

Small Is Necessary

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Shared Living on a Shared Planet

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Less Is More: Living Closely on a Finite Planet

This introductory chapter outlines why, and how, small and shared housing is a stepping stone towards environmentally sustainable livelihoods and socially convivial lifestyles this century. After sketching the global challenges that small and shared housing can address, I sketch out what small and shared living means on a personal level. Then I describe the structure of this book which, selectively reads the past (Part I), reviews the present (Part II) and speculates on the future of collaborative housing (Part III) at a time when economic and environmental challenges threaten life as we know it, even our species-life per se. *Small Is Necessary: Shared Living on a Shared Planet* addresses those massive challenges in constructive ways to show how community-based activities could make us live more sustainably.

THE CHALLENGES THAT FACE US

The enduring Great Recession following the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 unsettled households across the world. There have been negative impacts on work opportunities, incomes and government support for affordable social housing, contributing to unstable house prices and unfavourable terms of credit for purchasing homes. In some regions precarious employment, declining incomes and fewer government services have driven people to cities ill-equipped to cater for rapidly expanding numbers of job-seekers demanding a range of basic services. It has become commonplace for house prices to have risen alarmingly in capital cities, with impacts on rental demand and costs. By the mid-2010s, particularly in Europe, substantial migrations had contributed to temporary and permanent resettlements. Finding appropriate and affordable housing has become a widespread challenge, particularly for young and elderly singles, especially women whose savings and incomes are typically lower than similarly aged men.

This is a chronic crisis and, writing in 2017, the prognosis remains bleak. According to a Resolution Foundation Study, 90 per cent of 18–34-year-old Britons will be unable to afford their own homes and will be confined to renting by 2025.¹ This deterioration in housing affordability is replicated across the United States (US), Canada, Australia and New Zealand (NZ). On the one hand, housing industry sources often complain that regulatory constraints on land use containing the boundaries of cities are responsible for rising land and home prices.² On the other hand, remarkably high house prices in Australia, amongst other nations, have been attributed to the availability of more onerous home loans at low interest rates, which translate into lower mortgage repayments, and the preparedness of owner-occupiers to devote a relatively high proportion of income to housing costs.³ Another upward pressure on prices has been international investment, responsible for a two-tier real estate market developing in global cities, typically in capitals such as London where the mean house price was roughly double that of other parts of England in 2014–2015.⁴

Still, the trend to house price increases has been neither uniform nor universal in cities, regions or countries. For instance, with respect to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, house prices and household debt multiplied remarkably in Sweden, Norway, France, Chile, Belgium, Israel and Denmark between 2000 and 2015, yet dropped in Portugal, Japan and Greece over the same period. Where house price hikes occurred they often flowed on to rental increases, especially in the US, and in Australia where there is low competition from that minor proportion (circa 4.5 per cent) of stock that is social housing (modest housing managed by government or not-for-profit bodies specifically for those on low incomes).⁵

Meanwhile, in terms of demand for housing and land for residential development, global population keeps rising. In 1800, there were just 1 billion (bn) human residents of Earth. We grew, increasingly rapidly, to 6bn in 1999, then to 7bn by the end of 2011. The projected 1.1bn rise between 2015 and 2030 is expected to swell most urban areas outside Europe by around 15 per cent. These averages deceive, in as much as they do not adequately represent places where populations will either shrink to leave unoccupied housing or, alternatively, increase remarkably. Indeed, the Australian capital of the state of Victoria, Melbourne, is expected to double its population to 8 million by 2050 from 4 million in 2012.⁶

The challenge is not simply one of fitting in more residents on limited land. Mainstream housing in the Global North absorbs materials and energy in its construction and everyday operation, contributing significantly to resource depletion and global carbon emissions. Settlements on coastal fringes and wholesale clearance of woodlands and forests have impacted heavily on animal habitats. In contrast to human increases, since 1970 populations of other vertebrate species have diminished by more than 50 per cent.⁷ The WWF *2014 Living Planet Report* shows that our ecological footprint (the area required to supply the ecological goods and services we use) has increasingly over-reached the earth's regenerative biocapacity since the mid-1970s.⁸ So much so that, by the mid-2010s, we were regularly consuming 50 per cent more than the earth could replenish. More disturbingly, the *2016 Living Planet Report* indicates that, if we follow current trends we will exceed Earth's regenerative capacity by around 75 per cent as soon as 2020.⁹

There are strong direct and indirect connections between housing and the over-use of Earth's resources. In 2010, all types of buildings worldwide accounted for 32 per cent of total global final energy use, contributing significantly to global warming – a development which not only threatens multiple ecological systems across the globe but also makes the future of the human species uncertain.¹⁰ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that increasing population, urbanisation and development threatens even more deleterious impacts in the future. Yet the IPCC also signals significant potential for reducing energy used in both the construction and use of residential building. Feasible low-cost achievements rely on compliance with strengthening government standards to improve building codes for construction and retrofits, policymakers attending to effective urban infrastructure and planning, and multiple voluntary lifestyle changes. How we house ourselves, live in our houses, and go to work and other daily activities, all have potential to significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions and global climate change.

MANAGING OUR FUTURE TO BE 'SMALL' AND 'SUSTAINABLE'

Given that we are struggling with affordability and breaching environmental limits, this book explores future directions of housing and household consumption towards more compact and shared lifestyles to enhance both social and natural environments alike. Through decades of experimentation, activist-residents, community-oriented policymakers

and non-government organisations have developed successful and enduring models. *Small Is Necessary* examines the benefits and challenges of creating smaller and more efficient living spaces using various collaborative housing models, such as cohousing, ecovillages and communal housing in cities, suburbs, peri-urban fringes and regional areas. All such models refer to households that share building and outside spaces and facilities in self-managed ways.

The book's title develops on a rich lineage. The classic *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* by 'E. F.' (Ernst Friedrich) or 'Fritz' Schumacher was originally published in 1973 (London: Blond & Briggs) and argued the environmental efficiencies of modest lifestyles for sustainability. Several years later, in 1981, George McRobie's *Small Is Possible* (New York City: HarperCollins) offered a variety of small operations and appropriate technologies to illustrate Schumacher's ideas in action. Much later, in 2008, Lyle Estill sketched another practical, economic and spatial dimension in *Small Is Possible: Life in a Local Economy* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers). Similar to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) the emphasis in *Small Is Necessary: Shared Living on a Shared Planet* is on avoiding the consequences of business-as-usual peril.

Clearly, any focus on sustainable housing and lifestyles must engage with the broader social, economic and environmental contexts for sustainable household practices. Therefore, in this book, I ascribe to Edwards' and Hyett's simple and constructive definition of the contested term 'sustainable housing' as 'housing that creates sustainable communities in a resource-efficient manner'.¹¹ Notwithstanding the criticism of Guy and Moore – regarding Edwards' and Hyett's rather technical approach to sustainable housing – taken on its face value, this definition encompasses environmental and social aspects at a neighbourhood scale, and focuses holistically on broad-scale social and material contexts where local cultures and government policies can encourage and maintain sustainable practices.¹² The term 'sustainable communities' emphasises inter-generational and reproductive aspects, as well as local economies and cultures. Beyond a state that an individual or household might attain alone, say by purchasing or retrofitting their home and garden appropriately and adopting more environmentally efficient practices, the concept of sustainable communities appreciates sustainable housing in a dynamic context of conjoined socio-cultural,

political and economic environments that establish and maintain sustainable practices in holistic ways.

HOW COMPACT AND HOW COMMUNAL?

In contrast to the economic interest of residential developers and the building sector to sell bigger houses to smaller households in suburbs and shoebox apartments in skyscrapers to investors who charge exorbitant rents, *Small Is Necessary* discusses the contradictions and challenges posed by current and future needs for shared and compact living. I am a critical advocate asking, for instance, whether high-density inner-urban living, as touted by many government policymakers, really does achieve a smaller ecological footprint than more collaborative suburban models. Similarly, I engage with debates on small and shared housing that historically separated many social and environmental movements.

The traditional left response to urban overcrowding and substandard housing was to call on the state to provide affordable individualised housing. This line failed, first, as many governments post-Second World War tended to respond by developing bureaucratically run public monuments that were neither friendly, aesthetic nor well-integrated. Second, under the influence of neoliberalism later in the twentieth century, states withdrew from direct provisioning of housing as part of cost-cutting and privatisation measures. Moreover, the traditional party and union-based left clashed in organisational ways with the diverse and growing 'alternative' movements' emphases on agency, collectivism, self-sufficiency and squatting – experimenting with models of alternative lifestyles, including communal living, creating alternative technologies and techniques for building, supplying energy and water, and dealing with waste, and self-provisioning for food and clothing. If these 'alternative' forms of living have become more central to a sustainable future, the traditional left maintains strong positions in asking central questions around the line between modest and sufficient housing, and cramped, noisy and insecure shelter.

Various models of collaborative housing are examined in this book, from non-relatives owning a house together and sharing their lives as a household unit, through to ecovillages that can include thousands of residents. A key question across all models focuses on preserving privacy and individuality. Despite the challenges of making such models work, I argue that collaborative housing can offer social support for young

and old, singles and families alike, while providing environments where sharing networks and local cooperation can flourish. Shared housing encourages sharing knowledge and skills, addressing a neighbour's problem cooperatively, rather than individualistically ignoring or competing against them, say through conspicuous consumption. Teasing out all the environmental and human factors that contribute to more sociable, liveable and sustainable neighbourhoods, *Small Is Necessary* develops a practical framework for assessing what works best in different contexts, to satisfy different needs and achieve the most appropriate solutions for residents.

Small and shared living is a sensibility and art practised in appropriately built, or altered built, environments within rural and city landscapes that remind us that we belong to planet Earth. Small and shared living depends on skills and knowledge that develop and balance our needs for gregarious sociality and privacy. Small and shared living is about a modest haven, fondly called 'home', socialising in streetscapes and 'greenscapes' nearby, working at home or in a conveniently located shared office space, where – thanks to the Internet and cloud storage – the world is our oyster.

Imagine a room of one's own in a household where facilities and living spaces inside and out are shared, along with tending and harvesting from a collective food garden. Small and shared is about well-planned neighbourhoods and good public transport, which ease the frustrations and irritations of everyday working and socialising. It's about choices, greater equality and connectivity between us, and a more sustainable balance with nature.

'That's the sales pitch,' I hear you sigh. 'What about the shambolic, crowded and dirty joint household I lived in when I was a student? To avoid all the conflicts and mess, I spent as much time as possible at friends' houses and dreamt of a flat of my own or a house big enough for a family to share with my soul-mate. I don't want anyone telling me what to do in my own home. Coliving sucks!'

This is where personal skills and community knowledge about coliving and collaborative housing are essential. It's why community-minded residents, architects, developers, builders, policymakers, regulators, public service providers, businesspeople, funders and financiers need to develop joint visions and processes for establishing built and social environments that incubate and facilitate modest collaborate living. In cultures of small and shared living, environmental efficiency is the norm

or ideal, and space is convivial. Residents accept household principles about who uses what, when and how – and benefit from joint cleaning and cooking schedules. Mutual support and care is at hand. The neighbourhood is planned for private and group activities. Noise and pets are controlled. When people have differences that interfere with what they each want, they problem-solve for win-win results.

It is complex, but the skills of self-organised community-based living can be learned and applied. After all, the city has long been regarded as the epitome of civilisation and, equally, the community-oriented character of a traditional village is a widely held ideal. This book features successful living models and experiments in cities and rural regions where people have set about collectively addressing current challenges of affordability, environmental sustainability and yearning for community by establishing households and neighbourhoods that are modest yet ‘enough’, and shared but secure and organised.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

This research interest evolved from my life’s journey. I was brought up in a small nuclear family but benefited from my grandfather living with us for four years when I was young. When my father researched in Wales, we spent months at a time living with different relatives. I boarded at school for a short period, which was my worst experience of shared living because of the imposed rules and regimentation. Afterwards, as a young adult, I lived in joint households ‘for better or for worse’ – great learning experiences! Sharing homes with different partners also honed my skills in negotiation and conflict-resolution.

However, none of those experiences improved on living in two residential cooperatives for almost one decade. One was an all-under-one-roof living and working intentional community, *Commonground* (Central Victoria; see Figure 1.1). The other was *Round the Bend Conservation Cooperative* (RBCC) on the peri-urban fringe of Melbourne, whose residents collectively manage a 130-hectare woodland, where each of the 32 shares entitles the shareholder-household to a site for a house built and managed under collectively developed and collectively monitored regulations. Effectively, this cooperative is ‘eco-cohousing’, which is examined in Chapter 5. RBCC resident members have few shared resources beyond their land but significant joint responsibilities for the natural environment. There have been barriers to easy entry

and exit due to member approval processes and the failure of lending institutions to offer appropriate models for buying in and out of such collectively owned property. I found that two long-term experiences of community ‘self-management’ – a curious term given what we are really talking about is ‘collective management’ – were deeply empowering on a personal level.



Figure 1. Commonground intentional community, Central Victoria, Australia

Source: Mike Crowhurst, photographer

Still, when I’ve lived by myself I have rarely felt ‘alone’, possibly because I have always been active in my immediate neighbourhood or wider diverse place-based community. Today, I live in Castlemaine, Central Victoria, Victoria being the most southern mainland state on the eastern coast of Australia. Castlemaine is known for its strong social and sustainability values and an artistic and diverse quasi-urban culture. The

nonmonetary, sharing, solidarity and social economy practices that have become subjects of much social and scholarly interest in recent years were always part and parcel of the way I lived and loved, gave and received.

These experiences of shared living in economic spaces – mine was the smallest house built on the conservation cooperative – have informed this text in equal measure to information gleaned from key practitioners, experienced professionals and academic experts, the books I've read, and the audio-visual material I've listened to and watched in order to write it. Experience is the great teacher. But, equally, following wise advice can minimise or prevent bad experiences. Collective living showed me that good planning and processes can be learned, and that adapting tried and true processes in flexible ways saves frustration, time and energy. I learned that wholesome cultures of shared living can be established, or be absent, and that such cultures exist as a critical form of what is often referred to as 'social software'. However, I often wonder whether relationships and values are not, in fact, the very real hardware of societies?

Experience showed me that governments and regulations, as well as mainstream social norms, often frustrate the smooth implementation or running of collective arrangements. Despite the diversity of the modern 'family' household, local, state and Federal politicians, bureaucrats, financiers, business people, builders, developers and appliance manufacturers have tended to cling to a dominant notion of the primary household as a nuclear-style family. For a long time in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, banks have refused lending money for collectively purchased property unless, say, everyone guaranteed the repayment of the loan, which might well be smaller and offered on higher interest rates than for individual homeowners. The idea of sharing energy sources or waste-disposal schemes has often sent bureaucrats – with their simple sets of rules and regulations for residential neighbourhoods laid out in a patchwork of private properties – into a 'Can't do', 'Never done' mode. This book shows how and why the economic and political tide is turning in favour of 'alternative' collaborative housing.

My experiential observations are supported by wider reading and studies that I have conducted as a researcher for the Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University (Melbourne, Australia) in a range of projects – many funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute – on housing affordability and sustainability, mortgage default, boarding houses, caravan and manufactured housing parks, and developing 'greenfield' suburbs. You will see, then, that all the arguments I mount

are framed in reference to relevant literature and supported by evidence mounted in endnotes.

READERSHIP AND SCOPE

This book was written because the growth of interest in small, sustainable and affordable housing and shared living is increasing. While subjects of the popular television program ‘Grand Designs’, which is hosted by architect Kevin McCloud, generally spend hundreds of thousands (even millions) of British pounds on creating homes that fail sustainability criteria simply on the basis of size, viewers voted the episode on Ben Law’s small £28,000 sustainable hand-built woodlands house as the ‘best ever’.¹³ Similarly, another popular episode focused on a modest and inexpensive two-roomed house and studio built in sympathy with its idyllic surrounds on Skye.¹⁴ Furthermore, there was great interest when host Kevin McCloud developed a community-oriented social-housing model, Haboakus, though he dropped eco-aims early on due to classic market-straightjackets conflicting with professional and market-led community-building.¹⁵

On the other side of the world, in Australia, when ideas journalist Michael Short wrote an article in the Victorian state daily *The Age*, in 2015, on ten solutions to Melbourne’s housing crisis – namely floating apartments, converted shipping containers, modular and prefabricated spaces, neat subdivisions of land, retrofitting an old house to make two, or an old factory to make many more homes, rooftop gardens and tiny houses – his article quickly trended as the newspaper’s most read.¹⁶ This interest is fuelled by the surge of experimentation in novel areas of alternative housing. In a more mainstream context, Figure 1.2 shows an 80sq m home, a ‘backyard’ infill development on circa 180sq m created by subdividing a block in a Melbourne inner suburb. With sustainability features such as the green roof, it was the first example of a ‘Less Is More’ home in a series of *Assemble Papers* (an e-journal that explores both ‘small footprint living’ and a ‘culture of living closer together’).¹⁷ Similarly, in North America, the ‘tiny house’ movement has burgeoned with increasing models of tiny house settlements (Chapter 8) offering the added benefits of collective living.

Concentrating on the Global North, this book refers selectively to developments and scenarios in Europe, the UK, North America, Japan and Australia and NZ since the mid-twentieth century. Drawing