

Oh, Give Me a (Itty Bitty) Home

MICROHOMES MAKE 'SMALL FOOTPRINT' A LITERAL PROPOSITION

by *Matthew Frank*

Rafael Chacon and Andy Laue lounge on their deck, drinking tea, completely taken by the view, the stuff of ostentatious Western dream home advertisements — except their deck is attached to a pair of 9-by-14 foot cabins with no running water.

These homes are so small they were rolled here to the Moiese Valley on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana on a pickup's flatbed.

Called microhomes, the two box-like structures were designed and built

by Stevensville writer and woodworker Charles Finn. His inspiration originally came from an off-the-grid cabin he lived in for three years in British Columbia. Finn has crafted six, all told, a minor business that's more art, he says, than construction. He sells them for about \$135 per square foot.

The microhomes are simple yet intricate, tightly crafted from recycled and storied wood, reddened and warm. Some of the wood for the Chacon and Laue homes came from a former goat shed in nearby Dixon. Heritage Timber of Potomac in the Blackfoot River valley supplies most

of Finn's recycled building materials.

Chacon and Laue's monthly electric bill is about \$12 and their entire winter's gas bill totaled less than \$100 (one of the cabins has a small wood stove). The two plan to someday install solar panels and go completely off the grid, Laue says. The sum is an affordable mountain getaway — it helps that Chacon and Laue don't mind using the neighbors' outhouse.

"The reason we're here is because we're so taken by the vision of living close to the land, simply, sustainably," Chacon says.

"You just don't want to stamp yourself



photos by Anne Medley



too hard into the earth,” Laue adds.

Finn’s microhomes are part of a global trend of scaling down to live more cheaply and closer to the outdoors, says Gregory Paul Johnson, director of the Iowa-based Small House Society that dubs itself “the voice of the Small House Movement.” The homes are impermanent and skirt zoning and building regulations, he says, aligning them with the ethic of living light on the land.

Johnson lives in a two-story, 7-by-10-foot microhome, warmed by a boat heater in Iowa City, built to be a “rustic retreat” allowing him to “basically be on vacation

every day.” The greatest motivation for small home dwellers is saving money, says Johnson, who adds, “Once they acknowledge that it’s a better way to live, they say, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m saving the planet.’”

Chacon and Laue’s microhomes are on 10 acres facing the massive Mission Mountains, aglow with March snow. A half-mile behind them runs the broad Flathead River. Their neighbors are organic farmers.

Chacon, an art history professor at the University of Montana, and Laue, a psychotherapist, live in Missoula, about an hour’s drive to the south. They come here on the weekends year-round — toting 15 gallons of water each time — to connect with the land and with each other.

“Our worlds rarely coincide,” Chacon says. “They coincide out here.” **NW**
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A Pair of Microhomes

Square footage: 126 each

Price: \$10,000 apiece

Designer/builder: Charles Finn