



montana microhomes

Hamilton builder
creates dwellings with
minimalist approach

By Seonaid B. Campbell
Photography by Lynn Donaldson

On a gentle rise, amidst an airy forest of old growth ponderosa pine trees in the mountains outside Missoula, sits a curious little dwelling. Clad in wood with a hobbit-sized door and an arched roof, this diminutive house has a fairytale air. Add wheels and it could be a gypsy caravan.

As we approach through a meadow of wildflowers, writer and carpenter Charles Finn tells me how he came to craft



Inspired by an experience living in a caravan, artisan, Charles Finn later built a microhome to live in Hamilton. Today Finn uses the sheltered space as a writing studio.



Set in a field along rolling farmland, pine clapboard cabin sports a recycled tin roof and echoes the vernacular style of the region.

his *pied-a-terre*, and craft a life dedicated to story. “I don’t know if it’s because I’m a physically small person, but I’ve always been drawn to small things,” Finn says, then adds, “Small is beautiful.”

Small *is* beautiful when it comes to the dwellings built by Finn, a native of Vermont, whose New England accent

draws out As and blends Rs when he utters words like barn. He’s talking to me as we approach his 7-by-9-foot cabin, but I find myself increasingly unable to listen. The wee abode seems magical, and I’m compelled to run up and disappear inside.

Finn’s aware of the charm the house casts over visitors. “People say, ‘This is gorgeous, I want one of these!’” They’re not alone. Finn had no idea that he was tapping into the collective unconscious when he began crafting the structures, but micro-homes have become increasingly popular worldwide. By definition, they range in size up to 1,000-square-feet. In contrast, Finn’s dwellings are no larger than 126-square-feet.

For a time, Finn lived in a hand-built, wooden “caravan” in British Columbia. There, his aesthetic matured. “I was off the grid and without a phone,” he says. “And I really began to appreciate that kind of life-style—having less, and less, and less.” Then, after an ill-fated romance, Finn left behind what little he did possess and set out across Canada on foot. Along the way he found a kitten companion and named her Mary Oliver, after the poet.

Finn’s 10 years in B.C. were an incubation period during which he learned carpentry and dedicated himself to the writing life. “I began studying how to write by reading.” Peter Matthiessen, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez: he studied the texts of his masters. The caravan, too, became the prototype for his future creations.

Eight weeks into the trip, Finn’s kitten died and he realized that he couldn’t walk his way out of grief. Friends invited him to Missoula, so he flipped a coin. Tails, and he’d abandon the road. Tails it was. Through a fortuitous chain of acquaintances he met Gary Delp, who needed a house sitter, and Finn found himself in a blessed circumstance. Delp owns Heritage Timber, a wood salvage company, and he gave Finn access to his wood lot and woodworking shop. “I just fell into

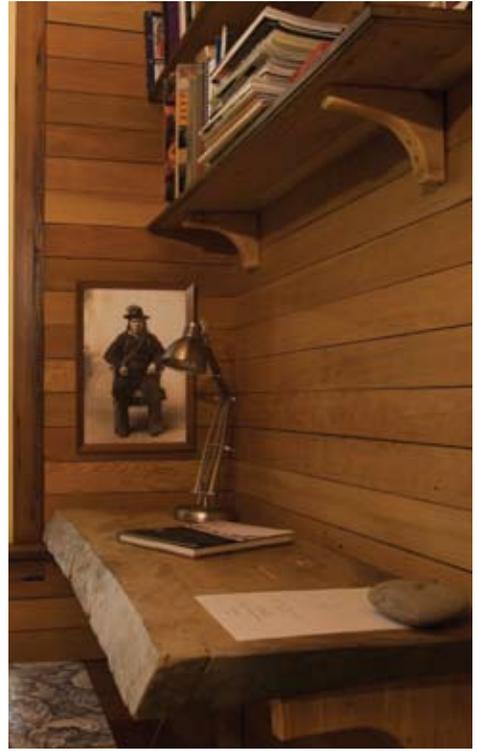
this wonderful situation," Finn says. Gary agreed to let Finn replicate the "dinky cabin" he'd inhabited in B.C. and place it on his land. "I thought, I could build one and put it on a trailer and I'd have a place to live," Finn says.

The trailer no longer supports the cabin, but sturdy posts do. As we ascend three steps to the porch, I notice that instead of a doorknob, a gear from a long forgotten machine acts as a lever. Finn opens the door, and at 5-foot-7 inches tall, he stoops to enter. "I was influenced by my years in Japan where the tea houses have doors that are short and narrow," he explains. "The samurai left their weaponry outside because inside was a place of peace and calm." When I step over the threshold I am transformed. The calm envelops me. This, I think, is all one really needs.

Finn's first dwelling—he has since constructed and sold five more—has the feel of a yacht. The interior is paneled in rich, age-reddened wood boards, and four windows let the sun shine in. A wood-burning stove provides heat, and exterior tanks supply water and gas. There's no electricity or plumbing. Finn, who is now married, and no longer occupies the cabin, says that he and his wife, Joyce, can sleep snugly in the double bed when they visit. In the corner is a writing

Richly textured with salvaged materials and detail, Finn's cabins are bastions of peace and personal eclecticism.





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desk where, like Thoreau at Walden Pond, Finn wrote stories by lamplight when he lived here alone.

The house itself is storied. "Each piece of wood comes with a history," Finn says of the planks salvaged from old Montana goat barns and grain mills. The beams in this cabin, for example, are crossbars from old telephone poles. Holes exist where glass transformers used to nest. Such vintage architectural detail is characteristic of Finn's work. "There's a soulfulness about using old material with nail holes and burn

They collaborated to design a dream-like country retreat: two 9-by-14-foot rooms (one a bedroom, the other a kitchen/living room) with a deck between. "We wanted to keep a small footprint on the land," says Chacon, who shares the retreat with his partner Andy Laue. "It was more about spending time outside than inside."

Finn calls his dwellings escape pods, to be used as his clients see fit. "They make great writing studios, meditation rooms, or guest bedrooms," he says. He's resistant to building



No two are alike; Charles Finn constructs the cabins from recycled and salvaged materials. These two 9-by-14-foot microhomes are used as guest quarters by a couple in Missoula; one is a bedroom, the other is a kitchen, dining and living area.

marks," he reflects.

Finn's aesthetic is as richly influenced as his cabins are textured. "These are, in a sense, my little tea bowls," he says, in reference to his inspiration, the 16th Century Kizaemon tea bowl. The Japanese believe that the bowl, which had humble origins and is flawed, epitomizes the beauty inherent in imperfection. "Working with salvaged material lends itself to that," Finn explains. "You don't have to have everything perfect."

His client Rafael Chacon, an art history professor at University of Montana, appreciates Finn's artful construction.

them any bigger than 9-by-14-feet. For one thing, that's the largest his trailer can accommodate. For another, he's from New England, and his Yankee values, combined with his Asian-inspired aesthetic, mean that he has a nearly Zen-like relationship to space. "I can't write outside because it's too expansive," he explains, "but in a small room my thoughts surround me." And in that space he dwells. Charles Finn's cabins are places to live, to ponder in thought, or simply to be. They may be small, but they can give your mind plenty of room to roam. **I**