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Alameda Embraces the Small-House Movement

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Little Boxes on an Island

Alameda's Seaside Cottages Are Downright Trendy

By Susan E. Davis Photography by Philip Kaake



When
Marcie Loch,
was looking for a house in
Alameda two years ago, she didn't expect
to end up in one of the most magical little houses on
the Island. But when Loch, 38, went to an open house near Paden
School, she found a 420-square-foot cottage, with roses climbing along a picket
fence outside, and a sleeping loft, a Viking stove, a claw-foot tub and glass mosaic tiles inside.
"I walked in and knew this was it," the Montana-born medical engineer says. "We went right from
the open house to the real estate agent's office to sign an offer."

The truth is, Alameda may be known for its stately Victorians, but there are dozens of itty-bitty, little houses here, too. Many are seaside cottages built as second homes or rentals in the late 19th century. Others were simply small family residences. But with mortgages melting down and global warming becoming more of a threat, small homes are becoming more popular. "There is a trend now toward smaller homes, both for environmental and financial reasons," notes interior designer Kelley Flynn of the Alameda-based Kelley Flynn Design. "People are realizing that it's time to get out from under the materialism of this culture and live more sustainable lives."



It Ain't the Size— It's the Decorating

Small homes can be cute if they're furnished well and kept up consistently.

But as several Alamedan designers note, there's an art to making sure your cottage doesn't turn into a hovel.

Remember, Less Is More: The more floor space and wall space you can see, the larger your home will appear. That means it's important to pare back on the amount of furniture you have, as well as the number of knickknacks, tchotchkes and other visual objects you display. "When you live in a small house, you have to continually ask yourself, 'what really makes me happy?' and 'what do I really need?'" says Kelley Flynn. "And then you have to edit your belongings mercilessly."

Don't Multi-task: The brain, notes Alexandra Odabachian, can't handle spaces that serve more than one purpose. "It gets too cluttered," she explains. "So even though it's hard to pull off in small homes, each room or space should have a designated purpose. The bedroom should just be for resting. The kitchen should just be for cooking. That's what provides clarity."

Scale Down: Big furniture swallows up the space in small interiors. Look for love seats instead of sofas, small easy chairs rather than oversized ones, and tables that can sit against a wall instead of in the middle of the room.



Above and right: Plenty of cabinet space helps Mary Hudson and Brad Reed keep their neat-as-pin 600-square-foot house free of clutter.

Store It: Find as many ways to store extra belongings as possible—whether it's using baskets beneath the bed, wall systems in the living room, or Murphy and other kinds of convertible beds.

Hold Your Head High: Small homes are no longer just for people who can't afford bigger homes. They're for people who want to reduce their carbon footprint, rein in their household spending and simplify their lives.

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—Robin Hewitt

Most people with tiny cottages also have tiny lots, which means they often don't have garage space. Loch, who moved to Alameda from the Peninsula, says about half her belongings are still in storage. Other people offload their belongings entirely. "I've been selling whole pieces of furniture on Craigslist," explains Chris Harper Triplet, who moved from a 2,700-square-foot home in Arizona to a 570-square-foot unit of a duplex on Ninth Street. "It's refreshing to get rid of it."

Many cottages in Alameda were built around courtyards, back when wealthy San Franciscans boated over to Alameda for seaside vacations. And many of those courtyards still retain a community feel. "I love this place," says Robin Hewitt, the property manager of the West End's Marion Court, which is comprised of 20 stucco cottages each 500 to 600 square feet; they were built in 1925. "It's a magical little community because we all get along and watch out for each other."

One and One and One Is Three

One way that people adapt is by adding on. That was the solution of designer/builder Randy Castellon and architect Alejandra Odabachian, who in 1995 bought their one-bedroom, 700-square-foot Post Street home, which was originally built as a duck hunting lodge in 1907. When their son was born just

a few years later, Odabachian designed and Castellon built a 100-square-foot tower off the back of the house. Ten years later, they designed and built a 225-square-foot "studio" in their backyard, with doors and windows handmade from redwood boards from an old fence, as well as furniture handcrafted by Castellon. This structure now houses Castellon's office, Odabachian's ceramics studio and a small library for the entire family.

"I've always been attracted to small spaces and spaces within spaces," Castellon explains. "I like having lots of little areas that charm and delight. But I'm a total minimalist—that's why it works for me. I'm always pushing us to reduce our belongings."

For Odabachian, it's not so much the size of a space, but its quality. "Natural light is key in shaping a space," she says, "as are pleasing proportions, interesting shapes, windows and doors that provide views of the outdoors, which can expand the feeling of spaciousness. And I believe that natural materials bring a certain warmth into a house, as well as a connection to the natural world."

Adds Flynn: "The emotional quality of a space is really important. It takes a lot of filtering—a lot of mental discipline—to get rid of the clutter and decide what we really want a space to be like." ■

Home Sweet 100-Square-Foot Home

Advocates of the "Small House Movement" are now encouraging people to go really small by building 300-, 200-, even 100-square-foot homes that include kitchens, sinks, toilets, showers and sleeping lofts. This is nothing new. The first settlers in Plymouth Rock, in fact, lived in 160-square-foot cabins, as did Thomas Jefferson (before Monticello was finished) and Henry David Thoreau (while writing *Walden*). But the idea is now taking off like wildfire. In fact, a development firm in San Francisco is now selling 250-square-foot starter condos—for the not-so-starter price of about \$300,000.

Want to learn more? Check out www.resourcesforlife.com/small-house-society.

