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# DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND



## *Big Ideas*

IN MANY SHAPES

+ SIZES

EIGHTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE





INSPIRED BY TINY house blogs, Ethan Waldman of Morristown, Vermont, built himself a movable home using quality materials such as local cedar for the exterior siding. The untreated trim will age to a silvery gray.

## He's Big on Small

Ethan Waldman proves that a tiny house is full of huge possibilities

WRITTEN BY NANCY HUMPHREY CASE • PHOTOGRAPHED BY SUSAN TEARE

**T**wo years ago, 27-year-old Ethan Waldman came home after a bike trip on the West Coast and took a fresh look at the next chapter of his life in Vermont. After living in a tent for a month, he questioned whether he really needed all the stuff he'd accumulated. He liked the idea of having a place of his own, but it no longer seemed necessary for it to be a large space. And he definitely did not want to go deep into debt to get it. So he joined what has come to be known as the "tiny house" movement and built a 232-square-foot house on wheels. Parked for now



beside a large pond in Morristown, Vermont, just north of Stowe, on land owned by a relative, the petite gem of a house is proving to be a comfortable, just-big-enough home that Waldman shares with his girlfriend, Ann Carpenter. "It's wonderful — very comfortable," Waldman, a technology coach, says. "I've always been a renter, so this feels really great. It's very empowering."

He feels a lot of pride in having built the house himself, along with a contractor friend, Jason Bednarz. Although the project involved a lot of design pioneering and took a lot lon-



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ger than he anticipated — more than a year working on it part time — Waldman says: “I don’t remember it being hard. I just remember it being fun.”

Seeing the project as part of an up-and-coming trend that aligned with his firm’s values, architectural designer Milford Cushman of Cushman Design Group in Stowe, Vermont, offered to sponsor Waldman’s effort by contributing pro bono to the design. He says he wanted to support Waldman’s taking responsibility for his “footprint.” Also, having lived on a boat for a year and in tents in the Ontario wilderness, Cushman relished the opportunity “to do a really, really tight design, where every move matters,” he says.

Bednarz, who himself came to the project with experience working on boats, says he sensed that making the most of small spaces is a design challenge Cushman especially enjoys.

**WALDMAN CHOSE NATURAL** pine for the walls and ceilings of his tiny home, and awning-style Marvin windows that can stay open when it rains, keeping the house cool all summer. A sliding door separates the bathroom from the “great” room, and a folding table doubles as a desk under a flat-screen computer monitor. The kitchen has a three-burner range and cabinets of Douglas fir.

The tiny structure built onto a steel trailer features a “great” room with a built-in couch with storage underneath; a wall-mounted folding table that doubles as a desk; a kitchen with sink, three-burner range, oven, refrigerator, and custom cabinets; a bathroom with a shower and basic, composting toilet; a sleeping loft with ladder; and a tiny front porch. A compact tank nestled under the sink holds 40 gallons of water. An on-demand unit designed for RVs supplies hot water, and a Dickinson propane heater — used in about half of all tiny houses constructed — and spray-foam insulation in the walls, roof, and floor keep the house warm. Waldman was able to tap into an existing outbuilding on the property for electricity.

High-quality materials such as shiplap pine siding, cedar shingles, and Marvin windows give real-house character to the exterior. Inside, cherry floors lend richness to the **V-GROOVE PINE** wraps the sleeping loft in warmth. The floor is polyurethaned, but the walls and ceiling are pickled for a softer tone. The dimensions were dictated by what could be legally towed on highways, so the loft’s peak could only be 3 feet 10 inches high. The entire structure is 7 feet 4 inches wide, 24 feet long, and 13½ feet high.







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Photos: Susan Toare

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living area. Walls are paneled with local pine, partly because traditional drywall might have cracked whenever the house was moved. Waldman also chose pine for the floor of the loft and for the interior trim, which he had planed to a half-inch thickness to save on weight as well as space. He then pickled it for a soft, warm finish. Overlapping copper shingles line the shower stall, adding pizzazz to the bathroom.

The movability of the structure presented some serendipitous construction opportunities. When it was time to have the house insulated, Waldman towed it to the contractor's shop, reducing the cost of the job by about 10 percent. He used the same strategy to get the roofing done. At 7 feet 4 inches wide by 20½ feet long (not including the 3½-foot-deep front porch) by 13½ feet high, the house is within the limits of what can be towed behind a truck in Vermont. Once, when it was being towed through the town of Stowe, the roof clipped a few sagging utility cables. Fortunately, the police officer who pulled Waldman over found the tiny house intriguing. "I could do with one of these," he said after looking inside.

Waldman, who has since published a guide for tiny house aficionados, identifies three types of people who build them: twentysomethings, especially those with college debt, not sure they want or are able to commit to a mortgage; people who have lost their homes to foreclosure; and retirees who want to stretch the money they have and live with roomier budgets. Even some families have found tiny houses workable. For all of them, the mind-set seems to be live simply with less.

Is there anything Waldman has found limiting? The small refrigerator. "We can't do a lot of advanced shopping," he says. Other than that, the house is working fine. "We had six people over for drinks and hors d'oeuvres, and it was very comfortable. But you do have to like the people you invite."

Waldman doesn't rule out the possibility of having another primary residence in, say, five years, and using the tiny house for work, travel, or rental income, but he and Carpenter are enjoying it so much that, for now, they see no reason to live elsewhere. ■

📖 Ethan Waldman's e-book, *Tiny House Decisions: Everything I Wish I Knew When I Built My Tiny House*, is available at [thetinyhouse.net](http://thetinyhouse.net).