

Episode 88

Successful Tiny House Living

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/88

Intro: 88 podcasts in and I'm ashamed that we haven't covered this topic before – tiny houses.

We had a chat with Sarah Susanka, author of *The Not So Big House*, and she definitely made us think more about spaces and perhaps getting more from space. So we take it a stage further today. It's a privilege to have Jay Shafer from the Four Lights Tiny House Company on the podcast. He's one of the pioneers, the early adopters, and has really popularised the movement. I started by asking Jay how he became involved.

Jay: At first it was very personal. I didn't really feel that I wanted to invest what little money I had into a mortgage so instead of doing that I figured I'd build myself a little house that met my needs and I didn't really want a lot of extra space or a lot of extra stuff because resources were limited and when I boiled it all down to my needs I came up with a very small house.

Ben: A tiny house. So is there some criteria that make it a tiny house, or is it just a small house is a tiny house?

Jay: Well you know, I'm glad you asked that because it seems like everything's a tiny house now. Much as everything is sustainable or green at least in this country's marketing. I actually never set out to design a tiny house at all, just an efficient house. There's a book that inspired me, 'Tiny Houses', well I think that name has just caught on. And I guess it just means a house that appears to be very small. My own definition is just any house within which all of the space is being used well.

Ben: And incredibly well because I might set out to design a small house where I love the philosophy of every room being used every day, a tiny house, it just goes that stage further.

Jay: Yeah, well I think it might take a little bit of OCD or something in the design process because I will spend hundreds of hours designing a 100 ft² house or a 200 ft² house and it's just a lot of fun for folks like me and apparently that sort of thing is paying off these days.

Ben: Can you take us through your tiny house history, because if you're anything like me your needs change through the years, so have you been in more than one tiny house?

Jay: Oh I have, thanks for asking, because the most recent years, especially the last five years have been particularly different for me. For about a decade I lived in less than 100 ft². Then I got married and had two babies, not myself but with help. [Ben laughs.] We as a family of four were living in 500 ft² at that point, which somehow seems a lot smaller than 100 ft² for one person. I guess little people take up a lot of space. Then our situation changed. I am right now in another 100 ft² house. My two little boys are with me. I'm actually designing one that will fit our needs better with two tiny bedrooms, the size of closets, for the boys off the sides and me in the loft. It'll be kind of like Harry Potter under the stairs. I hope the family folks don't mind but I think they'll love it. The kids will love it.

Ben: And how do they take to it?

Jay: Well kids love forts. We love tree houses and all sorts of small structures as kids. I just never got over it. I think most people, or many people, never really got over it. There's something about efficiency of design that really appeals to people and the feel of it. Something that kind of hugs you, is not confining but still containing. That seems to have an appeal to a lot of people.

Ben: Do you find yourself going out more because the indoor space is smaller?

Jay: You know, it's funny because I built my first small house thinking "I'm outdoors all the time so why not." Then I finished the first small house, moved in and I started staying indoors more often oddly enough. That said, a lot of folks who build tiny do consider the great outdoors to be their living room and outsourcing one's life can come in really handy, especially if you don't include something like a shower. Well, then you wind up going to the gym a lot. [Ben laughs.] First guy I ever built a house for, Greg Johnson, is known as the Jared of the small house movement. Jared is a character featured in a hamburger restaurant commercial who lost 80 pounds because he started eating at the hamburger restaurant. Greg lost 80 pounds living in a small house.

Ben: There you go, you can't argue with that, can you!

Jay: No, no! I think he gained the weight back perhaps when he moved back out of the small house recently.

Ben: That's not good news! And in terms of land, do people who live in tiny houses tend to own the land underneath as you might with a normal house? Because I've seen some that seem to be on a trailer.

Jay: Yeah, I think the ones on a trailer are the most typically identified as small houses or tiny houses but really, like I say, any small house or any house in which all the space is used well is really a small house in my book. And there are a lot of very very small houses out there on foundations and the owner may own the land, or is at least renting the land and so that's totally a small house in my book.

Ben: What does a tiny house have in it?

Jay: Well a tiny house has whatever the occupant needs in it ideally. So if you design it yourself that's easy to take care of. I like to go for the standard stuff: kitchen, bathroom, living room and sleeping space. And within those areas just the standard stuff like in the kitchen would just be a refrigerator, sink and a cooking facility and it goes on from there.

Ben: Are they much more basic or do you feel that you have exactly the same facilities that you had in your old house?

Jay: Well, I think that they're more basic in the positive sense if they're done right, because you just exclude any details that are superfluous to the real design for living.

Ben: Can we talk about the pros and cons because there must be, some of them might be obvious but are there any things that perhaps wouldn't come to mind?

Jay: You know I get asked the question about pros and cons a lot, and pros, I mean the major pro is just freedom. A lot more time to do one's own thing that one loves to do, rather than working for cash non-stop. If one works for cash doing the thing they love anyway, great. But living small allows you take those resources and put them into things that you actually love.

The downside, the primary downside, was hard for me to come up with for a long time but I've finally started mentioning flatulence. I guess that would be the one thing. [Ben laughs.] If you're cohabiting with other people that can be a problem.

Ben: This could be a good point to go on to energy efficiency, that you did mention earlier. [Jay laughs.] A lot of the houses that we look at on this podcast, they're highly insulated, highly airtight and they have mechanical ventilation systems. When we get that small, I'm assuming there's no point in doing that and also that body heat is really going to be significant?

Jay: Yeah, apparently you've been thinking about this because that is true. A funny thing happened last month, or maybe it was the month before, the United States finally got rid of its primary minimum size restrictions for housing, which is kind of unfortunate because that was the good thing that I had to push against for a long time! I thought it was horrible that we were forced into more house than we needed. But the upside is now you can build a legal house that is less than 150 ft². The difficulty there is then you have to meet all the other codes which require a lot of insulation and a lot of structural stuff that really isn't necessary to a small space. When you have walls that take up a quarter of the entire width of your house it's probably not the most efficient use of space or material.

So yeah, I like to go as efficient as possible but once you get up to a certain amount of insulation you actually start getting inefficient by adding more because there's a diminishing return on insulation value. Once you get over what would be called 20Rs, and it doesn't matter what Rs are, it's just that 20Rs is enough and once you get more than that you really don't get much more out of the insulation you're adding on.

Ben: And what does it mean in terms of your bills? Do you have any examples for when people ask this?

Jay: Well I've never done it scientifically, but empirically speaking my bills for heating a house are about 1/12th of the average for the location where I'm living. So I guess that's quite a savings. It really boils down to, it's almost directly proportional to the amount of square footage you have to heat.

Ben: And I'm imagining as well it's things, material objects, that you just don't have space for in the house as well so all those other efficiency savings too?

Jay: Yeah, you know I can't go out to IKEA like I used to! [Ben laughs.]

Ben: Does IKEA make anything that fits in your house?!

Jay: Well IKEA is one of the only places that does because it's European and over here we design big stuff still, though it is getting smaller. It's paralleling the tiny house movement.

Ben: What happens then if we want one of these? Where do we get them from or do we have to make them ourselves?

Jay: Well, you send a cheque to me, Jay Shafer! No, actually you could design your own, which is nice when you have time to do that because you can design it to meet your own needs. Designing a small house is more like tailoring, like designing a suit rather than a house in the sense it has to be very, ideally very well suited to you. Besides that there are a lot of plans for sale out there and some are good, some are bad. Some are cheap and some are expensive and there is no direct correlation between those things. In any case it is nice to go for a design that is very efficient in terms of space and without a bunch of holes in the walls. It's nice if it can be efficient.

Ben: What does that mean then when you're getting efficient with space? How do we know we're on the right tracks and we don't make some massive blunder?

Jay: Well, it's tough. I guess without the OCD I've got it's not like, it just falls into your lap usually, apparently. But in my experience it really helps to go out and check out spaces. What feels good to you? I spent a lot of time in public bathroom stalls and in tiny boxes figuring out what actually feels like a good kitchen for example. You get a lot of interesting stares and whatnot, but it probably is worthwhile considering you're building a house! And even after designing my first house, for something like 500 hours or more, I changed houses because I could see a few square inches here and there that could be used better.

Ben: And are they always timber frame?

Jay: No, SIPs panels (structurally insulated panels) work very well. Also, well basically anything works well if you're building on a standard foundation. If you're doing thick straw bale walls you'd better build it a little bigger unless you want to live in a tiny hallway, but if you're building on wheels which is a fairly popular way to do it, you'd better stick to lightweight materials. I mean building a brick house on wheels is quite a trick! [Ben laughs.]

Ben: Talking about the wheels then, and driving around, people don't go crazy do they? Does this just become a caravan that you drive here, you drive there and then really it's a bit like camping?

Jay: Well I never design my houses for that purpose. I figure if someone wants to drive around a lot they should probably get something a bit more aerodynamic than something that's designed for full-time, year-round living. So my houses they cost a bit of gas, a bit of money in gasoline, or petrol as you might call it...

Ben: Very good.

Jay: ...driving around, so while I've done it on occasion to show people, to drive round and show people how a house can work, I don't recommend it. I've actually designed a house more recently that goes right back to the old RV (Recreational Vehicle) or caravan idea but is insulated for year-round habitation and designed for that kind of living.

Ben: And are these houses stable and secure? What would be a typical life of a tiny house?

Jay: Well I always built mine to be better than the average house, so one of mine will presumably last longer than I will. Or most of us would in general. So there's no real correlation between quality and the quantity of space except for that when you're building and designing very small there's a lot more, generally a lot more money that can be spent on quality of materials and construction rather than just on the quantity of space and square footage.

Ben: I guess that's one of the big advantages isn't it, that you can use some really nice top quality materials because you haven't got to go crazy?

Jay: Yeah, yeah. I had no budget for my first house. I thought well how much money could one possibly spend on 100 ft²? And I found out you can spend an awful lot!

Ben: [Ben Laughs.] Oh no, that's not what we want to hear!

Jay: Well you can also spend a very little! It just depends on your tastes. Generally speaking per square foot it is going to be more expensive for a small house because you're still spending money on all the expensive stuff like the heater and the kitchen appliances and whatnot. And you're getting rid of the cheapest part which is extra square footage which you wouldn't probably be using anyway so all in all it's cheap. Like my house when it sat in Iowa City was the cheapest house in town. It was also the most expensive per square foot.

Ben: It's funny, I was listening to a podcast that my friend Matthew Cutler-Welsh does, and every so often he mentions this, in New Zealand they have this thing about the cost per square foot, and the number one way of getting the cost per square foot down is building a huge great house!

Jay: Yeah, I think that must be what's going on in our country as well. I didn't even realise that might not be the case in any other country, but we're into our square footage here. We like our food and our buildings big and cheap if possible. So it's a tough sell, but it's finally selling.

Ben: Is there a re-sale market for tiny houses? For example, the house that you've talked about, how did you sell that, or did you not? Maybe you just parked it up and it was done?

Jay: Well, there is a re-sale. I'm not really sure what the statistics are on re-sale value are, for re-selling your house when it's very tiny. I guess it depends on you know if it's on wheels you could say it's a vehicle so it would depreciate in value typically.

Ben: Really?

Jay: Well, I guess that would be the case with most vehicles but then again you could move it to a foundation and then you can sell it for more, so it's a very ambiguous thing.

Ben: [Ben laughs.] That's an incredible fact! Do you find that tiny houses attract a certain type of person, and if so, what qualities might they have?

Jay: Well, I've done a lot of workshops and I've seen a few thousand people come in and there tends to be simple people. Well, I say that, it's very hard to identify a demographic because I've had 8 year olds come in, I've had 80 year olds come in and more. There are a few more women than men it seems. I just figure women must be smarter in that regard. I don't know why that is, but there's not a really easily defined demographic.

Ben: In terms of the history then, are things changing? Because in the UK we don't really have a tiny house movement, or not that I'm aware of which is one of the reasons why I wanted to chat to you.

Jay: It's funny because I started designing houses that are very small very shortly after I went to Tokyo in Japan, where they have very

small houses, great design. I wouldn't imagine they would have a tiny house movement in a place where the houses are already small and have always been. That said, I guess tiny houses are big in Japan now. They're also big, relatively speaking, over in the UK.

Ben: They are?!

Jay: Yeah, it's kind of weird because the places that have inspired my designs are now picking up on my designs which is a great honour. And I guess it's become an international phenomenon. I love that but it's harder for me, I would have a hard time pushing tiny houses in Japan myself.

Ben: I know Lloyd Alter at Treehugger, I'm not sure whether you're aware of him, he loves his tiny houses!

Jay: Oh yeah, I love Lloyd because he loves tiny houses and he's a great free advertiser of the tiny house movement.

Ben: He's a great guy all round, yes we love Lloyd. Moving on then a little bit. Tiny houses are very much about living a simplistic life. Do you think that's where ultimately we've got to head as a species?

Jay: I do. It does seem odd that all the rest of nature, even our human nature except for the ego part, or at least the unfettered ego part, is always driving towards efficiency and abiding by the law of necessity, and yet here we are stepping outside of that and building to impress. I don't know what it is exactly but the United States and a lot of other places have gotten far away from efficiency in its housing and I think nature always has its way. So I think it's just coming back and I'm hoping that the McMansion craze that was going on for a few decades here at least and a few other countries, was actually the fad, the trend, and that small houses are actually a normal thing.

Ben: Can we talk through the design process then if this is something we want to do ourselves? How do we make it work, where do you start, what might be some great tips?

Jay: Oh yeah, my gosh. I wish I'd known about the internet when I first started designing my first house. Well, convenient that laptops now, or even phones can be your entire entertainment centre, but to Google the term tiny house or small house back in the late 90s when I was thinking about this stuff at first, you wouldn't find anything much except for 2000 ft² houses or a few very small houses here and there. Now you Google that term there is so much

inspiration you can't get through it all. There are just so many tiny houses out there and tiny house ideas. That's a good place to start with that kind of inspiration.

Beyond that material-wise, technology has completely followed the small house movement. There are more efficient ways to build a wall for example than there used to be. Light and efficient in terms of the insulation within, so polyisocyanurate for example. It's just an insulation that has come along recently that happens to be thin and effective so thank you technology.

Ben: As we get towards the end of the interview, are there lots of common questions that you get asked? I'd be intrigued what those might be?

Jay: You know, I do get asked about the cons of tiny houses a lot, so thank you for asking that though I do have to present my somewhat flippant answer because that's the only one I know! Other questions: merits, sustainability, in terms of efficient use of resources and living. I guess the main message I like to put out there is that it's just so liberating to live in a space that fits your needs without having to take care of a lot of extra.

Ben: And just a little quirky question here, I notice that there's an Australian filmmaker who's been shooting out in Portland, Oregon. Have you heard of this film and are there lots of other films about tiny houses?

Jay: I'm so excited that there are. I'm eager to find out who this filmmaker is. It's possible that I know who it is but I don't know who that is. There are a few films. Tiny the Movie became at least number 4 if not higher on iTunes most popular documentary list and it's still way up there, made by a couple of friends of mine. There are a few out of the Netherlands. They like small stuff up there and yeah. Oh and speaking of Australia, it seems like the places with the biggest houses are the most into tiny houses. Australia has the biggest houses in the world right now. I think it's a backlash thing.

Ben: Well it's been absolutely fascinating to chat with you. I appreciate your time. Jay, thank you very much.

Jay: Thank you Ben. I appreciate it.