpful phrase that all would likely agree with: “the whole point of this lifestyle is to live with what you love.” Cathy “no longer tolerate[s] or [is] exposed to physical and mental clutter” because she only has items that symbolize strong or fond memories of when she got them. Jim and Sarah left a 2200 square foot home, but haven’t found any real issue with downsizing due to the ability to creatively combine essentials like a hand-built “dog crate that is also like a table.” Overarchingly, items in all four homes in this study are either important personal non-negotiables or items that serve a functional purpose. The positive realization that getting rid of an abundance of personal possessions is not incredibly difficult for any of these four people bodes a positive light for the success of this movement in the future. Minimalism is certainly a trait that can be practiced outside of Tiny House living, but as a by-product of a smaller living space, attitudes seem to remain bright and is only an added bonus to the lifestyle they have chosen.

Slower pace. For Cathy specifically, her life is given purpose and meaning through increased amount of time to notice little occurrences in daily life.

Everything takes a little bit longer to do, like cooking or getting dressed, except for cleaning your house- that takes a lot less time. Laughs. All of those things for me take a

little bit longer because everything is tucked away in storage, you have to move things, put things back. But I don't think that's negative thing, I think it's good to be in the moment and be intentional, it's a very intentional life... See I don't have a food processor anymore, I have a cutting board and so chopping an onion I have really great conversations with a friend chopping that onion that I wouldn't have had if I had zip zipped in the food processor. So cooking is more meditative before it used to be, because I take the time and I think about what I am doing.

Pam also feels like she has more time in her day to “be healthier, because we had a busier, more hectic lifestyle, it was easier to just go grab fast food... overall our quality of life has improved.” Pam and her husband's relationship has also improved due to a slower pace; she declared that “we love to compromise together again and love to spend time together again.” Eliminating certain negative aspects that more possessions creates leads to a slower and healthier lifestyle for these owners. An increase in health and mental benefits would surely be a positive point for owners in the future. This mix of fewer possessions leading to a slower lifestyle is not limited to the DIY side or the pre-fabricated side- so these positive traits will continue regardless of the direction this movement takes.

Freedom on wheels. One notable difference between our DIY dwellers and pre-fabricated dwellers, is that both Cathy and Sam built their own house, and purposefully so on wheels. With their lack of properties, they have a greater freedom to travel where they want- with their house in tow. Sam describes his freedom due to his housing situation:

I've got no obligation to wake up every morning to wake up at 6 am to get two weeks a vacation a year and work twice as hard the week before and twice as hard when you get

back to catch up. It's just- we aren't made to pay bills and die. Like [laughs] since moving into this, it feels like I have been living intentionally.

With his home on wheels and a lack of physical weight in possessions, he can leave. Cathy also reports a liberating feel when she realized that she is absolutely free to go wherever she needs to a much greater degree than when she had a house on a foundation.

I am able to move up here and help my parents and be with them the last days of their lives and a lot of people just do not have that financial freedom to do that. They would have to sell or rent their house and rent something new and I'm able to just unplug my life and cross the country and that's just really awesome. So the flexibility is huge.

The unique and added benefit of wheels to the house obviously increases freedom. Wheels are not exclusive to DIY builders, it just happens that the two individuals in this study that did build their own house built it on wheels, and the two the bought theirs are not on wheels.

Sustainability

In formulating my research questions, I suspected that sustainability and environmental concerns were at least a secondary or tertiary reason for most Tiny Home dwellers. In this interview pool, sustainability was certainly mentioned and cared about to some degree- but none of these candidates identified strongly with what Pam called the "underculture" of Tiny House living, "you know, the hippies or those who are really environmentally conscious, living off the grid and things like that." In this study, Cathy was the most motivated by sustainability, yet still said "it wasn't my main reason." Sam also agrees that sustainability is "not the motivating factor for me to build this, but it's definitely, um, a reason... it's a plus for me." Though sustainability was not the main reason for having a Tiny House for any of the candidates, it seems that a personal enjoyment arises when they can say that their home itself contributes to a better world

than the average home. However, a person's home did facilitate or increase their own individual passion when it comes to sustainable interactions with the environment.

Presence of individual sustainability passion. Due to either their previous life or discoveries made through their new home, each person expressed excitement and passion over a particular plan to improve their carbon footprint or live more in tune with the environment. Cathy already "had eliminated chemicals from her life" a few years prior to her transition, so ensuring that her home was as chemical free as possible was an obvious course of action. Other topics she is passionate about include buying "most clothes at thrift stores and trying to live a sustainable lifestyle. I eat all organic food non GMO, and try not to use things with batteries." These personal lifestyle choices are not directly related to a Tiny House for her, but she does feel that her house does "help improve her carbon footprint." Sam had not thought a great deal about the environment prior to his build, but has become quite passionate about his composting toilet:

Honestly, I am a big proponent and an advocate for a composting toilet. Like- that's a weird thing to be an advocate or proponent of, but honestly they are great. [...] because, I had saw something that said, you know, 'millions of people die every year because they don't have access to clean water.' And we poop in ours. And that just... every time I thought about that...It's like poop guilt kinda thing. And I'm like, 'This is clean water and it should... it should not be used like this.'

Since adding plumbing to a Tiny House on wheels is an expensive venture, Sam has certainly found an interesting but important environmental concern. For him, a necessary feature of his Tiny House has become a personal passion. Pam's house doesn't yet have any specific environmentally friendly features, but she is proud of the fact that they "do not use any fossil fuels like propane or natural gas to heat [their] house. [They] use a wood-burning stove." Pam's

awareness of the environment has a positive correlation with her time spent on their current property in the forest near parks and lakes. Communing daily with the natural world has increased her desire to lessen her carbon footprint and continue her life-long practice of using cloth grocery bags- “we saved over 10,000 bags from the landfill which made me jump with joy” because “we made a difference!” For Jim and Sarah, sustainability was not a motivating factor in their pre-fab Tiny Home, but when they were choosing the house they wanted, but they did look for one with a “tankless water heater” and “two split AC units that are very energy efficient” that have a high “SEER rating, you know, the higher the rating... uh, the more energy efficient that it is.” As environmental issues continue to increase with the passing of time, the outlook for Tiny House s in the future is positive due to their helpful features that lend to a more sustainable lifestyle than traditional housing.

Identity

To determine the research question exploring how “the two different ideologies, DIY and pre-fab, affect the future of this movement”, a comparison of personal identity between the two mindsets foretells an interesting shift in the movement. Because Cathy and Sam built their Tiny Houses with their own hands, placed the exact location of each board and nail- the time spent on the growth of their Tiny House dream seems tied to their identity. For the pre-fab owners, this level of empowerment did not seem as intense.

Size does matter. One interesting outcome of these two DIY builder’s power in designing their home was the assertion that the size of their home contributed to success, especially in Sam’s case. Sam mentioned repeatedly that his house is “too big” and that he has plans to go “smaller.” This is due to the fact that his house is not near as mobile as he would like it to be. At 15,000 pounds, it must be towed by a hired truck. His house has not afforded him the

mobility he thought it would. His circle of friends seem to agree, as many others he knows want to sell their current Tiny Homes to downsize for greater mobility freedom. Sam says that

“most people I know once they live in for like, 3, 4, 5, 6, months they’re like, ‘no it’s gigantic. Like I really wish I would’ve gone smaller’. I’ve never met anyone that’s like, ‘I wish I would’ve gone bigger.’”

This type of response signaling a sense of pride in living small is usually directed to incredulous normal home owners who can’t fathom a Tiny Home. Additionally, to increase his opportunities to travel, he plans to make a smaller dwelling, 54 square feet, and then he will be truly mobile and free. Since his wanderlust is connected to the house’s size, then lifestyle is very connected to size itself. Christopher Smith, in his popular documentary “Tiny: A Story of Living Small” also struggles with locational stagnation as he moved to a remote parcel of land in Colorado.

Christopher recognized the dichotomy of a “a generation that is more connected, yet less tied-down than ever” in his desires to drastically change his surroundings. He ended up feeling isolated and wished to move much more frequently than he expected, similar to the attitude of Sam (2013). Although he was proud the ability to downsize and build a house, Christopher, in contrast, now does not live in his Tiny House due to the size and limitations. (Smith, 2016).

Although Cathy does not plan to downsize, she clearly takes personal pride in the size of her house and the many opportunities it grants her. She feels that “flexibility is huge” when she was able to “unplug [her] life” and travel cross-country. Cathy says now she “doesn’t tolerate” clutter and the space waste of her previous house that she “already had been living in only a third of.” She takes pride in the size of her house and her ability to live happily in such a space that she goes so far as to say she “hates” the temporary rent house she has lived in with her husband for a short while as they make plans to live in a Tiny House together soon. She even speaks of

her house as if it were a person when she is away from it, “I hate being separated from my Tiny!” Interestingly, while her original goal was to not be tied to her normal dwelling and felt like modern America is entirely too “self-contained in our homes, as if we never plan to leave” she still misses her home when she is away from it, and puts the same labels of comfort, security, and hominess that any normal homeowner would do. Her mobility is established through wheels, but the psychological connectedness to her home-place is not different than her home before. Physical freedom may be attained in this way, but mental freedom and feeling “tied down” to something still remains to some degree. For Cathy, her personal comments regarding the size of her house and distaste for a larger home conveys the idea that her home personified in various ways as cornerstones of her identity. Through noticing size and seeing just how Tiny your home can be through clever economizations of space lead to increased feelings of success and accomplishment as a Tiny Home builder. As size contributes to accomplishment- identity and self-perceptions of success are fed through the DIY builder’s home.

Pride and self-confidence. Perhaps the most bold extraction from Cathy and Sam’s interviews are the immense amount of pride and self-confidence they feel that they have gained from their initial choice to quit their day jobs, harness personal knowledge, enter into the construction process, live with much less than most Americans, and engage with life in a refreshed state of happiness. The whole journey and present reality has occupied a huge portion of their identity. Their house is not just a roof, it has become a part of them, part of their self-definition. The choice itself to make a Tiny House is not for the weak of heart or lazy. Sam says he appreciates the “the kind of person who says just, like, ‘f*** it’ and do something. And there’s not a lot of people that will do that.” Since Sam has indeed taken the plunge to do something out of the norm, he aligns himself with what he views as outlier qualities in most

humans, the ability to be different, crazy, and unique while having a house to show for it. The combination of “crazy” yet “hardworking” and willing to “bust your ass” to build such a house creates a unique dichotomy in the identity of both Sam and Cathy. This combination creates a sense of pride in the work of their hands and resourcefulness. Sam feels security because “I will always know that since I can build it, I will always have a place to live. Whether it be this, or a car, I can build a shelter- something people even think is cool.” Cathy asserted a similar sentiment when she said: “when I pull into my driveway and look at my house, and sitting there looking at it, I get a source of confidence and empowerment and accomplishment.”

Empowerment and self-confidence would simply not come in such a high level from something that you purchased-especially since you did not have control over the outcome. Jim and Cathy even expressed audible discomfort and embarrassed avoidance when asked about challenges they faced in attaining their home. They warned that the enjoyment of life in a pre-fab Tiny Home

“definitely depends on... the quality of your house you get... it ah, really varies from company to company. I’ll just say that. That was the only challenge. And that wasn’t necessarily real clear to us up front. And that’s on us. But after we got it we were like, ‘Okay. There’s some issues.’

Pam also mentioned irksome construction issues she now has to live with- her house was accidentally built facing the entirely wrong direction! The pre-fab owner’s general issues regarding the quality/construction of their home basically eliminates the grounds for increased pride in the faulty house itself, which was the exact opposite of the attitude and outlook from the DIY owner. In the same interview question regarding construction and purchase challenges, both DIY builders expressed an interesting amount of positivity. DIY builders have a case of Pollyannaism, defined as an “overly optimistic and benevolently cheerful state of mind”

(Miriam-Webster). This tendency causes people to remember past events with a pleasant, rose-colored tinge rather than the grey veil of difficult realities. With quotes like “the house just seemed to unfold in front of me” and “the construction process was not really that hard” coupled with admissions about the massive amount of time it took to build their home, a discontinuity arises about their perception on their work. Repeatedly making what is obviously an arduous construction process sound easy seems to increase the interviewee’s pride in accomplishing such a task. Pollyanna type comments about construction and difficulties increase the candidate’s self-image of being capable, committed, and resourceful people that are too strong to allow any problem or mishap to get in their way. Another way in which the DIY builder’s increased pride and self-confidence is through their countercultural efforts and rejection of mainstream values. Cathy discussed how in her previous life she loved the commercialized Christmas celebration with her friends and loved buying many presents for them. As her Tiny House ideology has influenced her perceptions on waste and intentional actions, she is very proud of her new style of giving gifts that includes “wrapping in brown construction paper and using twine as ribbon and I draw on the wrapping paper.” Instead of a huge extravaganza, her friends are gifted with “wholesome” activities like concerts or a dinner. This cultural deviation in regards to Christmas spending and commercialization is just one of many small aspects of life that form Cathy’s identity and increase her set-apartness from her previous lifestyle and other “average” Americans. Her re-invention of Christmas is similar to the earlier observation regarding Tiny Houser’s new embodiment of the American Dream. Christmas ideals and hardworking acquisition of a house are still achieved, but in a refreshed and counter-cultural mode.

Sam’s experience with composting toilets, as introduced to him by necessity in his Tiny House design, has created his personal sustainability passion, but also a passionate part of his

identity. He revels that his passion goes deeper than care for the environment when he describes his tactic to debunk “smelly toilet questions” when he exhibits his home. To prove that his love for composting toilets abound, Sam exhibits right before he needs to dump his toilet with “3 weeks” of refuse contained. Since people do not tell him that his house smells, he enjoys the shock that this admission means. His display of bedpans used as planters create a talking point and sense of pride for himself as he tells people “when you go to the bathroom, you pollute clean water! When I go to the bathroom, it makes plants grow.” A self-righteous attitude is on display here- and an air of superiority used to justify his decisions and manage cognitive dissonance. Both Cathy and Sam’s choices to buck normative trends in society add to their level of pride and self-confidence through their lifestyle choices. The combination of purposeful choices and positive personal experiences gained from their Tiny House journey creates an extremely large portion of self-perception and identity through their house and how they attained it. Since such time was not spent in the pre-fabricated owners, the added levels of identity- fueling experiences were not exhibited. When asked about their new life in their home, the pre-fabricated owners both had pithy responses, especially Jim and Sarah. They do not think their Tiny House has made them any better of a person and will even admit “yeah, we are still lazy... and like to watch TV a lot.” As the future of the movement is considered, the DIY owner’s increased passion and heart placed into their house and movement at large is lost with the advent of pre-fabricated options, the movement will suffer and lack their personal passion.

We are *not* “those people.” When asked about common misconceptions plaguing Tiny Home owners, both DIY builders spoke fervently about other types of people that they most certainly are not. Cathy spoke frequently about the homeless and financially strapped, and Sam spoke frequently of trailer park folks and tent-city homeless. While it must indeed be frustrating

to be classified or mentioned in the same sentence as someone you may view as unsuccessful, lazy, or poor, the strong reactions about the “other” that Sam and Cathy espoused reveal underlying implications regarding their self-perceptions. Since it has been established that Sam and Cathy put much stock into their *choice* to quit their jobs and are proud of the work they put into their house for construction and continued work for business potential, any idea that would minimize the very work they are proud of offended these owners. Indeed, societal perceptions of trailer parks and homeless tent-cities are not typically positive in any way. Until the availability of loans or cost of Tiny Homes decreases, class privilege will continue to exist in the Tiny House community. As flavors of elitism increase among DIY builders, others desiring to build a home that are not in the same social or financial situations as these two leaders in the movement, the movement could suffer from narrow-mindedness and a lack of diversity. In the future, it would benefit those active in the Tiny House movement to reach out to less fortunate people from different backgrounds to encourage and help build a house of their own. Instead of a movement mechanized by people very proud of their choice to leave their “normal” home ownership and start something new and better, it could consist of a greater number of first-time homeowners who are empowered by having a place to live of their own. For the movement to increase, allowing and embracing social mobility would benefit those outside the movement wanting in, and widen perspectives of owners like Cathy and Sam.

Community

Hand in hand with identity is a sense of community. Humans were built for it- and Tiny House dwellers are no exception. In conjunction to the DIY owners’ increased identity linked to their home are the friendships and rooted community in the Tiny House movement. As Sam said, “it’s crazy and unexpected how much people rally around someone who is doing something

crazy and weird.” Community within the movement and community with the owner’s surrounding city is facilitated by a large amount of time spent, knowledge sharing, and the appreciation for humanity.

Time as a community commodity. Since the DIY owners have a mobile business and economic benefit from their house itself, both Cathy and Sam mentioned the increased amount of time they had available to invest in community and facilitate deeper friendships. Sam asserts that Tiny House dwellers have more time to volunteer civically and engage with the city since they typically “own their own business, and have more time on their hands.” As discussed previously, the DIY owners have increased financial capital prior to building their house and report high amounts of job dissatisfaction in comparison to the pre-fabricated owners. Since the DIY owners have quit their day jobs and minimalized their spending habits, much more time is left in the day to focus on personal passions and community engagements. For the pre-fabricated owners, they still hold their regular 9-5 jobs that demand much of their time, and are not as financially free, as they are still paying for their houses. As the debate for Tiny House acceptance in major cities still rages on, these DIY owners are citing increased time for community engagement as a key selling point to city officials. Although these city officials are “old and backwards” in their eyes, Sam and Cathy believe that increased community involvement is an idea that no one should resist. However, as Tiny Houses become more mainstream and people purchase pre-fab Tiny Homes yet still lead lifestyles no different than the average American with a full-time job, this selling point falls flat. If and when cities allow Tiny Houses in the city limits, lawmakers will still have to weigh the options and limit the “entitled people” who feel that they “should be able to park their home anywhere, at no cost” simply because their house is small (Cathy).

In direct contrast, Jim/Sarah live outside of city limits on personal property. The pre-fabricated owners in this set did not voice strong emotions or assertions regarding community, because they largely live outside of one. As the pre-fabricated homes become more readily available and cities are not making strides to allow homes within limits, Tiny Houses will increase in the countryside- providing no direct help to urban centers or adding to economic infrastructure. The argument that a Tiny House should and will promote community is split between the DIY owners and pre-fabricated owners in this set. The old phrase “time is money” connects to the Tiny House movement clearly as those with a higher social class and a stable system of cash flow are able to volunteer, often for the movement, thus facilitating the growth of Tiny Houses for others. However, this only holds true for the select number of Tiny House dwellers that have mobile businesses and the desire to improve the community.

Knowledge sharing and empowerment. Espoused in great detail was the DIY owner’s praise of the community in its ability to share large amounts of knowledge and aid with construction of their house. Since what Cathy and Sam did in building a Tiny House was “unique,” “cool,” and “unheard of” in their communities, many people offered up their time to help build and plan their houses from both inside the Tiny House community and out. Cathy had a group of young girls in a week-long construction program help out with the framing process of her house. Sam bragged that all he has to do was shoot out a post on Facebook asking for help, and “four to five people” will gladly come and work for free- even three seventy year old ladies came out to help one day. Sam also had “the electrician, who did all of it for free, spent probably forty hours and it was after his regular job.” Since Jim/Sarah and Pam both acquired their home from a professional builder, this entire process of building and community work similar to an old-time barn raising did not happen. If the building processes and labor is attached to a dollar

amount in an external business, knowledge sharing and community aid is completely eliminated. Social capital is replaced with economic capital. The reason why community comments were absent in both pre-fabricated owners' interviews, was because they do not have the increased need and experience for it like the DIY builders have. Not only did they not need the help of kind others to build their house, they did not obtain much or any building knowledge that they could pass on to others. Coupled with raves and comments of appreciation of their friends, neighbors, and strangers that came out to help them build their home was ultimately the desire to reproduce that knowledge and give back. Community knowledge sharing is just one more aspect added to the movements through DIY builds, and not in pre-fabricated options. Cathy enjoys the new set of friends and social contacts she has gained through her build experience and the subsequent result:

...I taught them a lot and now those people are helping and teaching others. So we are all paying it forward and that just makes you feel really good, you just get amazing warm feeling when you know that you are helping your peers and you're helping lift other people up and that's really huge. I like that I am able to educate people about building and Tiny Houses.

Not only does Cathy gain new friends and gets to help others, the underlying plus of personal empowerment from possessing and sharing useful knowledge adds to her motivation and even identity. Sam shares these personal motivations for helping others as well, even mentioning that his quick and excited response to my interview inquiry was due to the kindness shown him within the movement. He feels like since others helped him, he wants to "give back" to the community by helping others and continuing to provide building projects that others can come out and learn building skills. Interestingly, free labor given to Sam and Cathy is re-stated to

include community service on their parts since they are providing a place for others to learn, while benefiting themselves. This is not necessarily a selfish motivation, but a brilliant and somewhat socialistic model for reproducible benefits for future success. Knowledge sharing and help within the community leads to high levels of empowerment for both the volunteer and the DIY owner-recipient. Since this regenerative model of community engagement is almost completely eliminated in the pre-fabricated Tiny House options, community implications are a very important piece to consider when forecasting the future of this movement. If pre-fabricated homes continue to rise, the grass-roots community engagement model as described here may vanish and passionate, DIY builders possessing valuable building skill and social capital within the movement will dwindle. Community is one bold area in which pre-fabricated owners do not have above average engagement in this set leading to isolation in the countryside, lack of building knowledge, and a low desire to reproduce knowledge and service in the Tiny House community. Building and labor can easily be bought, but passion and “pay it forward” mentalities are priceless.

Unification. In terms of personal circles of friendship and community and positive outlooks on humanity, the DIY owners differ greatly from the pre-fabricated owners. As knowledge sharing and altruism toward others are catalysts for human interaction in the DIY builder’s world, these motivations give way to true friendship and community. These friendships founded on blood, sweat, and tears centered on a common goal facilitate a unique reliance on each other not typically found in our individualistic society. Additionally, once Cathy and Sam had positive relationship experiences with others in result of their Tiny House journey, their outlook on humanity seemed to increase along with it. Sam explicitly said that “Tiny Houses have changed my perspective on the kindness of humanity.” He did not elaborate further on his

refreshed feelings of goodwill towards others in his words, but in his actions. Mid-interview, a knock at the door of Sam's home revealed an interesting fellow who was asking for some cold brew coffee and clearly just wanted to stop in and talk. Sam explained that he had met him by chance online, stayed for three weeks helping him convert a mini school bus into a home, and now the pair are "really great friends." additionally, Sam gets to live on an older lady's drive way that he just met at work. Now, his "weird little gypsy" community consisting of himself, school bus guy, and random other passers-through that show up to help get to cross-generationally "hang out together in her backyard." The result of Sam's community engagement has led to a unique interpersonal bonding experience though his lifestyle. Cathy also shares Sam's expressions of appreciation for the community around her as she touts the ability to spend intentional moments outdoors entertaining friends and making memories. Jim/Sarah and Pam failed to mention any deep connection with others specifically though their Tiny Home experiences. Though knowledge sharing and empowerment, the DIY owners were able to create friendships and a subsequent positive outlook on humanity that the pre-fabricated owners do not experience. For the future, pre-fabricated Tiny Houser's elimination of community building and involvement will then fail to add to the owner's perception of humanity. American attitudes of individualism will not rise above the status quo in the pre-fabricated owner's life- at least though the medium of Tiny Houses.

V. Conclusion

Examining four different Tiny House owners and asking open-ended interview questions effectually laid out a framework to answer my research question "what life looks like for Tiny House owners on the DIY side and the prefabricated side." Four life-defining areas contained the same or similar ideologies, regardless of DIY build or pre-fabricated purchase. All interviewees

1.) enjoyed financial freedom as a primary catalyst for their Tiny House choice, 2.) expressed derision for the American Dream yet still harbored engrained ideological elements of success and hard work 3.) desired intentional possessions through minimalistic mindsets, and 4.) exercised environmental sustainability as a positive by-product of their home. Life looks the same as before in their “normal” home, but just at a slower, but welcomed pace. Tiny Houses no matter how one attains them, can provide these four benefits to one’s lifestyle and mindsets.

Marked differences lie in the themes of identity and community; providing answers to my other two research questions regarding “how DIY builders versus pre-fabricated owner’s differences will affect the future of this movement.” The very fact that such bold statements containing identity-defining assertions or positive community assessments do not clearly exist in either pre-fabricated/professionally built home owners speaks volumes about ideological differences. Since Jim/Sarah and Pam did not invest personal hours of labor and sweat into their homes, their level of identity connectedness could rival that of a “normal” homeowner. Possibly, anyone who builds their own house, no matter the size, would have a similar sense of personal investment and pride in the work of their hands. However for the future of this movement, as Tiny Houses move towards Cathy’s goal of “just another housing options” the personal investment and status aligned with differences, craziness, and uniqueness also is lost. Can a Tiny House movement lacking passionate DIY builders even progress?

The Reality of McDonaldization

George Ritzer in his book “The McDonaldization of Society” defines increasing rationalism in society as his term McDonaldization- “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (1, 2013). He explores the increasing irrationality of rationality in our

current Western world. The original DIY ideology is a foil to McDonaldization and can be traced back to Thoreau and the desire to live countercultural- engaging with life on a deeper and slower pace that allows for an increased awareness of personal worth. DIY ideologies in these interviews indeed line up with the desire to cease some aspects of the commercialized, rationalized, fast-paced American hamster wheel where many people are imprisoned. In the case of pre-fabricated and professionally built homes becoming part of a movement with supports and foundations around original DIY builders, McDonaldization is beginning to happen. The movement is gaining mainstream acceptance as pre-fabricated houses arrive and increasing efficiency to an in-efficient process of building a house, and increasing homogeneity to highly-customizable housing option when built yourself. Ritzer suggests that increasing rationality and the model that McDonalds has created to achieve far reaching success is exhibited in many sectors of society like “Mountain climbing (e.g. reliance on guidebooks to climbing routes), the criminal justice system (police profiling and the ‘three strikes and you’re out’) (13). Tiny House s are not cited as an example in Ritzer’s publication, but the required ingredients of “efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control” are all present in the Tiny Home companies. But since we do live in a world where streamlined efficiency is key to growth, Cathy recognizes the value of McDonaldized pre-fabricated homes in the movement as a means to achieve her “main drive and focus- to make Tiny House s mainstream”. If she wants “all the work [she] and other people have done to get it accepted, to have home options to be ‘you can have a house, a condo, a town home, an apartment, a trailer home, and a Tiny House ’” then she does have to sacrifice a few traits that make the Tiny House lifestyle unique. Cathy again makes this point in her discussion on her drive to advance the movement:

You can buy used ones, and there are some models that are sort of mass produced. So that part has changed, they used to be sort of a one-off, and now you order one and deliver it to your backyard.

Indeed to advance the movement she is passionate about in our society, McDonaldization is almost necessary. Those who do not wish to advance this movement through increased acceptance in society seem to be on the fringes. All interviewees expressed a positive attitude about the movement they are a part of, and seem to wish success upon it and those who have a Tiny Home in the future. However, McDonaldization as a mode for success threatens Thoreauvian ideals of sustainability, intentionality, and identity. Additionally, the opposing trends I anticipated finding in my original research question regarding ideological differences were not specifically found. Neither DIY owner expressed strong animosity towards pre-fabricated owners due to the prospect of mainstream acceptance though commercialization, despite the paradox.

Future Predictions

The DIY builders such as Cathy and Sam have businesses devoted to furthering the movement and helping others build their own. As professional contractors increase production as the movement continues to gain popular appeal, their knowledge and businesses will not be as needed. I believe that when and if Tiny Houses become as mainstream as Cathy desires, the unique marketability the movement currently possesses will vanish. Living smaller in a Tiny House will just be another choice in the myriad of choices we have. Since a minimalistic lifestyle already exists in the list of housing options available like a studio apartment, mobile home, RV, travel trailer, or in a rented bedroom, the unique and fascinating qualities of Tiny Houses that lie in the ability to build it yourself will be lost and Tiny Houses will no longer be “cool” as Sam

asserts. Additionally, most people who bought their Tiny House will not likely possess the social capital to hold Tiny House seminars, book public speaking events, or teach others much about building anything. The increased uniqueness of this movement is almost solely found in the DIY builders. What makes a Tiny House stand out from other small housing options that would also afford common elements of financial benefits, refreshed outlook on the American Dream, an intentional amount of possessions, and sustainable energy and waste choices? The answer is increased identity from building blocks such as pride, self-confidence, and movement knowledge from building your own house. Other ingredients for a successful Tiny House lifestyle like strong financial benefits, revitalization of the American Dream, intentional possessions through minimalism, and sustainability benefits still remain in the pre-fabricated owner's lifestyles. Although driving forces in the themes of identity and community lack in pre-fabricated owners, the other four identifiable themes concurrent in all Tiny House owner's interviews cannot be ignored. Tiny Houses, regardless of manner of acquisition, provide a unique way to solve issues in the American housing market and the environment. From the perspective of DIY builders, the advent of commercialized business ventures selling Tiny Homes may increase social acceptance and advancement, but could ultimately be the undoing of their personal businesses, and eventually the movement itself.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size of four interviews, the greatest limitation of this study is the fact that conclusions based upon these interviewees cannot be used to create generalizations for the entire Tiny House movement. The close examination of four people helped to draw important conclusions regarding apparent trends in the movement, but cannot be wholly representative of all Tiny House owners. However, strong similarities existed amongst the DIY builders versus the

pre-fabricated owners that seemed to provide clear opportunities for analysis. If this study was repeated, a different set of observations and conclusions may ensue. Since observations were drawn from personal opinion, facts and perceptions extracted from their words could be inaccurate or skewed. All attempts were made to keep participant's wording pure through careful transcription and use of quotations rather than frequent paraphrasing that could lead to bias. Additionally, this interview pool lived in the Southwest region of America. Regional and cultural perceptions and distinctions within the Tiny House community could indeed differ across the nation.

Another limitation lies in my bias as an interviewer. Due to two years of research regarding the Tiny House movement, exploration and plans made to build a house of my own, and previous interactions with Tiny House owners, all could skew my opinions and slant my conclusions. To minimize these potential biases, I provided my advisor, who has much research experience in the social sciences, with copies of the transcripts and themes I extracted. In reviewing the data, she confirmed that my analysis was appropriate and similar to her own. This enabled me to see that, though it is impossible to rule out all personal bias, my conclusions were as reliable and objective as possible. Due to safeguards to limit outstanding bias and limitations, I believe this study effectively contributes to the analysis of the Tiny House Movement in America.

Future considerations

This study is possibly the first to explore the Tiny House movement in regards to DIY builders versus pre-fabricated buyers. Since this study is broad and foundational, this study's focus on the lifestyles of DIY owners versus pre-fabricated owners gives way to many possible sub-studies and advancements for study of this social movement. Numerous possible future

studies might be: analyzing women Tiny House owners through a feminist lens, examining the Tiny Houser's alignment with a larger world view containing vegan, chemical free, no-waste lifestyles, and a study investigating professional Tiny House building companies and vendors.

Pam, in her interview, mentioned an interesting phenomenon that would be interesting to explore. Many of the women who like her Facebook page about her lifestyle are middle-aged women who want to have a smaller house due to divorce, empty nest, or simply losing the desire to keep up a large house. Exploring women who have attained a Tiny House would be a fantastic perspective coupled with current feministic themes.

In all of these interviews, participants asserted a desire to improve the environment and increase sustainable practices in their own life. Diving into the commonalities of many Tiny House owners as they are motivated solely by sustainability or those who have developed a passion due to their Tiny House would also increase knowledge about the success of the movement and predictions regarding future benefits of Tiny Houses in society. Additionally, an analysis of Tiny House owner's interactions with the outdoors compared to average Americans would be another illuminating aspect to environmental concerns and sustainability practices in Tiny Home owners.

As a direct follow up to this study, I would truly enjoy seeing an in-depth analysis of multiple companies of various kinds who build and sell Tiny Houses. Companies range from creating dwellings on wheels, to concrete foundations, pre-fabricated box sets, mobile home-like movable units, and treehouses. A greater exploration of the dozens of companies large and small popping up across the nation would provide an important academic puzzle piece and maybe ultimately help convince mainstream banks to loan prospective buyers the funds to attain their own Tiny House.

As more literature is produced regarding this interesting and changing social movement gaining traction across the nation is produced, the further this movement will reach and possibly become a mainstream American reality. Further studies will certainly help enumerate the future of this movement related to a complex web of motivations in society.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. What are your personal reasons and motivations for living small?
2. What challenges did you face attaining/building a Tiny House?
3. Do you think Tiny Houses could be a solution to personal debt and rising home costs?
4. What are the realities of daily life that you did not expect?
5. In what ways is your life the same as living in a “normal” dwelling to now?
6. Do you think Tiny Houses are a lasting trend in America?
7. How has your Tiny House helped improve your quality of life?
8. What do you think common misconceptions are about owning a Tiny House?
9. How can the banks be convinced that Tiny Houses are valuable economic investments?
10. Is environmental sustainability important to you?

Appendix B

Personal Reflection

As I embarked on this thesis journey I first had to pose a question or produce art. I wanted to do excellent work AND produce something “useful”! After a year or so of sifting through what I viewed as “dry academic-type” research topics that felt inconsequential to my life, I set my sights on what I thought would solve all of my thesis angsts- a project that would be astounding and useful to my life. I was going to build a Tiny House.

After at least six months of reading blogs, watching shows, visiting Tiny Houses, taking a tour of Brad Kittle’s land and business “Texas Tiny Houses”, enlisting a friend to devise legitimate architectural plans on Sketch-Up, and always keeping my eyes peeled for potentially useful junk on the side of the road- I changed my mind. Not because any of the previous list was undesirable, I truly enjoyed that phase of “research”, but because I found myself seeing discordance in the Tiny House lifestyle I wanted to become a part of. My philosophies aligned with the DIY side of the movement. I truly desired increased community for the rest of my life like I have found here in college. But would I find that living alone in a place where no one could comfortably visit or live with me? I truly desired to minimize my possessions and stop wasting space and money on clothes I didn’t need. But was paring down my possessions to hardly nothing going to declutter my mind, and make me a cleaner person? I truly wanted to care more about the environment and commune with the outdoors. But was living off the grid in one place the best way to fulfill my outdoor wanderlust? Soon, the list of lifestyle benefits touted in the blogs and shows I had seen did not hold the same excitement and promise. For me, building a Tiny House at this point in my life wasn’t going to change my life for the better. I would go into debt, forfeit precious time with my college friends and family to install a salvaged bathtub, and

throw myself into an identity that I did not truly want to be mine. I am thankful for that exploration of a dream and the reasonable, thoughtful discontinuation of it. I now look back upon that uber-excited phase of constant research and Tiny House planning as I do when I scroll through old, cringe-worthy, high school pictures of myself on Facebook: I appreciate who I was then and what trends and people I aligned myself with, because it all brought me to who I am today. Today, I am a near-college graduate who took the aforementioned ambition to build a Tiny House and turned that experience and personal journey into an exploration of the ideologies versus realities of the Tiny House Movement in America.

Throughout this project, I noticed that the pre-fabricated homeowners held a mindset similar to my own about this movement. Instead of looking to a house and new lifestyle to improve happiness, success, and identity, the pre-fabricated participants seemed to have achieved those elements previously in life. They are downsizing to improve their lifestyle, yet do not tie a large part of their identity to their dwelling. At first, I thought that I would agree much more with the impassioned and vivacious DIY homeowners. However, the pre-fab owner's down-to-earth and humble attitudes helped me see that their choice to buy a commercially built home was not poisonous to the movement, just a different manifestation of it. I expected this thesis to conclude that commercialization was destroying every creative and unique fiber of this movement, but that is just not the case.