

THE LONG-TERM STORAGE COMMITMENT

The pull is great: over a billion square feet of personal, away-from-home storage space is now rented in the U.S., much of it heated and cooled. Interestingly called *self-storage*, this “industry” has increased forty-fold since 1960, making it larger than the music business, and economically more profitable than the movies. It fills a space about the size of 300 huge office towers, or about 100,000 city pocket parks.¹ And much placed in long-term storage is never valued again (unless it’s old files subpoenaed for court). So which do you prefer: another hundred square feet of concrete for your stuff, or trees? Storage, or music?

Sometimes we save something just because it was once expensive, and we think that day may

come again, so we insist on its value by saving it, even though “objectively” we have no use for it.

Economist Juliet Schor explains “the Diderot effect”: Diderot received a lovely silk dressing gown as a gift, which he enjoyed until he saw how shabby it made everything else in his room look.² Ask yourself, does your item peacefully fulfill a pleasant desire, or does it promote the tendency to grasp at wealth? Some small-house enthusiasts turn cleaning house into a spiritual practice that reminds them to trust that they will always have enough. They free their objects, and in turn are freed. Others turn it into a game.³

“Every year when I can’t shelve a new book or close a drawer, I am inspired to get rid of one hundred things. It’s a nice round number, and a manageable task. I

number a sheet of paper from one to a hundred and begin to scout for items I can do without.”

—Joyce Marques Carey

Giving away a few pieces of furniture or old clothes is just a game compared to the task that most people face at some point late in life: leaving a home they love and that holds dear memories for them. In less-mobile societies some people live their whole life in a single house, born into it while their grandparents still live there, then passing away while their grandchildren sleep in another room. Some North American families live this way, but most end up with empty bedrooms and too much yard.

In 1954, Christina Jones and her family were the second family to move into the new tree-lined subdivision of Plano, Texas. Each street was connected to a long park with winding pedestrian paths, and each new home had its own yard and driveway and at least three bedrooms—luxurious and perfectly suited to her young dreams. Forty years later, her sons had each moved to Houston or Austin, and she stayed home alone, despite her sons’ invitations to move closer. She knew she had too much space but couldn’t find the courage to leave the decades of memories and the things most familiar to her. In 2005, reading a newspaper article about the inability of most families to afford homes near good schools, she finally found a compelling reason to move forward: “I realized a young family could really benefit from my

Cheryl grew up sad in a one-bedroom apartment, the only child of an alcoholic mother. She insisted on large dwellings for her first twelve years of adult life, but then a brush with death and thus a spiritual awakening led her to a Christian community where she was given a tiny (10-by-6-foot) trailer to sleep in. The first weeks were a claustrophobic nightmare, and she dreamed of escaping her cell. She had no trouble getting to early-morning prayers. With time and prayer she became comfortable in the trailer (which had windows that looked out on velvety fields she finally noticed). Now she happily shares a small apartment with her own teenage daughter.

home, especially if I gave them a good deal on the price. Why not give someone young the same chance we were given?"

THE TRIP

Almost every small-home dweller traces her ability to live small to a trip. A year in a Parisian apartment or on mission in Bolivia, or two months hiking the Appalachian Trail: everyone has a memory of an adventure that involved very little stuff, a small place, good company, and fun.

As a young man, Lucas gave up his apartment and left with a tightly stuffed backpack to spend six months in India. Within a few weeks the backpack felt large, and he scaled down, giving away his third, and then second pairs of shoes, exchanging the backpack for two smaller bags, eventually giving away two-thirds of the clothes and even the tourist guide he had brought. "By the end of the trip even my money began to feel like a burden. Maybe I was going nuts, but the friends I made and the sights I saw made my possessions seem useless. As I gave things away I felt lighter and lighter, more filled with faith that I'd find what I needed on my path. Now I keep hoping to find that light feeling back home."

Small-house dwellers often strive to re-create in their homes the happiness they felt on a trip.

Conversely, if your memories include an unhappy childhood or marriage in a very small place (like Cheryl, left), you'll need to do something to change your mental association.

WHERE DO YOU REALLY LIVE?

This exercise has been suggested by a number of teachers and designers in the Natural Building Movement.⁴ Because they understand the material world to be precious, and they often build by hand, without machinery, they tend to make every house space efficient, to minimize waste and overwork.

1. Make a list of activities that you do at home and things that you need in your house. Be as detailed as possible. Fold up your list and stow it away.
2. Over a period of one to two weeks, keep a log of where you go in your house, and what you do there. You might post paper at doorways, and accurately record exactly where you go and how long you spend there, or just take notes from memory, once a day. In larger rooms, be specific about which part of the room you used.
3. Look around your house for spaces that you never inhabit. Imagine what would change if that space magically, poof, disappeared.
4. Make another list of "activities and needs," without reviewing the first list. If you have patience, make a new list once a week for a few weeks.
5. Uncover your first list and compare it with later ones. You may be surprised.

PRACTICE YOUR DREAM

M. Tournon, of La Maison Ecologique in Grenoble, France, reports: "Parisians dream of the country, so they build a big house out here, which they inhabit for one year, rarely emerging to enjoy the country they say they came for. In two years, the house is on the market, and they are back in Paris." How often have we chased and caught a dream, only to realize it's not what we expected?

Maybe you dream of a room where you can throw large dinner parties, yet you've never thrown a dinner party. Don't wait for the room: try it now. Henry David Thoreau fit twenty people in his cabin; surely you can fit six in your apartment. Trying it out will give

you some taste of whether you enjoy it, or whether you might only want to do it twice a year, in summer, outside. Maybe what you need is a porch, at an eighth the price.

A new house is probably not going to drastically change the way you live, so plan it around your actual activities. Otherwise, you'll end up with a pretty park bench in your garden that no one sits on, a delightful guest room that no one sleeps in, and other expensive reminders of a dream you didn't realize.

Sometimes older people easily trim down their possessions and design a small house. Maybe they've been through something like this before, and they can imagine clearly the life ahead of them.