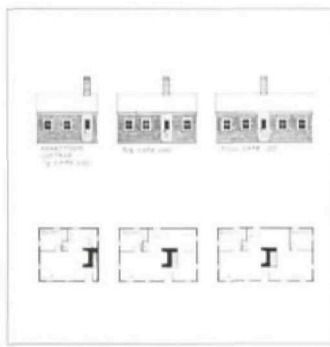


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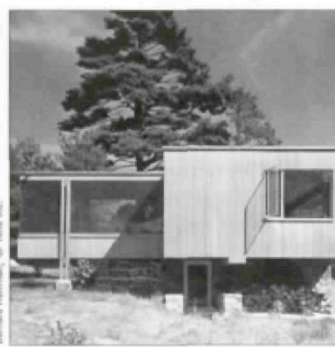
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BY NONYA GRENADER

“Notwithstanding all efforts to improve the product, the American small house is still a pressing, needy, hungry, confused issue.”

— Frank Lloyd Wright, *Architectural Forum*, 1938

THOUGH THE NEW AMERICAN HOUSE grows ever larger, the small dwelling continues to engage our domestic imaginations and challenge our design instincts. You know the type — two bedrooms, one bath, a starter home for some and a lifetime house for many. Whether because of a tight budget, a need to build quickly, a confined site, environmental concern, or the desire for simplicity, the small house has endured as a distinguished if humble form of shelter. The small house is a dwelling reduced to its essentials; the insightful editing required to reach that state has intrigued both architects and historians.

The roots of the small house might be traced back to 1753, when Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier presented an extreme version of the idea: a primitive hut “pared down to four columns that supported an inclined roof of leaves to keep out rain and sun.” He argued for a reduction to the essential components and warned against any item “added by caprice.” The hut was a miniature proscenium where the beginnings of domestic drama could play out — an archetypal house form full of possibility. The descendants of the hut are plentiful, and though the walls have been filled and the footprint enlarged, the scaled-down program is still valid.



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Emily Grenade

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau spent \$28.12 to complete his 150-square-foot treatise on self-sufficiency next to Walden Pond. He hand-built the cabin of rough-hewn lumber, and its crafted detail and pastoral setting gave it a presence that exceeded his goal of simplicity achieved independently.

In the 18th century, the Cape Cod house was ingeniously conceived to expand incrementally, a precursor to the prefabricated, expandable home. The half Cape Cod, known as the “honeymoon” cottage, transformed into the three-quarter model when children arrived, and then a full Cape Cod as the family grew.

After World War II, Cape Cod variations and “complete communities” such as Levittown, New York, provided the sought-after two-bedroom, one-bath model to accommodate growing families. Although their houses were relentlessly similar, Levittowners embraced the idea of a defined space to call their own, a plot of land, and an open (if monotonous) view. In fact, there was something admirable in the sameness: a democracy of size that fostered a neighborly attitude of equality.

These are just a few of the investigations in which builders and owners responded, for various reasons, to the lure of reduced square footage.

Early modern architects also embraced the idea of paring down a dwelling to its essence. For 20 years fol-

lowing the Depression, Frank Lloyd Wright developed his Usonian houses, offering planning innovation and new construction techniques in spite of material shortages. In the 1,340-square-foot Jacobs house, built in 1936 for \$5,500, Wright placed the hearth and kitchen as the center hinge of public and private wings — with all interior spaces open to an expansive garden.

In 1941, Marcel Breuer, assisted by Walter Gropius, designed a screened, wood-clad dwelling that appeared to float above its rock base, re-defining the traditional cabin and porch in crisp modern vocabulary. A freestanding fireplace, the only built interior element, divided the public and private zones.

Far from Walden Pond (and a century later), Le Corbusier built a one-room cabin in France. Clad in a more rustic palette than his familiar pristine buildings, the retreat nevertheless offered insight into his thoughts on proportion, with the modular man inscribed boldly on the vertical wood façade. For the single room, Le Corbusier designed furniture that both defined the spaces and directed a precise choreography of interior circulation.

In the 1950s, Charles and Ray Eames conceived of an “expandable little house” not unlike the Cape Cod — grids of space that could be strung together horizontally or stacked vertically. As a planning tool, the limited kit of parts offered a nearly limitless variety of configurations.

S M L XL X

1. Primitive hut, Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier, 1753.
2. Cape Cod variations.
3. Levittown, New York, 1948.
4. Marcel Breuer's and Walter Gropius' Chamberlain Cottage, 1941.
5. Le Corbusier's Le Cabanon, Cap Martin, 1950.
6. Charles and Ray Eames' prototype for the Expandable Little House, 1959.
7. Project Row Houses, Houston, 1939/1994.

What is the lesson of the small house, its lean and elegant legacy? Historic Houston offers a range of models. A series of houses built in 1939 on Holman Avenue demonstrates a modified form of the classic shotgun-style house — one room wide and several rooms deep. Each room flows to the next, with no square footage squandered on entry rooms and hallways. Instead, transition comes in the form of front and back porches, which extend the simple volumes to the streets and shared yards of the larger neighborhood.

This type of rowhouse became the celebrated subject of artist John Biggers. He said, “As I came upon this special potency, I told myself, hey, I've got to show this whole community as it is, with women on their porches, and show their meaning, that what they see and do truly is dynamic.”¹ Biggers understood that these small houses were enlivened by their inhabitants. He placed importance on the house as a backdrop to daily routine and ritual, and he realized that the rowhouses gained power through repetition. They were enlarged by their sheer number and ability to form an urban ensemble.

In 1994, artist Rick Lowe led a group effort to rehabilitate the (by then abandoned) 22 houses on Holman. Project Row Houses found a fresh use for the historic dwellings, converting them into a vital, lively community of gallery spaces, housing, and neighborhood services.

In a very different mode, Fredrick Leon Webster built a three-story villa on Hyde Park Boulevard. He named his Mediterranean-style tower “L'Encore,” likely a reference to his position as director of the Little Theater of Houston. By the elegant name, Webster showed aspirations to fashion a grand home in spite of the confines of a 20-by-22-foot lot. In the *Architectural Guide to Houston*, historian Stephen Fox observed, “It is a prime example of the fascination with the quaint, the diminutive, and the exotic that typified American architectural eclecticism in the 1920s.”

What is the fate of the small vintage Houston house? Architect Dillon Kyle has worked for five years on an existing house in the Southhampton area, where many small houses are replaced rather than renovated. This compact house — now Kyle's own home — was originally designed by Harvin Moore and Hermon Lloyd in 1940. Kyle's thoughtful insertions and deletions have resulted in a collection of modern details seamlessly stitched into well-worn brick and siding. With limited prospect for resale, his reinvented small house is a questionable investment. But as houses continue to expand, requiring greater resources to build and operate, Kyle's house serves as an admirable example of quiet reuse, proving that less can be exquisitely enough. ■