

# Is America's 'Tiny Home Movement' taking hold here?

By Vasna Nazor, SBS News - 17<sup>th</sup> April 2016

**Australia has some of the largest and least affordable homes in the world. As home ownership remains elusive for many Australians, could smaller, smarter homes be the answer to the housing affordability crisis?**

Some Australians are gaining inspiration from America's Tiny House Movement.

Local architects, builders and developers are also embracing small home and design concepts.

The high cost of Australian homes is prompting a re-think of housing options, and encouraging Australians to "think small" about the spaces they live in.

A growing interest in more eco-friendly and sustainable living, along with well-designed and efficient spaces, is also fuelling this emerging trend.

Whether you call it down-sizing, minimalism, or a need for debt-relief, more Australians are questioning, not only how much space they can afford, but how much space they really need?

The [Tiny House Movement in the US](#) is inspiring Australians to consider alternative ways of living.

The movement's philosophy of living simply, and debt-free, with minimal impact on the environment, has attracted at least 18,000 followers in Australia.

Sixty eight per cent percent of [American tiny home](#) owners have no mortgage, compared to 29.3 per cent of all US homeowners.

In America, there are companies that specialize in building Tiny Homes, whereas it's more of a do-it-yourself job in Australia.

In Sydney, best friends, Beck Benson and Reece Brennan, have done something few other 20-somethings have.



Best friends, Beck Benson and Reece Brennan designed and built their own Tiny House.

They designed and built their own Tiny House - measuring just 2 metres wide, 3.6 metres long and 3.9 metres high, with a sleeping loft, in the roof.

It's also equipped with a shower, a gas cooktop kitchen, and in-built storage.

And it's on wheels. so it's mobile, although that also limited its size.

"I spent a couple of weeks travelling around in it, various weekend trips here and there. It's great, very functional and you could really live here permanently," says Reece.

Beck and Reece believe it's the smallest tiny house built in Australia, and also the first.

"We did build it ourselves. We planned it all ourselves from scratch," says Reece.

"It always seems like such a pipe dream when you're undertaking such a huge project that no-one's done before."

Beck and Reece used recycled materials to build their miniature house. It took them two years to complete it, working on weekends and public holidays. It cost just \$18,000.

"Where we live the houses prices are just going up and up. And so, this just seems like such a better option, especially for young people. But not just for young people," says Beck

"With the median house prices in Sydney being a million dollars at the moment, and considering your deposit at 20 per cent is \$200,000, for ten per cent of your deposit, we built our totally liveable home. Less than ten percent." added Reece.

While it's been used as a mobile away-from-home and temporary accommodation, the tiny house, which was built for Beck, is not yet somewhere she's calling home.

"I haven't had a chance yet, but I'm really hoping to, in the next year. I just wanted to build it. The actual process of having it at the end, was a kind of an extra bonus. Yeah, it was the journey of building it that I was particularly focused on. But it's amazing that we've got this totally liveable structure afterwards," says Beck.

Council regulations and restrictions on where you can put a tiny home can be a hindrance.

So far, only a few Australians appear to be living in one.

But that could be about to change.

There's a growing demand for courses and workshops on how to build your own tiny home.

The Bower Recycling Centre in Marrickville, in Sydney's inner west, supports the Tiny House Movement, says manager Guido Verbist.

"We built one, with 15 people, over a weekend... We had people from the US coming over, who are experienced in doing it, and they helped with the development and design," he says.

"We have since been contacted by many people who show an interest in it, and even ask us to run more of the same workshops."

Catherine Karena is a Training and Recruitment Manager, who's also a Tiny House enthusiast who has organised building courses attended by a broad range of people.

"You've got young people who don't think they've got a hope to get a house at all, or they don't want to get into huge debt. Then you've got grey nomads, who don't want a granny flat, they want to travel around," she says.

"When we did our first building course in Sydney last year, it was such a wide range of people. You had middle aged, you had 20s, 30s, 50s, 60s. We had all different people, and they all had different reasons. Some of the common things were, people want more life. They don't want to be in debt. They don't want huge mortgages. A lot feel, like, happiness doesn't come from a lot of stuff."

## A POSSIBLE NEW SOLUTION TO HOUSING NEED

Some organisations are also looking at the Tiny House Movement as a way to provide accommodation for homeless youth and women's shelters.

While such compact living may be too extreme for many, bigger is not always better either.

Architects are increasingly challenging their clients to think about what they really need.

It's a conversation award-winning Melbourne architect, Andrew Maynard, is having with his clients.

"There definitely is a trend where people realize that quality is more important than size. Now there seems to be a new way of thinking that realizes there's actually a lot of limitations, and

problems, when you create large spaces, whether it simply be how much energy it takes to heat or cool this space, or just clean the damn place," he says.

People have realized you can keep spaces small, well designed so they're not cramped, and beautifully connected to the outside space."

Maynard says sustainability and lifestyle choices are driving the trend.

"All of those cultural shifts will actually help us to solve the affordability and density issues that we're really confronted with."

As the Great Australian Dream of home ownership remains out of reach for many Australians, the Queensland based [Future Housing Taskforce](#) believes it's coming up with solutions to the housing affordability crisis.

Working with builders, developers and local councils, the taskforce has produced what it calls the "Smarter, Small Home."

Variations on its designs, including dual occupancy models, are being built around Australia, for as little as \$100,000.

We do not need 250 square metres of space for 2 people or 3 people, when we used to provide housing of 85 square metres for 5 people in the 60s and 70s. We are now the most unaffordable nation in the English speaking world, for ten years in a row."

The Future Housing Taskforce is also launching an off-grid version of its smaller, smart home.

"We've had feedback now from over a thousand people, and it will be completely off-grid, with water, power, sewerage, and provide its own food sources. It will be open for display in 2017."

"I believe the future of housing in Australia will be off-grid suburbs, off-grid communities, that are capable of reducing the running costs to zero."

Kevin Doodney, the founder of the Future Housing Taskforce believes there's a need for more diverse housing options, not just to address affordability issues, but also future housing needs.

"I think the problem we're all facing is, we all buy a memory of architecture. And no matter how hard we try to solve this issue, we keep going back to what we've always had. What we've always had, we can't afford. Land has gone up in Australia over 600 percent in the last seven years. We cannot afford to continually build one house on one lot," he says.

"The only thing we've done in Australian housing in something like 40 years, is add an ensuite."

More diverse housing stock that allows more people to work from home, and caters for Australia's diverse communities, is also part of the solution.

"We have to look at housing that appeals to the changing families that are occurring across Australia.... from the first home buyer, to the retiree market, to the families that fracture, we need housing to accommodate all of these markets...."

And that, Kevin Doodney says, would allow more Australians to achieve the Great Australian Dream of home ownership.