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Talking About Tiny Houses: An Interviewing Profile of Erin  
and Chris

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## Talking About Tiny Houses: An Interviewing Profile of Erin and Chris.

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### Abstract

This piece is a snippet of an interview from a larger research project titled: “The Social Practice of Living and Travelling in Small Mobile Living Structures”. Using a style popularised by Studs Terkel in his book ‘Working’ (1974), I have used the interviewee’s own words but manipulated the order of the sections to make a cohesive narrative about living in a Tiny House. Erin and Chris talk about life in their tiny house within the framework of Social Practice Theory, informing the reader about the skills, materials and meanings that have contributed to their current living situation.

**Keywords:** tiny houses, interviewing profile, Terkel analysis, sustainability

We currently live in a world which uses the logic of inequalities and unlimited extractivism to drive the economy, to the detriment of the environment and the people who are oppressed (Keil, 2018). These exploitative practices have contributed to climate change. Meanwhile, people have formed communities in opposition. They inhabit tiny homes on wheels, converted vans and RVs. These ‘Small Mobile Living Structure(s)’, (*SMLS*), attract people who do not want to spend up to half of their income on housing, as Americans increasingly must (Desmond, 2015), or be fixed to one location.

This article is a snippet of conversation from an interview I conducted with Tiny House dwellers, Erin and Chris, for part of wider research titled: ‘The Social Practice of Living and Travelling in Small Mobile Living Structures’. It has been written up in a style popularized by Studs Terkel (1974), named a ‘master of oral history’ (Manzoor, 2017). The first paragraph is written in the third person as an introduction to the interviewees and their situation, then the rest of the text uses their words and a first-person perspective. While each individual has their own reasons and motivations for joining the tiny movements, Erin and Chris’s interview

touches on several key themes identified in my research: sustainability, flexibility and affordability.

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*Erin sits outside her beautiful tiny home, with her dog GorGor, on a piece of land surrounded by forest in Washington State. While it is only about 40 minutes from downtown Seattle, this plot of land could not feel further away from the busy metropolitan city. Returning from his run, Chris joins the conversation. While both Erin and Chris considered sustainable housing, it was Erin who convinced Chris that a tiny home was the way to go. When everything fell into place perfectly, they decided to pull the trigger and do it. It is their way of giving the middle finger to the socio-economic systems which create high rent, high parking prices in the city and the bigger is better mentality.*

We did it to kind of denounce the American lifestyle that you just need to have the biggest house you can to be successful. I just don't understand that, I don't agree with it. We've been nomadic people our entire existence. We've always been as small as possible because it uses less energy. Our last place in Capitol Hill (Seattle) was \$2200 *a month*. What is that? Where I come from in Montana, that's a mansion payment. That's insane. So, it just made every bit of sense to us. We love being out in literally the middle of the forest. We're close enough to the city but we're in the middle of the forest here.

This is plan C for so many people who are just so stuck. We're stuck. Like we're never going to own a home. The median house price in Seattle is what, like \$700,000?! No - that to me is shackles. That doesn't make any sense. That's all your ducks in one barrel. Every economist will tell you to diversify your assets. I'm a bartender and he's a tattoo artist so we both have unverifiable income to a certain extent. So, this is the only home ownership we could ever have. This is a solution for so many people who can't get over the rent trap.

It keeps your existence in check. To sift through what's important possession wise. You end up with so much crap that you just don't need, and it makes you feel like you're under water at certain points. This allows you to live simply and think about what you're gonna buy before

you buy it. You know, can I fit this into my existence? No. We're under 90 square feet of no. It adds discipline to your spending too. Like why buy things anymore on a dying planet?

I hope we don't have to move our Tiny House around. We're so happy. I mean we have a pool. We *love* it out here. But we can. That's one thing about our generation specifically. Who knows where our job is gonna be tomorrow. The fact that we just have the ability to move is huge. That's such a weird weight off our shoulders. If everything goes wrong, if the earthquake happens tomorrow, we're ok. We can move. It affords you a little bit of freedom. But, we really hope we never have to. We're in paradise. I could stay here for the next 20 years.

It takes a lot of skill and time too. Just putting it up, parking it, unhooking it, levelling it took an hour. I had to learn how to not pee and poop at the same time with our toilet because, it's separated. You have to go then flip the lever. That was the biggest learning curve. And you have to close the lid to the toilet no matter what, so it can aerate properly. We do grey water. Everything is sustainable here. So, we had to learn to haul our grey water over to the little mulch pit that we made where it'll aerate and what not. Once you got used to what went where and how it works, it was really a snap to do it. It took a little while to figure it out. But now it's half an hour of actual work at most. Everything has been made so simple by a lot of modern technology. I mean a lot of the technology we use here has kind of been perfected by RVs. They've done a lot of the work for tiny houses.

Rather than getting up and having breakfast and a coffee, you gotta get up and empty the pisser, fill the water, empty the grey water. You actually have to get up and start doing stuff or else your day is not going to be well by the middle of it. I like the discipline it provides. It's oddly enough a lot nicer to start your day taking care of your homestead and living entirely for yourself opposed to immediately being in this place where you're living for other people. You don't have this immediate ego trip of trying to compare your life to other peoples'. Same thing with the news. You start here. You start present. It's the best. I'm stoked on our decision.

We're essentially hiding in plain sight out here, in a way. It's illegal to live in an RV full-time, unless you're a carer. I'm starting to become a care taker for my cousin, Wendy, who has arthritis, so I can qualify as a carer and I can live completely legally out here in an RV. For whatever reason, King County classifies them as RVs because they're small and they're on

wheels so they fit the same zoning requirements. But they need to be redone. It's really important that these get reclassified in a certain way because these can be a solution for so many people. You can do it sustainably. You can do it healthily. You can do it safely. There are ways to do this that are by code.

This was definitely something [Erin] designed, almost entirely. She figured it out before we pulled the trigger on it. So, without her, I probably wouldn't be doing it. I'm stoked that I'm here for sure. It's rad that what once was a pipe dream – to live more simply and sustainably in the woods – this allowed it to happen now. It was a way to make it happen without having to sink some hundreds of thousands of dollars into land that I don't know whether or not I would like in a few years. Well, even then it's not legal to park a tiny house on your own land because they're not to code. The exception is places where they are legal: Olympia, Portland, there's a couple of others.

Now that I think about it, all my friends who do this are either women or couples. I only knew one male doing it, and he didn't get all the way. I think women are naturally nesters and home makers. There are exceptions of course but I think that might just be a woman thing for whatever reason. We have always been nesters. I think a lot of women feel taken advantage of by renting systems too because they're so predominantly male owned. They'll pull back from that. You're your own master. Women have balls too. We're dreamers, we're creators, we're all these things. Maybe it's cause men have more toys too. They like big TVs. We're building a shed to keep all his toys in, his tools. Women have our things, like too many shoes and whatever, but they'll fit in a closet.

There's a lot to think about. I think it was Dee Williams who said tiny houses were meant for cities. I get you can fit more people, and there are houses in Seattle that have huge back yards. It's great but we would not have done this if we didn't have this situation. That's what really got the ball rolling. Figuring out where to put it is the hardest thing. If you don't have access to water or have enough space to compost everything, it's probably going to get a little messy. It wouldn't be quite as sustainable. It makes you prioritise your water usage, cause you've got to fill up the huge tank again. In my opinion if you're not going to use it to do a certain thing like that then what's the point? I mean if you're not going to try to use less or reduce your, for lack of a better word, carbon footprint then why?

We still work in Seattle but I don't know how much longer that's going to last for me. It's so expensive. Parking is insane, it's literally half of minimum wage. There are so many problems with housing. So many problems with foreign investor companies coming in causing a bubble and profiting from it and no one wants to do anything about it. It's an economic disaster that we could potentially control but no one wants to. It's trying to reason with people who are making a profit. I think for both Chris and I, more than anything, this is a giant middle finger to all of that. It's punk rock as hell. This is our 'fuck you' to all that, and financial institutions. Don't want no part, don't have to have a part. Our bills are so low that I don't feel this pressure to be like 'I've got to figure something out because I've got rent due and it's thousands of dollars...'. I could just maybe not too. Maybe I just won't.

I feel like a lot of people are searching for something like that because people are fed up with how convenient life is; it's very unnatural. You want to see what the actual world is all about. I think there's a growing interest in that and it causes us to live in a Tiny House. That's kind of a driving force behind it. It's kind of a perfect storm between that and the economic crisis plus climate change and stuff like that. This is us trying to make a difference in that respect. Change our lives for the better, so hopefully we can feel more comfortable with the impact we're having on the planet.

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Living in a SMLS is a very different experience to that of a traditional house. It requires those who undertake it to learn a variety of new skills. In this uncertain world, plagued by environmental problems and increasing inequalities, it offers an environmentally sustainable, affordable alternative. As a new movement, the possibilities for SMLS are still being discovered, with conversations like this one building our understanding.

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