America downsizes on dream houses

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America, in a hesitant way, is going small.

Tiny homes, by United States standards _ between 28 and 167sq m _ are becoming popular.

As part of a larger trend towards living small, cottages are being used as affordable housing, guesthouses and holiday homes.

The average size of the American home expanded from 91sq m in 1950 to 217sq m in 2004, up 140 per cent.

This boom was largely driven by a belief that living big meant living well and real estate was a great investment so the bigger the house the better the investment.

The recession is one thing killing that notion. Millions of foreclosures have meant ``people have lost a tonne of equity'', says Boyce Thompson, editorial director of Builder magazine. Add high unemployment and energy costs and no wonder small might seem better.

According to the American Institute of Architects, last year 57 per cent of architecture firms reported a decrease in the square footage of homes they designed.

Another factor is people's desire to live with more ecological awareness and less wastefully.

There are also demographic changes. Thompson points out that one-third of American home buyers are now single; people are marrying later and many don't want to wait until marriage to invest in a house. Moreover, as Americans live longer, many widows and widowers are downsizing to small homes.

And with elderly parents and grown children returning home, there are more multi-generational families, increasing the demand for ``small auxiliary buildings,'' says designer Marianne Cusato. Tiny dwellings allow generations of a family to live side-by-side with privacy.

But some people do not want small _ they want minuscule.

Mimi Zeiger, author of Tiny Houses and Micro-Green, defines tiny houses as about 93sq m, although ``some enthusiasts cap them at the 300-square-foot [28sq m] to 400-square-foot [37sq m] range'', she says.

Zeiger believes America's abundance of land and materials has traditionally made Americans less conscious of conservation than people elsewhere, but that is changing.
Cusato credits Sarah Susanka's book The Not So Big House, first published in 1998 and expanded in 2009, with starting a movement to change the way builders work.

``People started saying they wanted their houses to be smaller, but better,” Cusato says.

Susanka, who considers a tiny house to be one measuring no more than 46sq m, once lived in a flatbed trailer truck of between 3 and 4sq m.

``There has always been a fascination with tiny houses and an underground interest in them that surfaces when the economy goes down,” Susanka says.

The best solution for housing in America, she believes, will be in the middle ground: 139 to 232sq m.

``The gift of the recession will be that Americans will believe that bigger is not better,” she says.

Zeiger, who lives in a small studio apartment in Brooklyn, New York, says, ``The most important thing that makes a tiny house livable is efficient space planning and clever storage. Like on a ship, things need to have dual purposes.

``You also need good light and air, so that the space isn't claustrophobic or hut-like, but is a space you want to spend time in.”

Her table, for example, serves as a kitchen table and office desk.

Cusato agrees light is essential in a small space. She recommends ``windows on multiple walls in a room, two at a minimum _ three or four are ideal. Tall ceilings _ 9 feet [2.75m] in a small space feels great. When living in a tiny house, lots of storage is essential. Nothing makes the walls close in faster than clutter”.

Proximity to a public space is fundamental, she believes, and recommends that porches or terraces connect to street life or a garden.

Zeiger notes that it is easy for urbanites living in tiny spaces to go out and engage with the rest of the world. When her apartment starts to feel cramped, she goes to a neighbourhood coffee shop. And since she does not have space for a lot of bookshelves, she takes full advantage of the public library.

There is also the tradition of Thoreau's Walden, the tiny cottage in the wilderness where the surroundings become part of the living space.

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