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Super-size to Super-small: McMansions, Tiny Houses, and applied New Materialism

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Super-size to Super-small

McMansions, Tiny Houses, and applied New Materialism

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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For my family, my friends, and the things all around us.

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Abstract

Every object that humans encounter contains its own unique history—from the location that it was sourced from to the hands that shaped it. There is a branch of philosophy that gives credence to the inanimate, New Materialism. I have taken the principles of this school of thought and applied them to two kinds of residences: the McMansion and the Tiny House. Currently these structures are most often judged on the basis of sustainability, livability, or visual coherence. However, these subjective standards for judgement do not bring a viewer any closer to being able to explain how the residence styles function. New Materialism will provide a consistent toolkit to use when encountering architecture, a practice that honors the space more than subjective judgements have the capacity to. I chose to introduce these structures before applying New Materialism to them; having a grasp on the unique personality of each space will lend strength to the New Materialist argument that all objects shine with potential. This work closes with two short explorations of the quiet ways in which spaces are alive. By the end of this thesis, I hope to impart an appreciation and awe for the mundane, the under-appreciated, and the over-hyped.

Introduction

This thesis will parse out identification and implications for McMansions and Tiny Houses. This project exists in three parts: an introduction to New Materialist philosophy, an evaluation of the McMansion, and a study of the Tiny House. The philosophical background will serve as the foundation for the ways in which I discuss and describe these architectural styles. Defining the McMansion allows for ease of reader identification, so I will begin there. Once a reader is equipped with enough knowledge to point a McMansion out in the wild, I will begin to discuss how New Materialist thought can be applied to this type of structure. The Tiny House is less complex in definition, but it allows for a more flexible range of uses. My discussion of the Tiny House will primary center on the details, draws, and drawbacks of various uses and design choices. Understanding the web of interactions that constitute a tiny house is essential to understanding its potential. All of this culminates into two twin narratives, where the components discussed in my thesis become the main characters in a New Materialist narrative exploration of their functions.

A person's home is their castle. They leave traces of themselves in the gardens they fret over, in the art they choose to hang, and in the spices they store in their cabinets. A person's home is an artifact. The historical manors we revere use the same brick and board as our modern variations on the same theme. These trends must be cataloged and categorized for future home builders and homeowners. People are inherently interested in their own lives, and a person's home is a frame for their

life. If home is an extension of self, home can be approached with same curiosity and patience that we deploy when studying people.

New Materialism

New Materialists apply philosophical thought to the experience of things. They attempt to flatten the world around them, putting every object (animate or inanimate) on equal ground. This mode of thought is at once humbling and wonder inspiring. Under New Materialism, a human carries the same potential for intrigue that a car or a seaweed growth does. The importance of humans shrinks and the world around them expands through the addition of agency to the inanimate. Any study of the world around us is subject to New Materialist interest because New Materialism is interested in how the world runs on connection both seen and unseen. New Materialism gives objects the attention they deserve.

There are several key concepts within New Materialism that I plan on applying to the rest of my work. The first of these is Bogost's conception of "flat ontology." Flat ontology holds that all objects in existence, both living and nonliving exist on the same level. Humans are not super beings that exert a higher level of existence on reality. Rather, if something can be said to exist, it doesn't exist to a lesser degree than anything else. Once all objects are placed on the same level of importance through an argument for flat ontology, I will outline the nature of an object. Jane Bennett's "thing-power" and Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects* factor into my interpretation of New Materialism. Objects must be defined before we can dive in to the key tenets of Latour's Actor Network Theory [ANT], which is tool that I will use later to describe structures.

Ontology is the study of being. Thus, a flat ontology is a study of being without the pitfalls of favoritism toward life. Ian Bogost sums up the theory of flat ontology with the phrase “All things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally.” (Bogost 11) It’s important to unpack this phrase to understand the concept. Levi Bryant begins this process in *The Democracy of Objects*. “The claim that all objects equally exist is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object. The claim that objects do not exist equally is the claim that objects contribute to collectives or assemblages to a greater and lesser degree.” (Bryant 19). Bryant attempts to draw connections between the thinkers of New Materialism by interpreting their work.

All things equally exist. You exist—even though you are made of distinct parts, you wouldn’t stop existing if you lost your arm. The plant on my windowsill would not stop being a plant if it lost a few leaves. You exist on the same level as your now detached arm, the plant on my windowsill, and its detached leaves. You can’t be said to be exerting more reality on the world than any other thing in existence. You are just as real as my plant is. “... flat ontology argues that all entities are on equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possess greater ontological dignity than other objects” (Bryant 246). This concept of dignity is at the core of many of Bogost’s assertions. If all things exist equally, then humans are no exception. Existing on the same level as a thrift store lamp shade can seem demoralizing, but with more commitment to flat ontology it can be reassuring. There is space for us in reality, we simply must share realness with

every other thing. The world around us is rife with objects that matter thanks to flat ontology. “The thread that runs throughout the work ... is a profound decentering of the human and the subject that nonetheless makes room for the human, representation, and content, and an accompanying attentiveness to all sorts of nonhuman objects or actors coupled with a refusal to reduce these agencies to vehicles of content and signs.” (Bryant 27). As humans, we have a tendency to make everything about us. It’s not our fault; our innate anthropocentrism is derived from the fact that it is the only perspective that we, as humans, have access to. Flat ontology challenges us to step out of the spotlight. Bogost sums it up: “Humans are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead among beings, entangled in beings, and implicated in other beings” (Bogost 17). Our structure and conception of reality is the most familiar to us, but it is not the dominant. Humans are not at the summit of being, but neither is anything else.

All things do not exist equally. So far, I’ve presented the claim that every possible thing exists and does so at an equal level as man. All these things are now our equals but all things are not equally useful. In the great group project that we call life, objects contribute to different degrees. “Flat existence entails equal levels of potential worth.” (Bogost 120). Please note that Bogost used the word “potential”, not actual. Flat ontology doesn’t immediately elevate the tadpole to the level of a library book. An object can exist on the same scale of reality as all other things and still carry little to no worth. Pflugfelder illuminates this, explaining that “... a flat ontology does not necessarily suggest that all things are perpetually equal, but that they have no innate

inequality.” (Pflugfelder 450) Objects gain worth through the number of connections they are able to amass. These connections are formed by interactions with other substances. Latour’s ANT is a tool used to trace connections and ANT can be deployed to examine the strength of an object. Bogost, of course, has some criticisms for ANT, stating “...in the networks of actor-network theory, things remain in motion far more than they do at rest. As a result, entities are de-emphasized in favor of their couplings and decouplings...” (Bogost 7) Bogost wishes to place emphasis on the importance of the entity, and finds that Latour’s methods detract from an object’s importance. This criticism is valid but Bogost doesn’t offer a better tool to trace interaction or begin to quantify the worth of object. As such, Latour reigns.

Flat ontology is a mindset difficult to access, but its application is widespread over the rest of this work. The trusses supporting a roof are *as* essential to the structure of the house as the webs of nails that bite boards together. A house cannot be reduced to its mere component parts; it is more than a mere holder of bits and pieces. Each substance should be regarded as intentional, useful, and essential. The essential nature (otherwise known as the dignity) of each component must be taken into account when studying the house as a whole.

Objects have their own unique identity and definition. Things own inherent dignity, beauty, and power—a notion that was hinted at by Bogost in my overview of Flat Ontology. This phenomenon of being is also known as “thing power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” (Bennett 41). The metaphysical poet John Donne once defined the object as “a little

world made cunningly”. Levi Bryant holds that “every object is also a crowd of objects” (Bryant IX). In New Materialism, objects connect to and are composed of other objects but cannot be reduced to that which composes them. Bogost explains that humans are among, entangled by, and implicated in other objects—and it follows that all other substances are as well. No object is only defined by the pieces within it or by the web surrounding it.

It is easier to begin with what a substance is not, rather than starting with what a substance is. “The qualities of the object are not the object.” (Morton 27). My favorite detail on my favorite mug is a light blue rose, but when the lights are out the rose is black and when the sun is rising the rose takes on an orange tint. This light blue rose is not light blue at all; its color is a quality that the mug produces. My coffee mug remains a mug when it is warmed by boiling water or cooled with ice; the mug’s being is not voided by changes in temperature. If I were to drop and shatter my coffee mug, those shards would all be new objects but they would also be remnants of my mug. An object is not defined by its qualities; rather, “...qualities are unique events that a substance produces.” (Bryant 90). These enduring and transient qualities aren’t at the core of thinghood. Some authors suggest turning qualities into verbs to reassign this power. The phrases “my mug does blue roses” or “my mug hot” doesn’t flow very well, so I’ve chosen to move away from this language. For your entertainment, feel free to continue attributing qualities to objects in verb form. This exercise presents a powerful way to apply New Materialist thinking to your life with humor.

A home is not a home because it is painted yellow, beige, or blue. Its color is irrelevant to its nature. Objects can exist as concepts in vacuums. It is their webs of interaction that render their reality into something beyond concept. When a home burns down, its charred pieces still carry “home-ness” inside of them. “Every object is a marvelous archaeological record of everything that ever happened to it. This is not to say that the object is only everything that ever happened to it—an inscribable surface such as a hard drive or a piece of paper is precisely not the information it records, for the reason that it withdraws.” (Morton 112). While relocating, homeowners are often reminded of the stories behind nicks and stains. That pink blob left on the carpet is the remnant of a slime experiment gone wrong. Paintings cover leftover marker art from a now grown child. Scratches on the floor from family pets almost fade out of view. A home is a record of the work of the builder, the ideas of the designers, and the lives of the family inside; but it is more than that. That record is the photo in the frame. The home is the frame itself and would persist were the photo removed and replaced. “...objects are not constituted by their relations to the rest of the world.” (Bryant 68). A home is more than the sum of its parts and the combination of all the networks within it operates. This secret, unknowable aspect is at the core of all object being. We will never know it, because objects withdraw.

Withdrawal means that at this very moment, this very object, as an intrinsic aspect of its being, is incapable of being anything else: my poem about it, its atomic structure, its function, its relations with other things... Withdrawal isn't a violent sealing off. Nor is withdrawal some

void or vague darkness ... [it is] an open secret. (Morton 16-17).

It is important that we view withdrawal as an “open secret”, not something to hunt down. “The claim that substances withdraw from one another suggests that it is impossible for objects to directly encounter one another.” (Bryant 136). As humans, we tend to struggle with communication. Words can be expressed but we will never know the true thought and motivation behind the speech of another. No true encounter has taken place when two individuals speak to one another. All communication is translation. All translation results from withdrawal.

Since the core of object being is withdrawn from understanding, true communication is a struggle. Some meaning is lost when we translate *howdy* into *bonjour*. This is a translation in anthropocentric understanding. Even more meaning is lost when objects translate each other or humans try to translate objects. Translation is not an ability possessed by humans. “After all, no object truly contacts another one. They really only share what Harman calls their ‘notes.’”(Bryant 26). In order for a tree to understand grass, it must translate the message that the grass is sending into a dendropocentric lens. These notes are the parts of the object which are perceivable by other objects.

The core of the object is foreign. Objects withdraw from the networks that encapsulate them. “No object ever encounters another object as a real object.” (Bryant 162). Instead of encountering other objects as whole and pure substances, “...things render one another in infinite chains of weaker and weaker correlation, each altering and distorting the last such that its sense is rendered nonsense.” (Bogost 84)

A little piece of meaning is lost every time an object's communications are translated. "Any object's understanding of another object is determined by a matrix of these fluctuating, partial, yet still very real, relationships." (Pflugfelder 451) Think of translation as a large game of telephone where the intended phrase is relayed in many mediums—some reliable, some unfaithful.

Most of the phenomena described by Latour in *Reassembling the Social* are also highlighted by other New Materialists. Latour created one of the most structured approaches to New Materialism. Actor Network Theory [ANT] is a common thread running through all the work of Latour's. Graham Harman, Latour's contemporary and copublisher summarizes ANT into 4 key points.

The four central concepts of this work can be summarized as follows:

Actants. There is no difference between hard kernels of objective reality and wispy fumes of arbitrary social force. Everything that exists must be regarded as an actant.

Irreduction. Nothing is inherently either reducible or irreducible to anything else.

Translation. Since one entity is never reducible to another, and never entirely contained inside another, actual work is needed to show the ways in which entities partly influence one another while remaining partly shielded from such

influence.

Associations. No entity is inherently strong or weak. Strength arises when an entity manages to assemble as many allies as possible, while weakness emerges when it is isolated or cut off from alliances. Since allies can include forces of nature and ironclad logical deductions no less than armies and banks, it is pointless to explain the world entirely in terms of atomic matter and equally pointless to reduce it to paranoid theories of conspiratorial human language and power. In principle, all forces are equal. (Harman 32-33).

Some of these terms have become the accepted language of New Materialism. You should recognize their usage from earlier explanations. Although those earlier examples still hold true, I'd like to present ANT through Latour's words and Harman's interpretation.

An actor (used in place of actant) is the central node of ANT. Latour specifies that the use of the word actor is intentional. "To use the word 'actor' means that it's never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting." (Latour 46) An actor on a stage is modified by their director, the presence or absence of an audience, the pollen counts in the air that day, and myriad other factors. Actors do not work in vacuums in the context of theater or in the context of ANT. Actors do not stand still, instead, "actors are constantly engaged by others in group formation and destruction" (Latour 47). Substance is not a human

domain. Even Latour holds that objects can carry as much agency as humans. “A billiard ball hitting another one on the green felt of a billiard table might have exactly as much agency as a ‘person’ directing her ‘gaze’ to the ‘rich human world’ of another ‘meaningful face’ in the smoke filled room of the pub where the tables have been set up.” (Latour 61) Although *Reassembling the Social* is a critique of modern sociology, it still manages to make New Materialist claims. Latour’s actors are not always human but they are still in constant motion, forming and adjourning groups.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Humans are more than a compendium of arms, legs, and noses; we have a self. A core being that would persist, even with the addition of a few pounds or the subtraction of eyebrows. “Latour calls it irreduction: ‘Nothing can be reduced to anything else,’ even if certain aspects of a thing could be considered transformative on something else” (Bogost 19). In ANT, nothing is mere. Nothing is meager or meek or irrelevant. No thing can be boiled down or put “in a nutshell”. Beyond this, no thing is above relation. Nothing can exist in a vacuum; nothing is so opposed to association that it can isolate itself. For things to exist and exert their existence in ANT, they must be irreducible.

Translation, a process highlighted above in my discussion of the nature of an object, figures into ANT. Without the process of translation, no objects would encounter each other. No communication would occur. The world would stagnate. Translation happens all around us. Latour describes translations as “a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting.” (Latour 108) Let’s break this phrase down into bite-sized chunks. A translation is a relation that

does not transport causality. There is no cause and effect metric in ANT because often there are many causes contributing to a single effect. My meringue fell flat because it's a representation of my crushed ego, because the humidity was two percentage points higher than normal, because my glass bowl was uncooperative, because the proteins weren't denatured by the beaters—and so on and so forth until the end of time. Instead of acting as a bar cart for causality, translations induce two mediators into coexisting. A mediator is another word for a substance that produces change, or acts. When two substances encounter one another and produce changes in one another (even in passing) a translation can be said to have occurred. These substances can influence one another without knowing one another. This influence is known as association.

The saying “strength in numbers” applies to all objects. Everything that exists must belong to some group, tribe, or band. The more groups that any given substance can snap in and out of, the more weight it carries. “We cannot discover the nature of a thing by looking into its heart, but must follow the blood that circulates from that thing through all its arteries and far-flung capillaries.” (Harman 44) ANT would not exist without reverence for the association that forms the network, the second key node to Latour's theory. An association occurs when two objects translate one another. “It is an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together.” (Latour 65) Associations can't be traced by standard methods deployed by modern sociologists because they don't create a society. ANT is a tool to

trace things. It is not what is being traced and it is not an overarching thread.

ANT is best thought of as a bulletin board with push pins and string pinned in it. The bulletin board stands for equal, flat existence. Nothing can be said to be more affixed to the board than anything else. It's either pinned in, or it isn't. The push pins represent actors, who in a vacuum don't lend any significance to the board. They only create meaning once they are connected. The push pins cannot be reduced to mere component parts in the board; they are all essential. Being a pin in the board isn't enough; to contribute anything of value the push pins have to connect to other push pins. This connection is done with strings. The strings themselves are associations. More important push pins will have more strings affixed. ANT is not the act of creating this bulletin board. The board already exists, push pins connected and all. ANT is taking a step back and deciphering the board.

New Materialism so far has been the domain of philosophers who all encourage readers to go outside and act upon the theories they outline. I plan on doing this, and being among the first to do so. New Materialists tend to lean on their own theories. Bogost does so with endless examples of what it's like to be a thing. Latour does so with his methodical approach to ANT. Where Bogost is a lion tamer, Latour is a zoologist. I want to apply the strengths of these thinkers somewhere new and I hope the pitfalls will all come from my own weaknesses. There is something genuine and reassuring at the core of New Materialism, that's what drew me to allowing the theory to guide my study. It gives objects their well-deserved due with reverence and wonder. I will give these houses their due and study them as wholes

instead of as Frankenstein sums of parts. I cannot guarantee that I will be faithful as I am an absolute beginner, but I can guarantee a genuine and whole hearted effort. You deserve this much as my readers and these structures deserve that much as the subject of my study. Bogost put it well: “Let’s leave rigor to the dead. Let’s trade furrows for gasps. Let’s rub our temples at one another no longer. Let’s go outside and dig in the dirt.” (Bogost 133) Let’s begin.

Practical User's Guide to New Materialism

Flat ontology is the theory that all things equally exist, but they do not exist equally. Every object exerts the same amount of reality onto the world but gains significance through its interactions with other objects.

Objects are not mere lists of qualities. They hold something unique to themselves. That unique hidden part is unknowable, it withdraws.

Objects translate each other to understand each other, not always perfectly.

Translation describes how objects are able to understand each other. Humans have phrase books, lampshades have translation.

Actants (or actors) are another term for objects, people, or anything within the plane of existence. Any single thing that exists has the potential to act.

Actors are irreducible—they are greater than the sum of their parts. That hidden part withdraws.

Objects translate one another to form associations. These associations are how objects interact.

Applied Actor Network Theory is a tool to describe the universe—like a bulletin board with push pins.

McMansions

The McMansion is a subject of ridicule and hate today. To its detractors, its size represents the lofty aspirations of an upwardly mobile but culturally uneducated middle class. Its design promotes segregation when placed in the worst light. These homes dot satire blogs like *McMansion Hell* and appear as secondary characters in shows like *Arrested Development*. It's easy to take a cheap shot at these structures; they've become the subjects of ridicule since their stereotypical owners are equally ridiculous. Despite all of this bad press, the McMansion has persisted. My evaluation of the structure will attempt to avoid the mistakes others have made. The McMansion isn't a monstrosity. It's a house. It will be studied with the same respect afforded to chateaus and cathedrals.

These critiques of the McMansion's appearance and right to exist are valid, but they are narrow minded. Some context is required to understand why the McMansion exists. "The Millennium Mansion is the predominant style in many large subdivisions from the late 1980's up to the present." (McAlester 708). In the late 1980's people in America were benefiting from incredible economic growth. Solidifying market outreach into true globalization meant that for the first time most financially independent people truly had the whole world at their fingertips. People wanted more. Even in the years running up to the recession of 2008 people were finding ways to gain. "While fast food chains may be getting rid of the super-sized menus, American homebuilders continue to build extra-large houses to meet buyers'

demands.” (Nasar 340) This quote follows almost 25 years of successful sales. Buyers were able to afford these larger houses much in thanks to mortgages and debt financing. The McMansion was a status symbol—a single family home in a nice neighborhood with a safe school nearby wasn’t exactly the height of luxury but it came pretty close.

Virginia McAlester found the McMansion construction style notable enough to identify in her most recent edition of *A Field Guide to American Houses*, released in 2013. It’s listed among houses built by Frank Lloyd Wright and homes inhabited by founding fathers. This field guide is an example of applied Flat Ontology—the approach puts every house at an equal level of existence and worth. There are a wealth of examples today that embody the McMansion. Homes like these aren’t too difficult to track down, the roughly 25 year span of their popularity means that there are many iterations cropped together in suburbs nationwide. “The McMansion is not just a place to live, but an assertion of the American sense of identity and space making a clear statement of prosperity.” (Nasar 342) In this chapter, I will describe the role of the developer and city in the rise of this style, discuss two different identification schemes for the McMansion, evaluate key identifying features, touch on some social implications of suburban life, incorporate some urban planning theory, and finish with an application to New Materialism.

The design qualms that many experts have with McMansions cannot be explained away by blaming suburban developers for participating in the building boom. “It’s not the developers’ fault ... They didn’t create this system, they just

inherited it.” (Lloyd 3). After all, the suburban developer only produces homes that are marketable and desirable; they only produce homes that will sell. The forward thinking builder is cognizant of market saturation and travels to seek out new styles to introduce to an area, but many builders are content to see a need and fill that need. These people are running businesses, and they are required to build what the market demands or fail. Furthermore, builders and developers have to adhere to rules and regulations set by the public sector. The city or county must approve all subdivisions before ground is broken, and people with qualms have time to raise them in public forums.

Some municipalities have few regulations regarding buildings, others dictate what color schemes are acceptable within city limits. The appearance of a given suburb is truly up to the regulatory discretion of the city it is built in. When developers want to create a suburb, they must submit their plans to the city or county for approval. Some restrictions were put in place in cities across America expressly to prevent the construction of McMansions and affiliated residences. “Planners reported adopting a variety of regulatory measures to minimize their impact, most frequently relying on building height, bulk and mass controls and design review.” (Nasar 353) These regulatory measures worked to an extent, but only at the cost of the freedom of choice for the buyer. Cities have the power to restrict the growth of any given construction style. Some cities chose to regulate against common McMansion traits while other cities chose not to regulate against the McMansion at all. In either case,

buyers were demanding homes that fit the scheme of a McMansion and suburban developers were meeting the demand to the best of their ability.

The McMansion exists partially because of the city, the developer, and the buyer—but it persists in our imaginations thanks to its unique appearance. I am not a trained architect, but all of the architectural theory I will present to you was created by actual architects. Several such scholars have presented potential definitions of the McMansion, which I will outline below.

The first of two definitions is provided by Virginia McAlester. She breaks the McMansion into a list of characteristics. She is not without humor in her treatment, but this approach is seen throughout the entirety of *A Field Guide to American Houses*. For her particular style of identification, each highlighted characteristic is structural in nature. These unchangeable parts of a house are the most important.

“Identifying features: Complex high-pitched roof, with lower cross gables or hips; tall entry features, one and one-half to two stories high and often arched; dormers; multiple wall-cladding materials, may be applied to single surfaces like wallpaper; differing window sizes and shapes, sometimes arched; commonly asymmetrical and with tall vertical appearance” (McAlester 707).

If Virginia McAlester's definition is insufficient for identifying a McMansion, I'd like to encourage you to reference the *satirical* McMansion Hell Grading Scale, duplicated on the next page. This second definition is loosely based on structural principles that are commonly violated.

house. These two identification methods are a tremendous jumping off point for the next section, where identifying features will be outlined.

The key identifying features of the McMansion are also some of its core design complaints. Homes with impressive square footages, eclectic design, complex rooflines, and cost cutting measures tend to qualify as McMansions. Many other styles of housing fit these criteria, but it is the culmination of all the criteria and the little grain of extra *je ne sais quoi* that creates a McMansion. When delineating the McMansion from other large suburban homes, it's important to note that other forms of residential architecture come with their own fatal flaws. Good design is subjective, and there is no "one style to rule them all". Architectural styles can be well adapted to the climate needs of a region but still not match well with visual surroundings. A poorly adapted home that heats and cools inefficiently can still be beautiful. Practicality is not linked to aesthetic merit. A truly ideal home possesses practical viability for the people living inside, visual beauty, and is well tuned to the climate demands of its region.

Mansion is the operative word in McMansion, but in this day and age it's difficult to nail down one definition. A mansion is more than just a large house, and even so a large house is difficult to nail down. In general, it's easier to look at square footage in a house as an allotment of square feet of space per person. This allows for a sliding scale of mansionhood—because something that is a mansion for a single resident may be a very crowded home for a large family. Wagner notes that the McMansion is "over 2500 square feet", while McAlester notes that the McMansion is

“... five thousand to ten thousand square feet and up.” (McAlester 708). With these varied definitions in mind and the assumption that the single family home accommodates four people, a McMansion could be between 625 square feet as a lower bound and 2,500 square feet and beyond as an upper bound of space per inhabitant.

Square footage per person was trending upward during the McMansion era from 1980 until roughly 2010, but the lots that houses were built on were not expanding. “Today, the average home is around 2,400 square feet compared to 1,500 square feet in an average home in the 1950s”. (Mitchell 7) The birth rate has of course been in a period of decline since the end of the boomer area. All this indicates that homeowners tended to have more room to stretch out and accumulate within the confines of their own homes. “As house sizes have increased, household and lot sizes have decreased. The average household size dropped from 3.14 [individuals] in 1970 to 2.57 [individuals] in 2000...” (Nasar 340). With fewer people in a space and square footage demands growing, each resident got more space to themselves. Some of this space is relegated to unused areas, like formal dining and sitting rooms; some of the space goes into creating expansive shared spaces like bonus rooms and game rooms. The fact that homeowners had more space allowed them to adapt their consumer habits. If you have the desire and the disposable income to purchase a pizza oven for the patio and you have the space for such a tool, a patio pizza oven you shall own. Although some homeowners dedicated themselves to filling empty spaces with decor, others closed off those unused spaces and relegated them for use

only upon special occasions. In and of itself, the mansion hood of the McMansion is not gauche or beautiful, it simply is.

There are some logistical issues with building a home large enough to meet these square footage guidelines. Even if the buyer will pay for a home that large, the cost based implications are far reaching beyond the initial point of sale. Climate control is an important piece of homes in America—almost every new American home is built with a heating unit and air condition. The sheer size of a house makes it expensive to heat and cool. Anywhere sound can escape (through thin walls or doors, a characteristic outlined below), heat can escape too. Even the most energy savvy homeowner who closes doors to unused rooms may still end up controlling the climate in those spaces and paying to do so.

A home's large footprint isn't the only thing that qualifies it as a McMansion; eclectic design aspects are another important component of this definition. In a scramble to keep up with growing demands for unique houses, builders combined architectural styles from many eras and affixed them to larger and larger spaces. These historical details create the feeling of a more expensive home. "As much as 20 percent of [a developer's] construction budget goes toward the application of superficial variety—different shapes, colors, window types, different types of tack on ornament, French Provincial next door to California Contemporary." (Duany 48) This visual variety is called "superficial" because it didn't come with any significant changes to the base house underneath all the details. True architectural variety within individual homes comes from the floor plan and frame of a house, not from any

replaceable portions. People living in McMansion suburbs are often living in houses with the same number of bedrooms, the same number of bathrooms, and the same style of garages. This allowed for speedy construction. In order to break up the visual monotony of homes clustered together that were all roughly the same size and served roughly the same purpose, developers provided buyers with a swath of options for the details on the exterior of their homes. In Kate Wagner's identification chart featured above, one piece of the McMansion puzzle was "Peel 'n Stick Architectural Details". Virginia McAlester explains this identifying trait in depth. "The exteriors of Millennium Mansions almost always include details borrowed from one or more historic styles and have a new signature feature- prominent (and largely non historic) one-and-one-half or two-story entries." (McAlester 684). The issue is not with the inclusion of the details—modern construction can pull details from the past in a tasteful and beautiful way. The issue is instead with the lack of adherence to one dominant era. The eclectic application of often faux details is one of the key identifying factors of a McMansion.

Contrary to the belief of some architectural critics, eclecticism isn't inherently sinful and can be beautiful. It simply refers to the act of mixing two or more architectural styles together. Humans are masters at taking two good things, mixing them together, and creating one even better thing. Eclectic design can be achieved in a beautiful and tasteful way. These blends are often most harmonious when the original styles come from similar time periods or regions of the world. Victorian Brutalist would be a nightmare, but the blend of Classical and French Renaissance

styles created Beaux Arts construction (Wagner). Just as long as there is a consistent thread running through each detail, it remains harmonious. That thread has to be structural in nature—you can't mix together two dissimilar styles and then paint the entire house orange to create continuity. If the visual weight of a house remains balanced, proportions are kept in check, and details are to scale the eclectic blend of any number styles works swimmingly.

In general, eclecticism works best when there is one dominant style and one or more secondary styles that influence the construction of a space. McMansions fall short on style points when they attempt to blend too many dominant style details together in their exteriors. Dominant style details are the key markers of one style of construction. These dominant details are punchy and tend to stand out even on homes where there is only one architectural school of thought as an influence. Often, the punchy details included on McMansion facades aren't exactly to scale. This led to too tall columns and expansive oriels where a simple window would have done just fine. There is a simple but not always fail safe approach to finding highly eclectic McMansion construction. Seek out homes that were clearly built in the modern era and fit the size requirement. Identifying eclecticism can be as simple as looking for breaks in a house's visual continuity. Check for large details that compete for attention. A house at its very best should never be in competition with itself, so those large details are a pretty clear indicator of too many styles applied all at once. Eclectic design alone isn't enough for a satisfactory identification; a McMansion requires a roof.

The most prevalent critique of the McMansion is the unique roofline. No commenters express discomfort with poking fun at the complex structures. Kate Wagner uses the term “roofline soup”. Virginia McAlester makes cheeky comments, explaining that “These complicated roofs can be thought of as crowns, or more satirically, as the Future Roofers of America Relief Act.” (McAlester 707). Duany attempts to use the roofline as a personality indicator, calling the McMansion “The North Dallas Special: a single house attempts to create the skyline of an entire village. It is meant to stand alone” (Duany 76). These complicated rooflines are a large part of what makes a McMansion easy to identify in the wild.



The roofline is where the McMansion gains much of its strength according to New Materialist thought. You’ll recall that an object is only as significant as its associations are strong, and the McMansion roofline has an unshakeable party of associations linking it to other things. The structural integrity of the house relies on

the strength of the roof, and so at least according to Bruno Latour these two things would be associated. One cannot hang Christmas lights without a roofline to trace, and their LED glow illuminates the way that the roofline is associated with a holiday and all of the religious and secular imagery contained within the holiday. The effort of the roofers ties the McMansion roofline back to family trees and histories entirely unrelated to the people that it shelters. The relationship that the roofline has with the people it shelters is probably the most significant, and in proper form I've saved the best for last. How many sayings equate a roof to safety, security, or the strength of the head of the family? *"Not while you're living under my roof!"*, *"We all live under the same roof"*, *"You can sleep soundly, the roof won't fall in"* come to mind. The roofline of the McMansion stands in for the rest of the house and for the family's strength. It can be counted on and relied upon as structurally sound even when there are storms outside. The roof of the McMansion is perhaps the strongest because it means the most to us symbolically.

In traditional architecture, viewers can use the roofline of a building to delineate the primary, secondary, and even tertiary structures. The primary structure is the main body of the house, identified as having the largest proportional piece of roofline. Each additional structure can be identified by looking for the next largest pieces of roofline. Most homes today consist of a primary and secondary structure at the minimum. The delineation of structures becomes muddled with the introduction of features like columns and pediments at the front of a home (because the column and pediment constitute a separate structure from the rest of the house) and two

story grand staircases encapsulated in turrets. In general, homes that architects enjoy are easy to delineate. They tend to be clean and simple, daring only to have a tertiary structure at most. The complicated roofline of the McMansion means that it goes well beyond having just primary, secondary, and tertiary structures, and architects complain that it creates visual confusion. It's a roof. It keeps rain out of the house and balloons in. The roof of the McMansion is not a predator evasion tactic and should not be treated as confusing or wrong. It simply is. Look for complexity, look for many different discernable structures, and seek out a place that reaches to the sky with its many shingles.

The final component to McMansionhood to discuss is the use of cost cutting measures. The McMansion is well known for its use of materials that give the *illusion* of great expense. There is no fault in seeking cheaper alternatives to luxury items, but there is a risk. These cheaper alternatives can degrade faster and often show signs of wear and tear earlier. They can be difficult to replace and sometimes the cost of replacement outpaces the cost of installment. Materials that are deteriorating are often a detriment to neighborhood curb appeal, so the pressure to replace them is high. "You get what you pay for" often does come into play with residential construction and cutting corners on materials can hurt the resale value of a house.

The use of cheaper alternatives has made the single family suburban home a more attainable ideal for many. With home ownership a near requirement of the successful achievement of the American Dream, it only makes sense that developers courted people who aspired to that ideal. The American economy hasn't always been

kind to the middle class. “It has become increasingly difficult for the middle class to own satisfactory housing. In 1970, about 50 percent of all families could afford a median-priced home; by 1990, this number had dropped below 25 percent.” (Duany 55) The unavailable nature of even a median priced space turned housing into a luxury good. The McMansion was a middle line in many cases. It had luxury detailing and high end community features, but was often at a comfortable price point for upper middle class families. People were able to entertain with the idea that “a person’s home is their castle” again and there was something distinctly exciting about that notion.

Attainability isn’t too dramatic of a challenge to homeowners, provided they had the means to drive new vehicles every 5 years or so, they also had the means to finance a suburban mansion. During the peak of McMansion proliferation, homes were often financed with large mortgages (as the peak of McMansionization coincided with the peak of the American housing bubble). All things considered, “...the McMansion provides excellent value for its price.” (Duany 41) It provides a large amount of house on a small parcel, making for very minimal lawn care. There is plenty of space for entertaining—often the presence of a “nub” means there is at least one room with space for lots of bodies all at once. McMansions have grand entrances and foyers and impress easily. As excellent as the McMansion is, it’s only an improvement upon other life in the American suburb. “Dollar for dollar, no other society approaches the United States in terms of the number of square feet per person, the number of baths per bedroom, the number of appliances in the kitchen,

the quality of the climate control, and the convenience of the garage. The American private realm is simply a superior product.” (Duany 41) The suburban way of life has become an unshakeable piece of modern Americana. It often means a life of comfort, but not explicit wealth.

In response to mounting costs, developers began seeking cheaper alternatives to keep their product lines affordable. This allowed them to keep up with mounting demand for McMansions. The renaissance of plastics, imitation woods, and injected foams has only sped the process of innovation since about 1990. “...there has been no shortage of ideas designed to make the single-family house more affordable... The results—plastic plumbing, hollow doors, flimsy walls, vinyl cladding—are very clever...” (Duany 57) Although there is a strong incentive for builder to produce more affordable products than their competitors these cheaper alternatives can end up costing a family much more in the long run. Plastic plumbing is temperature sensitive and over time it grows brittle—putting a house at risk for flooding or mold. Most homes built in the 1990’s were built with PVC pipe plumbing and those pipes are now in need of replacement. Hollow doors do very little to insulate sound and they’ve gained a bad reputation in builder’s circles for being cheap—their inclusion is a detriment to a home’s resale value. Anywhere that sound can escape, heat can escape as well. Homes with these hollow core doors tend to be difficult to heat and cool—climate regulation can’t be focused into areas of immediate use. Wall cladding is one of the McMansion’s weaker aspects. False stucco is a popular cladding material for a McMansion, but over time this stucco can bubble and crack. It’s applied in large

sheets of thick boarding and if it's improperly affixed to the house the seams between the boards become visible, again lowering resale value. False brick doesn't have as many logistical issues, but it does create visual discontinuity when it's only applied to the street side of the home. McMansions are often built with a focus on immediate curb appeal and the sides of the house are typically neglected in an effort to save funds.

With all these components in mind (square footage, eclecticism, roofline, and cost cutting measures), we can move forward into a discussion about some of the social implications that may have been attached to suburban life during the heyday of the McMansion. Moving forward, there will be a discussion on selling the McMansion, an overview of the accusation of segregation, and a critique of sustainability.

One of the most appealing things about the McMansion to builders and developers during its heyday was that it was incredibly easy to market and sell. Creating a product that buyers actively wanted and finding the right team to present it meant that these houses were selling almost as quickly as they could be produced. While writing about suburban sprawl, Duany calls the McMansion a twenty minute house.

Despite the way that it sounds, the 'twenty-minute house' is not a derogatory label. Quite the opposite- it refers to the fact that a house has only twenty minutes to win the affection of a potential buyer, since that is the average length of a realtor visit. The building industry has responded to the

phenomenon by creating a product that is at its best for the first twenty minutes that one is in it. (Duany 77)

The McMansion almost always appears with a grand, often two story entryway. The high ceilings therein are inviting and elegant, allowing a house hunter to picture Christmas dinner filled with family and friends. This design choice is truly at its best during the first twenty minutes of any showcase. In practice, these entryways are often large amounts of unused space. The extra eight to sixteen feet overhead impresses at first but becomes an echo chamber on move in day. Some marketable options aren't always as practical as they are beautiful.

Dividing homes by market segment has the potential to create a sense of superiority in some suburbs—but oftentimes the construction style is so homogenous that the shift from mid-range house to upper echelon house in a mixed housing development is imperceptible to anyone other than the residents. "The segregation of housing by 'market segment' is a phenomenon that was invented by developers who, lacking a meaningful way to distinguish their mass-produced merchandise, began selling the concept of exclusivity..." (Duany 43) In recent years, most developers have differentiated themselves in the market by focusing on only one tier of housing. This allows them to tailor their business model to one set of clientele, producing homes that are attuned to the desires of their buyers. Some buyers want privacy and an exclusive community. If they're able to pay for it, they are welcome to those things. In general an exclusive community means that buyers benefit from higher maintenance standards, a more strict set of covenants governing the Homeowner's

Association, and similarly well off individuals in the immediate area. The desire for exclusivity among higher class buyers among other factors motivated the explosive growth of the gated community.

The single use pods of housing where McMansions tended to spring up were unsustainable based largely on the structural trends that make them identifiable. Grass lawns demand a significant amount of water. The large McMansion roof created a home that was inefficient to heat and cool. Furthermore, McMansions tend to all suffer from one major flaw—the requirement of car ownership for any kind of meaningful travel. Car ownership is a requirement for suburban life. “In modern suburbia, where pedestrians, bicycles, and public transportation are rarely an option, the average household currently generates thirteen car trips per day.” (Duany 22). It isn’t uncommon for a family to have as many vehicles as they did people. This seems difficult to picture until you parcel it out, but a work vehicle for one parent, a grocery getter for another parent, an RV for weekend camping trips, and a car for the teenage child is completely plausible. There is no neighborhood corner grocery store where a parent can pick up foodstuffs. Bulk shopping and supercenters sprung up in shopping districts near the intersection of several suburbs.

Gated communities and other suburb models where McMansions are commonly found tend to be single use pods. People don’t drive out to the suburbs on a Friday night to go dancing or go out to eat. That’s not in the nature of their design. “A residential subdivision [consists only of] houses and parking” (Duany 5). The problem is of course that people have to leave suburbs to participate in any kind

of commerce or entertainment. “The pendulum has swung too far toward isolated, car-dependent single-family-home neighborhoods to be sustainable” (Lloyd 2).

McMansion owners rely on their cars to bring them to grocery markets, mega malls, and movie theaters. This doesn’t leave much uniqueness behind for their housing.

Libraries, schools, and stores weren’t built with the assumption that their patrons would be walking to reach them. The expansive parking lots tell this story, that “[secondary spaces] in the new suburbs are designed based on the assumption of massive automotive transportation.” (Duany 6) The assumption of car ownership can leave some residents in a difficult spot. Those without cars are often left without transport to work or access to fresh foods, instead relying on what is available to purchase at the nearby gas station. Once suburbs are abandoned for the next newest thing, they can quickly turn into food deserts. “... new suburbs tend to be situated far from public transport, social services and commerce, so they are particularly bad places for people who can’t afford cars.” (Lloyd 3). There are only so many needs that resource centers can fill, let alone anticipate. A lack of access to social services can cripple a family that is struggling to get back on their feet. Those who cannot drive are abandoned. The elderly, the young, and the poor are unable to fill their own needs within the confines of suburbia.

The social implications of suburban life tend to be supported by urban planning theory. Some basic principles that hold sway over the fate of the McMansion and the luxury suburb will be outlined below. Jacobs cautions against monotony in a space, explaining that “dull neighborhoods are inevitably deserted”.

(Jacobs 273) Capitalist pressures tend to give a sense that new is better. New technology sells more than twenty year old gadgets, and new cars do the same. The market for the brand new and the very old has always been robust. The middle/old is always mocked or scorned. It only follows that buying behaviors for homes in suburbs follows this pattern. “Inner-ring suburbs, the previous generation’s great escape, have begun to decay as newer subdivisions are built at the suburban fringe. These subdivisions will in turn lose their populations to new housing yet farther out.” (Duany 40) Last year’s homes are last year’s news, and older models are quickly abandoned.

Interest sprouts from variety. McMansions found their vein of variety with the use of eclectic historical details, complex rooflines, and value. The street view differed from house to house, even if all the homes were three bedrooms, four bathroom, and four car garage affairs. As discussed earlier, true architectural variety doesn’t actually come from the use of details. Variety is born from a blend of structures and uses, and it is an essential component to the health of any community. “The ubiquitous principle is the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially.” (Jacobs 14). This diversity of uses is most often found in healthy downtown areas; people are able to sleep in apartments, eat in restaurants, and shop for new clothes within a block or two of the same origin point. Having diverse spaces encourages pedestrians, who only bring more visual interest.

Inner ring suburbs have slowly been absorbed into the fringes of city life and have slowly picked up some of the problems that suburb dwellers seek to avoid—traffic, noise pollution, and higher taxes namely. “In the new suburbs, you can’t move up without moving out.” (Duany 44). Housing is largely divided by market segment, so once a family enters a new tax bracket they can consider leaving their current suburb for a better one. This is how the boomers left inner ring shoebox homes for the ranch homes and split-levels that filled the 70’s and how generation X began the migration into suburbs where McMansions flourished. Suburbs farther from the city tended to come with the explicit expectation of safety, privacy, and quiet. The flight of the newly upper middle class to decidedly greener pastures is not a phenomena exclusive to their adoption and subsequent abandonment of housing styles. People who can afford to seek out better conditions and better opportunities almost always do so, as it is rational and within their best self-interest. It may remain confusing as to why suburbs in particular are being abandoned in tiers. There are some absolutes to keep in mind that help to explain the constant move further from the heart of a city.

The inner-ring suburbs of shoebox housing have already started to see “city problems” invade their streets. “...it’s just a matter of time before suburban fringes begin to absorb the people that can’t make it in the city.” (Lloyd 2). The future of the McMansion suburb is not particularly bright. People who can afford to have begun to migrate away from these large houses into simpler homes, leaving spaces open for new buyers. The recession that closed out the 2000’s helped speed the process along, as foreclosure crept up on many families. To put it simply, McMansions fell out of

vogue and now their identity as a luxury space is being challenged. “We’re not talking about the mean inner-city streets getting meaner, we’re talking about the pristine, newly-built developments of four-bedroom, three-bath dream homes produced in the last housing boom becoming ghettos for the poor and the disenfranchised”(Lloyd 1). The McMansion suburb is the newly abandoned space, the unloved and unwanted space, and now it is a space in transition. McMansions aren’t easily parceled out into apartments and are often in need of repairs costly enough to deter any renter. Prices will continue to fall until these homes reach a market segment they can speak to.

The application of all of this architectural theory and suburban lifestyle information to New Materialism should make the picture that I paint of the McMansion whole. McMansions were more than houses; they were also places where people lived. Grouped together, they formed as much of a community as the dwellers inside wanted to create. Under their attention, book clubs formed and dissolved, play groups grew up together, and lawns were mowed in perfect unison on Saturday afternoons. If somebody living inside a McMansion didn’t want company, they didn’t have to venture into the outside world to fulfill their basic needs. McMansions were tiny worlds on their own where families could satisfy their needs for cleanliness and entertainment, eschewing the laundromat and the movie theater for the comfort of their own home. The McMansion satisfied so many of the needs of its inhabitants that it became the center of many associations. It remains in our psyche partially because of the strength and number of these associations.

Keeping architectural principles in mind, there are some facets of the McMansion that are moot in the eyes of New Materialism. The irreversible, unchangeable qualities of the McMansion are the only pieces that should be studied. That is why I have made no critique of the carpeting inside, of the art on the walls, or of the use of beige and affiliated shades. These details are mere qualities. In the New Materialist tradition, “the qualities of the object are not the object.” (Morton 27). Any aspect that could be changed in fifteen minutes isn’t within the scope of this project. A house is at its core only the structural aspects that are persistent, not only for New Materialists, but for architects as well. “Genuine architectural variety... does not consist in using different colors or textures” (Jacobs 225). Genuine variety should inspire New Materialist inquiry because that is where a McMansion delineates its identity. These unchangeable aspects are the only ones that matter. Some may find this rule to limit the definition of a McMansion, and to them I would argue that limiting a definition down to the structural core of the thing will allow its being to expand. Small details that were once glossed over will grow important in the wake of New Materialist fascination. The roofline that I examined above could have been discounted, but instead the associations were traced and it was revealed that the roof carried more than just structural strength.

Seeking out McMansions should challenge you to observe your surroundings more carefully. This close observation should ignite the feelings of wonder that were hinted at in the chapter outlining New Materialist thought. The world is beautiful and complex and people don’t have to cultivate expertise to recognize that. Part of this

search is to affirm the accessibility of mundane beauty in our everyday lives.

Recognizing that things have power and agency produces a feeling of great security.

Every house is the product of centuries of trial and error, adaptation to climate, and of dare I say, intelligent design. This chapter was largely a challenge not only to learn principles of aesthetic value but to appreciate the complexities of each tiny reality we encounter in everyday life.

McMansion Example Photo

This is an example to a lesser degree, but the key details are still there. Note the presence of a turret, brickwork that doesn't carry over to the edge of the house, multiple structures (I count 6), and a wrought iron balcony that is inaccessible from inside of the home (a detail out of step with the style that the turret and keystones are pulled from). The current homeowners couldn't be reached for comment, but an earlier tour shows the house to be 5,000 square feet. It could host 8 inhabitants and still qualify as a McMansion.



Photo by author.

Glossary

Columns (good): According to *What Not to Build*, a good column is sturdy (height between 8 and 10 times the diameter), columns must be installed in even numbers, the beam (or entablature) should be about equal the diameter or width of the columns supporting it, and the beam (or entablature) depth should be about two times that of the columns supporting it. Good columns compliment the primary structure rather than lord over the remainder of the house. While they shouldn't be ostentatious, they must be supporting *something* and follow the architectural precedent set by the rest of the home.

Cross gables: A gable is the basic roofline shape, like the letter "A". A cross gable roofline occurs when two gables intersect, causing an "X" shape from the overhead view.

Dormers: A dormer creates a more complicated roofline, it is one window that projects out from the established slope of the roof.

EIFs: Exterior insulation and finish system (fake stucco boards). Doesn't have the same longevity as real stucco, but much cheaper to apply.

Hips: A hipped roof shape is more of an elongated pyramid with two triangle shapes forming the short sides and two longer trapezoids forming the long sides.

Jerkin head Roof: A jerkin head roof shape is a standard roof (think A-shape)

but the peaks at the top of the roof have been clipped off.

NONSENSE HOUSE: McMansion Hell specific term that refers to a home that lacks architectural continuity.

Nub: McMansion Hell specific term that identifies an awkward piece of roof that doesn't quite blend in with the rest of the roofline. Often these nubs indicate the presence of a bonus room or man cave on the top floor.

Oriel: A second story bay window.

Pediment: "a triangular portion of a gable end" (Edelman 219) These features are often seen at front entries.

Peel N' Stick Details: McMansion Hell specific term. Refers to using wall cladding and other exterior decoration in large quantities with little to no continuity.

Primary Structure: "the largest main form of the home" (Edelman 219). This main body should be easy to pick out as it should be formed by the largest section of continuous roofline.

Roofline Soup: McMansion Hell specific term that refers to a chaotic or illogical roofline that doesn't delineate a primary and secondary structure (instead creating a fancy roof "hat" for the house to wear)

Roof pitch: the degree of slant in a roof. A low-pitched roof would be closer to flat, a high-pitched roof would be more vertical. Roof pitch is often used

strategically to tune a home to the climate of an area. High-pitched roofs are particularly good for regions that get lots of rain and snow because the precipitation does not gather on the structure. Lower pitched roofs are best for hot climates because it is easier to heat and cool a home with a minimal attic.

Transom: “a window found above a door or other window” (Edelman 219)

Wall Cladding: Wall cladding is a way to make a wall appear to be made from something it really isn't. Brick is a popular cladding material because of its cost, but other stone features are also often seen. The easiest way to discern if a wall is clad vs. made of the actual building material is to follow the wall all the way around the building. Often, wall cladding is only applied to the front of the house and doesn't actually continue to the sides or rear.

Window Shape: Window shape specifically references the outline of the window. Standard shapes include rectangles and squares, but McMansions frequently feature half circles, hexagons, and other non-traditional forms.

Window Style: Window style refers to how the window opens (if it opens) and also to the decorative shapes in the window.

Tiny Houses

Where McMansions encouraged their owners to think big, tiny houses encourage their owners to think small. The tiny house is championed as a significant lifestyle change that has the power to bring its owner happiness, health, and wealth. As much as the McMansion is an underdog today, the tiny house is a frontrunner. Channels like HGTV have multiple programs dedicated to designing, building, or purchasing a tiny house and they are the main attraction for a plethora of blogs. We have turned our attention away from living large, instead encouraging people to use their houses as a vehicle to that which they find important. Although there are certainly some benefits to inhabiting a tiny house, it isn't a one size fits all affair. Tiny houses aren't well suited for many people and all of the positive press has left out some of the struggles that tend to follow people living small. My evaluation of this style will attempt to provide both a positive and negative read on the tiny house. I will discuss the history, definition, environmental and financial aspects, lifestyle logistics, groups served, and the legality of the tiny house. I will conclude this chapter by applying New Materialism and urban planning theory to evaluate the strength tiny houses.

The story of the tiny house begins long before it earned its name. As long as people have sought shelter from the elements, houses have been tiny. Before the tiny house became fashionable, it was a prime example of overcrowding. "Overcrowding means too many people in a dwelling for the number of rooms it contains..." (Jacobs

205) Tiny housing was not seen as a positive lifestyle choice, but as a last possible resort. Those without the money or identity status required to secure safe housing ended up living in communities of shacks. The tiny house would have presented a safety concern. Little houses packed with people, clothing, and furniture are fire hazards. Tightly packed spaces tend to produce more risk because there aren't good ways to separate activities involving heat and flammable materials. There is also the risk that the people inside wouldn't be able to navigate out quickly enough in case of a fire. "Overcrowding within dwellings or rooms, in our country, is almost always a symptom of poverty or of being discriminated against..." (Jacobs 208) Back then, overcrowded conditions were mostly created by landlords to take advantage of the urban poor. For an ethical city, overcrowding was to be avoided at all costs.

The variety of uses and needs that people have for tiny houses has grown exponentially since it first entered the fringes of our national attention. It became an attractive option as safety measures improved, and by the late 1990's and early 2000's tiny housing was a grassroots movement mostly followed by people who were living off of the grid. Tiny housing meant that people had the mobility to leave if needed (since more traditional tiny houses tended to be built on trailers) and could set up temporary homes away from the rest of the world. Tiny houses were easy to convert into homes off the grid. They ran the gamut of reliance on existing systems thanks to their structural flexibility. "Some tiny houses are hooked up with full wiring for grid-tied AC power (or take the less technical option and run an extension cord in through a window). Others have a solar system for the whole house, while still others just

charge a few batteries to run small lights and simple electronics.” (Murphy 55) Since there was so much less space to manage, tiny houses could be effectively powered using only renewable resources. Those people interested in living off the grid spread the word about tiny houses, and now this construction style has grown into a mainstream fascination. With the beginnings of the history of the movement now explained, we can move forward and define the tiny house.

To understand the inherent structural flexibility of the tiny house, it is important to pinpoint a universal definition. When it comes down to identifying a tiny house in the wild, there is no one architectural style that makes it apparent. Tiny houses aren't all mid-century modern affairs with shed roofs and quaint pastel shingles. It can be many different things. A yurt, a school bus, and a shipping container all qualify as tiny houses, provided there are people living inside. “There is no single definition of tiny houses...” (Mitchell 157). Tiny houses are easy to pick out of a crowd, but difficult to narrow into categorical traits. In truth, the main identifier of the tiny house is also its most important operative word, “tiny”. Its core feature and key identifier is size.

Square footage constraints are the main identifier for a tiny house. Just as before, it is square footage per resident that forms the boundaries of a definition. There is a difference between a house that is small and a house that is tiny. Tiny houses clock in at 200 square feet per person. “This means a single person living in 200 square feet and families of five living in 1,200 square feet are both living in tiny houses” (Mitchell 15). To put this size constraint into perspective, a king size bed is

roughly 40 square feet. Most dorm rooms, which consist of two twin beds, two armoires, two desks, and two chests of drawers, are about 200 square feet. Imagine trying to cram in kitchen facilities, a toilet, and a shower into that size of living space and you'll begin to understand some of the complexities of designing, building, and living in a tiny house.

The typical tiny house has some other important features. When I say typical, I would like you to picture an HGTV tiny house built for young newlyweds who telecommute for work. Typical housing is just the amalgamation of many common traits seen, but that doesn't mean that every tiny house has these traits.

...a typical tiny home usually consists of a great room that combines both kitchen and living room to maximize space. The interior design of a tiny house also employs convertible couches, foldaway tables, and clever shelving solutions that solve storage issues. Sleeping lofts, which often come with ladders, are another fairly common feature in tiny houses because they convert otherwise unused vertical space into livable quarters. Bathrooms tend to be smaller as well, yet many tiny houses still have full-sized toilets and showers. Generally, efficient design and quality craftsmanship seem to be a trend in tiny houses because owners want to increase the utility of their space without sacrificing comfort. (Kilman 1)

The floor plan of a tiny house has been pared down to just essentials. The one bathroom serves as both a master and a guest bathroom, and so privacy and storage

concerns must be taken into account. Most tiny houses place the bed. Zoning regulations, which tend to deal with how a home connects to city sewer, water, and power lines still tend to prohibit tiny house hookup. This, as well as the need for mobility, is why tiny houses tend to be built on trailers. At the end of this chapter, you'll see how zoning laws and building codes are the two largest roadblocks to the success of the tiny house as a legitimate dwelling. The composting toilet is a necessity since tiny houses cannot be hooked in to the sewer system, but it is not without flaws (specifically related to odor suppression). The generator and solar panels can provide electrical power—many tiny house owners rely on small stoves and fans for climate control.

In “standard” cases many of the features of the tiny houses are dictated by lifestyle needs of the homeowner. Transport requirements tend to influence the base of the home. Most tiny houses are built on trailers so they can be moved from place to place as needed, but some municipalities have recently started allowing tiny houses are permanent residences—meaning they have standard foundations and would hook directly to city sewer, water, and power infrastructure. The climate that a tiny house is in influences the roof pitch. The pitch of the roof is the steepness of the roof, in short. “A steeper roof allows for higher snowfall to be accommodated... flat roofs are notorious for leaking, and... green roofs are a popular notion for people wanting to build sustainable homes.” (Mitchell 137) In cooler climates, tiny houses tend to have steep roofs, much like the rooflines you'd see on an A frame house. This allows the snow to accumulate, and once it grows heavy enough the snow slides off the

roof. Roofs with moderate pitch are best for rainy climates; they allow the water to roll off but don't have the same harsh appearance of a steep roof. Flat roofs are really only good for sunny climates. Water tends to pool on them, and without a way to clear it off that water can deteriorate the roof's integrity. The green roof is any roofline that is covered in vegetation. This would allow the homeowner to grow some of their own food, but having a green roof makes a home incredibly difficult to transport. Imagine strapping all of your potted plants to the roof of your car and trying to keep them intact while going 65 mph on the freeway and you'll get the idea. Tiny houses evade definition because they can be SO many things, but these points should help you understand some of the nuances of designing a tiny house and inhabiting one. In the following segment, we will evaluate the environmental and financial aspects of tiny house life.

Many people make the switch to tiny houses because the tiny house tends to be a more environmentally sustainable option. "Tiny homes are built with sustainability in mind, and so, with the smaller space also comes less to maintain." (Seaquist 93). With less area to cover, homeowners can afford the more expensive eco-friendly options, like sheep's wool insulation or reclaimed wood siding. The tiny house truly champions the 3 R's, reduce (smaller footprint), re-use (use of biodegradable or earth friendly materials), and recycle (repurpose existing belongs into something more purposeful). As well as being sustainable by design, "...tiny houses consume fewer resources to heat, cool, and power themselves than the 'greenest' or most energy efficient traditional home could ever dream of." (Mitchell

36). Homeowners have to spend less money keeping the climate of their residence comfortable. One tiny home owner reported “I will sleep better knowing that my heating dollars are going to a local sustainable logger instead of fueling the perpetual conflicts in the Middle East.” (Murphy 56), which signals the fact that tiny homeowners can afford to make sustainable choices that clear their consciences. If this homeowner were expected to heat and cool a full sized single family home using a fireplace and logs sourced from a local sustainable logger, the cost would be prohibitive.

Tiny houses have an almost negligible trash footprint during their construction. “The average new construction home generates around four tons of trash in its construction; compare this to a tiny house that often produces only a few hundred pounds or so of waste.” (Mitchell 138) To people concerned with the health of the planet, reducing trash output is a good way for a single family home to make a difference. “One of the successes behind the tiny house is that it restricts consumption and waste, which encourages its owner to lead a minimalist life.” (Kilman 5) This minimalist life tends to begin long before a home enters the construction process, but reducing waste during the construction process is another way for tiny homeowners to assert their values. Much of the trash involved in the construction process isn’t biodegradable or even recyclable. Materials like house wrap can be very difficult to reuse. Most construction companies don’t bring out dual trash and recycling dumpsters when they enter into a jobsite, instead opting to mingle materials. As such, tiny home

construction can be designed to be minimally wasteful since there are fewer materials required and generally the construction process allows for flexible disposal of recyclable materials.

Tiny houses consume less energy, and the energy they do consume can be sourced ethically. “The reduced energy use associated with a tiny house (914 kilowatts for a tiny home compared to 12,733 kilowatts for a standard home) protects the environment and saves valuable resources.” (Seaquist 93) There are several factors accounting for the reduced energy use in a tiny house. First, the appliances tend to be smaller and there isn’t enough counter space to leave uni-tasking kitchen appliances like coffee makers and toasters continually plugged in. Second, due to the reduced size the tiny house is less expensive to heat and cool. Finally, most tiny houses don’t come fully equipped with all accommodations which forces homeowners to rely on their communities when it comes to laundry, entertainment, and sometimes even personal hygiene.

All of the environmental benefits of living in a tiny house may be offset by the reality of living in a house that is nearly impossible to resell. Unless homeowners are able to find a buyer with similar living needs or the financial means to further customize the space, the tiny house is a single use home. For someone truly concerned with the health of the environment, a cost/benefit analysis may be a helpful tool to help decide between living minimally in an existing apartment and building a tiny house from scratch. I will go deeper into the financial benefits and detriments of tiny house living in the following paragraphs.

Environmental health isn't the only reason some choose tiny housing, it's also an affordable lifestyle choice. "The economic reality is that people under the age of 35 are mostly unable to purchase a single family home and that rent is also increasing at a steady clip." (Seaquist 95) Affordable housing has become a significant issue in many large and growing cities. Portland and Boise both have rent rates that require the average employee to earn more than minimum wage to be able to afford a median priced apartment. This is becoming a reality for most cities nationwide. Tiny houses are a way for people to be able to afford a starter home that is all their own. "Home ownership is at a 48-year low of 63.8% according to estimates by the Commerce Department." (Seaquist 91) Renting to own, renting, or simply staying with a parent has now become the housing reality for many individuals living in the United States. With their smaller financial footprint, a tiny house may be a possible solution to the problems of accessibility to lower incomes and flexibility of lifestyle that are coming to a head within our housing market.

Tiny houses truly have a purpose, and they can provide a lot of benefits to people seeking ways for their lifestyle to support their principles or goals. "Because a tiny house greatly reduces your annual living expenses- the amount of time you must spend earning an income is greatly reduced." (Mitchell 33) Tiny houses can be designed to be incredibly low cost. Their small size means many building materials can be purchased at a discount, and with patience (and a firm budget) a tiny home can cost less than a mid-level car. Tiny houses can be gateways to economic freedom.

After the initial purchase of the house, there is little need to pick up additional furniture or kitchen goods, as there isn't enough space for these new things.

Tiny houses tend to not be much of a financial burden on their owners once the house has been finished. "...in many cases you will not have to pay property tax on the tiny house, since it is not attached to a foundation." (Murphy 54) All of those building and zoning workarounds tend to mean that a tiny house is classified as an outbuilding, a playhouse, or an RV. Under these classifications in some cities, the tiny house is property tax exempt. Although that seems like a nice prospect initially, property taxes are an essential revenue stream for the city. "If the trend towards building tiny homes continues to gather momentum, tax rates may have to go higher to finance local school districts." (Seaquist 94) Tiny houses promise a smaller financial burden to the homeowner when compared to traditional single family housing, but if cities begin to accept tiny houses as legitimate structures and tax them as such, tax rates may cancel out any savings.

Once a tiny house is finished, most people own it outright and don't have to deal with a mortgage. "At this point, most banks will not lend to people for tiny houses because tiny houses currently aren't seen as having a market value." (Mitchell 52). This is a direct contrast to the economic reality of standard single-family housing today, since "the cost of a [standard] home with interest exceeds well over a million dollars". (Seaquist 91) There is a significant upfront cost of building a tiny house compared to the rest of the associated expenses, but the cost of building a tiny house isn't much more expensive than the down payment on a single family home. This

lack of market value may be a negative evaluation coming from banks, but most people who live in tiny houses benefit from reduced or nonexistent mortgage expenses. They are able to put their earnings elsewhere, either saving money for a single family home, travelling more, or working less.

The downside to one's residence lacking market value is that it is incredibly difficult to resell a tiny house once the residents have outgrown it. Even experts give this advice. "When it comes to building your tiny house, plan on not being able to resell it." (Mitchell 90) Conditions change and some changes require shifts in one's residence, and although tiny houses have flexible identifying information their structures are difficult to adapt to lifestyle changes. Families grow and need more space to accommodate a new baby and an early elementary aged child. Empty nesters lose mobility over time, and most tiny houses aren't built to be accessible by wheelchair.

Tiny houses are difficult to resell since they tend to be designed expressly for the conditions of the resident. "Most housing is designed for someone else so that it ensures resale value. Spec houses and apartments place a premium on maximizing profits and square footage over functionality and aesthetics" (Mitchell 48). The tiny houses that we know today are ultra-customized to fit the owner, they are bespoke in the most literal sense of the meaning. Spec, or speculative, tiny houses exist—but even if a builder is using a plan they bought off of the internet or a space they ordered from Amazon there is still a lot of wiggle room for customization and personalization early in the construction/ move-in process. People seeking to leave

the tiny house community in favor of the suburban single family home often run into issues when trying to get rid of their tiny house. “Due to the tiny house industry’s infancy, legal and financial alternatives have not fully developed; making the economics of a tiny house much more complicated than just the upfront cost.”

(Kilman 4) There really aren’t municipal systems put in place where owners seeking to leave their living arrangement can donate their tiny house as a space for a homeless individual to live, since tiny houses are still largely against municipal building and zoning regulations.

Environmental and financial aspects aside, prospective tiny homeowners must also consider the logistics of condensing into a smaller life. Tiny houses don’t inherently come with the space to store ski equipment and heavy coats, so winter sports enthusiasts must keep their interests in mind when choosing or creating a floor plan. There certainly isn’t enough space for the plethora of toys and trinkets that come with a child, so parents must either pare down or plan accordingly. These spaces are often bespoke, edited and tweaked to fit specific needs. Storage space is a must, but so is minimalism. Tiny house owners must tailor their living spaces to accommodate their things.

With these houses, there is a pull for an owner to decide what is essential to them and what can be sacrificed. Living intentionally in a tiny home doesn’t require any kind of cultural shift. Tiny homes don’t require people to compromise their identities as students, parents, people of faith, or otherwise. They do demand a massive lifestyle shift on the part of the homeowner. Tiny homes challenge

homeowners to pare down to the bare necessities, to reach out to their communities to fill any gaps that their homes can't provide, and to do so without stretching themselves too thin. They require much patient thought and slow work to be successful spaces for a dweller. After all, the ideal home is one that possesses practical viability for the people living inside, has visual beauty, and is well tuned to the climate demands of its region.

The 100 item challenge is another way that prospective tiny homeowners prepare for the reality of life in a space with only 200 square feet per person. “...anything that is not enhancing the quality of life or the function of the space actually detracts from it.” (Mitchell 142) This is a challenge to own only 100 items. It is also touted as an exercise in getting rid of baggage. Imagine the freedom that would accompany getting rid of the terrible gifts you've hung on to for years out of guilt, the ratty socks you keep because you don't want to purchase higher quality pairs, the shoes that pinch your toes. Minimalist living has no space for discomfort or guilt. As an exercise in empathy, I'd like to challenge you to keep a tally of all of the items you use in a day—counting in eyeglasses, watches, and wedding rings. Once you reach 100 items, stop the tally and see what time of day it is. This challenge is an extreme form of minimalism that “...helps prevent habitual engagement with the consumer economy, and limits purchases to things we truly need and want to have in our lives.” (Murphy 58) There isn't any space for the unimportant or the meaningless in the life of a tiny home owner, and every purchase must be measured carefully for utility. The

logistics of living in a tiny house are comprehensive, but the groups served within the tiny house movement are diverse.

Today, tiny houses fill needs for many different kinds of people. “The tiny house movement recognizes a demand for housing in impoverished areas, among the homeless, and for those seeking to make a smaller ecological footprint.” (Seaquist 92) In truth, the tiny house movement isn’t nearly as male-dominated as traditional construction. “...women are building almost 60 percent of tiny houses.”(Mitchell 36) The tiny house is an attainable ideal for many who would otherwise not have the option of home ownership. It provides a gateway to financial independence.

It is said that “Tiny-house people on average make more money than the average American; they are twice as likely to hold a master’s degree as the rest of the United States, and are 90 percent more likely to have no debt.” (Mitchell 106) but as the movement grows in size and popularity there is a good chance it will reach other demographics as well. Some of the demographic groups that have already begun inhabiting tiny houses are the homeless, the elderly, and the recently graduated.

Tiny homes do have strong social justice potential. In cities that have legislation that legalizes their existence, tiny homes have become a way to support populations of homeless individuals. “In neighborhoods with homelessness and vacant lots, tiny houses offer a new neighborhood, often with shared gardens and community space while providing inhabitants privacy and dignity.” (Seaquist 93) These parks of tiny homes have become an important lifeline to those who need them most. There is a nonprofit in operation today called SquareOne Villages that

exists solely to facilitate these villages. The growth of this nonprofit shows that tiny houses are a viable option for addressing issues of homelessness and a lack of affordable housing in cities. A tiny home community is a sound investment for the unhoused who seek a more stable lifestyle. SquareOne Villages are in operation across the country, and more and more cities are choosing to partner with this nonprofit as a way to address institutional weaknesses.

The loss of independence is often a sorrowful moment in an older individual's life. As difficult as it is for a child to watch their parent decline, it is even more painful for a parent to slowly lose their autonomy. The tiny home provides a better solution to elder care than placing them in a nursing home does. By building a tiny home for a parent in the backyard, this gives the parent some space and privacy and makes it easy to visit them. Often, having a community helps an individual transition into this new season of their life. Some accommodations are necessary to produce a tiny home suitable for an older individual. In general, tiny houses are built with sleeping quarters in a loft that is accessible only by ladder. For an aging individual it would be difficult if not impossible to climb up and down the ladder multiple times a night to facilitate bathroom breaks. Placing the sleeping quarters on the ground floor of a tiny house cuts into the already limited square footage and makes it even more difficult to entertain guests. Other accommodations include a more limited kitchenette (to prevent an oven being left on) and raised seating that is easier to get in and out of.

For recent college graduates financial well-being is a most pressing concern. Student debt is a reality of the millennial existence today and the popularity of unpaid internships makes it difficult to repay that debt in a timely manner. Young Americans have begun seeking out ways to reduce their expenses. In fact, “31% of adults between the ages of 18 and 34 are still living with their parents.” (Seaquist 91) The tiny house is another low cost living option that affords slightly more personal freedom than mom’s basement. Recent grads are willing to compromise square footage for savings, so much so that it permeates our media. The song “Blurryface” by band 21 Pilots quotes “out of student loans and treehouse homes we all would take the latter”. The economic advantages of living in a smaller space are outweighed by the legal risk for most of the populations that tiny houses now serve. Tiny houses have great potential to provide housing to the otherwise unhoused, promote freedom for the aging, and produce financial security for recent graduates. Despite all of the good that tiny house communities can do for a city, their potential social justice applications are often silenced by building codes and zoning laws.

Tiny houses are illegal in most cities across the country based on two separate grounds: building codes and zoning regulations. Building codes provide provisions for safe construction, including rules around how a space is wired for electricity and fire safety measures. “Generally, building codes are seen as a positive type of government regulation. They minimize the possibility of construction defects. They ensure that the house is structurally sound and safe, while also ensuring that the house meets a certain quality standard.” (Vail 366) Building codes have done a good

job of ensuring that American residences are consistently safe and livable, but they are not without their flaws. It's said that building codes can prevent innovation. New technologies, materials, and techniques are often forbidden because they have yet to be proven as sound—and since most cities and counties have their own building codes the ability to experiment varies wildly based on one's geographic location.

Most city building codes have a minimum square foot requirement. This requirement prevents developers and builders from creating overcrowded living conditions to take advantage of the poor. One workaround to the minimum square footage requirement is claiming the tiny house as an outbuilding to a larger living area, but that can get tricky with local tax appraisers. Another workaround is building the tiny house on a trailer and registering it as an RV. “By putting the house on a trailer, you are suddenly governed by RV laws instead, which stipulate a maximum trailer size rather than a minimum.” (Murphy 54) The problem with putting your permanent residence on a trailer and registering it as an RV is that most cities have laws restricting how long you can park in the same area. “...in most municipalities being labeled an RV is more of a hindrance than anything.” (Mitchell 50) It can be difficult to hold down a consistent job if every three days you have to strap down all of your belongings and move to another campground. A third option that a few tiny homeowners have used is attaching their tiny house to a large garage to meet minimum size requirements. The problem with attaching a tiny house to a large garage (read: storage area) is that it disqualifies the structure as a tiny house. Many tiny house owners have successfully evaded the accusation of breaking building code

through creative measures, but this small act of civil disobedience is still illegal and can mean the city will condemn the tiny house.

Beyond building code laws prohibiting tiny houses on the grounds on minimum size requirements, zoning laws prohibit tiny houses on other grounds. “Zoning is typically concerned with whether or not a house must connect to septic, municipal water or a well; the minimum lot size that the house must be located upon; minimum square footage of the house, and occupancy regulations.” (Seaquist 94) Zoning laws present significant issues for prospective tiny house owners nationwide, but there are still some structural workarounds.

If a house cannot connect to septic lines, a composting toilet may be used. Composting toilets break down waste in an often waterless system but tend to be larger than traditional toilets and may not always contain odors.

Composting human waste allows owners to recycle their excrement back to the land, requiring that they know, for instance, how long compost needs to sit before it is ready to use (usually around one year when composted outside), and that they understand the importance of human waste in the cycle of land use. (Kilman 6)

The composting toilet requires no hookup to water or sewer lines to function properly. In general, waste rests in a chamber below the actual toilet and is covered with wood shavings or moss to mask the smell. Over time, the waste breaks down and can be applied to a plot of land outside the same way standard manure is applied. Some tiny home owners use their compost to enrich vegetable plots and green roofs.

Toileting issues are not the only problems that living in a tiny house can present; often access to water is a barrier to success as well.

Not being able to connect to municipal water or a well doesn't present a significant issue provided that a tiny house is outfitted with water tanks, much like an RV or is parked near a hose that dispenses potable water. These tanks have been used successfully for decades but can sometimes be difficult to fill and maintain. Access to water often dictates how often a homeowner is able to cook, clean, and shower properly—some tiny homeowners take advantage of a gym membership to shower regularly in that secondary space rather than use existing water stores.

Tiny houses don't take up much space, but if someone is looking to build a permanent residence they may find that their city requires them to have more than a quarter of an acre of land for their lot. Occupancy regulations are founded from overcrowding concerns, which were highlighted above. "Not being able to permanently build a tiny house on a private piece of land due to zoning laws is perhaps the biggest obstacle to the tiny house movement." (Seaquist 94) One has to move to an area that is tiny house friendly or find clever loopholes to construct the tiny house they've planned on.

Navigating the world of city building and zoning laws can be confusing and downright exhausting. A home that's legal in Memphis may be fully condemnable in Louisville. To escape the threat of condemnation, some tiny homers choose to live rather itinerant lifestyles. Tiny houses do present significant economic advantages for most homeowners—they're cheaper to build, to buy, and to maintain than traditional

housing. “So, the price of the tiny house might seem low at first, but the hunt for suitable land and the navigation of legal codes adds further costs to the small price tag.” (Kilman 3) The murky legality of tiny houses is the most significant barrier to their success in the American residential market. “In order for the Movement to really take root in this country, the rigid zoning laws and building codes must be altered or amended to account for these tiny homes.” (Vail 375) Special provisions allowing for tiny houses have already been put in place in many cities, but until those provisions are widespread and accessible, the tiny house is a more viable option for desperados, rogues, and granolas that can rely on their communities to lend them strength.

Now that we’ve discussed the legality of the tiny house we must apply all of this information to evaluate the strength of the structure through both an urban planning lens and a New Materialist’s eye. From a municipal standpoint, tiny houses aren’t particularly attractive. They bring in less property tax revenue which detracts city systems like schools and they use less energy which detracts local power companies. It’s difficult for a city to turn a profit on tiny house communities without making some changes to local code. Houses that undercut minimum square footage requirements make city officials worry about the creation of slums in municipalities. It would be impractical for each city to create a set of rules universally applicable to residential construction that allows for tiny houses but prevents slums. “Instead, tiny homes should be afforded their own special provisions in the codes.” (Vail 375) The majority of building code is pulled from several standardized sources, so if the tiny

house community could agree on a series of universal building standards and create a packet of code simple for cities to adopt there is a stronger chance that the movement would gain traction. If there was a way for cities to reform their property tax code to make special provisions for tiny houses, these affordable communities would become even more viable. “Tiny houses can mean big things for our economy, the environment, and our communities; it could be just a matter of time before our culture legitimizes the mindset behind them.” (Kilman 10) The potential of the tiny house will remain more or less unrealized until more cities adopt ways to integrate them legally into code.

The tiny house has significant barriers to surmount before it can become a realistic living option for more people—but homeowners themselves have barriers to overcome. There is a distinct mindset that tiny homeowners model across most platforms, one that is out of step with traditional American values. The tiny house can be defined as a trailer home or an RV based on square footage constraints alone, but it is so much more than that. “What separates these small housing options from those advocated by the Tiny House Movement is the mental state that accompanies the Movement. It is more than adapting to financial strains. The Movement advocates the objective of living simply in order to achieve a better quality of life.” (Vail 367) The pull toward simple living is in contrast with consumer culture. This is why tiny homeowners are challenged to own only 100 items and appreciate each of them. “Through its small space, the tiny home challenges owners to reconsider how they value physical goods, personal relationships and the environment...” (Kilman

9) Tiny homeowners are forced to give objects their due. There simply isn't enough space for unused items or duplicates.

We see a twinkling of flat ontology in the respect afforded to belongings within the traditional tiny house mindset. Flat ontology says that all objects exert the same level of reality on the world. Everything has an equal claim on existence. Within the tiny house, owners must consider the destination of their waste just as much as they must consider the use of their storage space. Things are rarely forgotten or misplaced; they all have an important role in the ecosystem of the home. The homeowners are just as important to the dwelling as keeping the green roof alive is. Tiny houses are excellent examples of thing power—they take on lives of their own and meanings of their own thanks to the attention and care of their owners.

One of the main differences in the equal strength of the McMansion and the tiny house is in the associations they form. You'll recall that the strength of an object is largely dictated by the number and strength of its associations. For the McMansion, all important associations can be managed within the home. The tiny home needs to reach outside of itself and into the community for its associations.

McMansion owners had homes that served as self-contained systems. They tended not to need to use community spaces or city systems to fulfill their needs. Tiny houses simply lack the space to be as multi-purpose as McMansions were. Charlie Kilman calls this phenomenon “home theater syndrome” where homeowners have insulated themselves from their environment by bringing everything they could possibly need inside the home (Kilman 6) McMansions have

access to laundry facilities, theater options, and gardening space within the comfort of their home and surrounding property. The associations that McMansions form are vertical—much like the vertical factory, all the systems within the home rely upon each other to function properly. The weakness within a vertical system of associations is the inherent disconnect with the outside world. Although associations are strong in this system, homeowners don't need to venture out nearly as often and tend to feel like their communities aren't as essential to their lives.

Tiny homeowners rely on secondary spaces to fill the needs that their primary spaces can't. Beyond relying on showers from friends or the city, laundry facilities, and drinking water all from outside the scope of the home many tiny homeowners rely on community spaces for entertainment, gardening, and welcoming guests. This practice of outsourcing uses that would traditionally be left to primary space into secondary spaces creates a web of associations within the greater community. This would be considered a net of horizontal associations; all of the systems are self-contained but tied together by common users.

Further, by frequenting such public places, tiny house dwellers are more likely to integrate into and appreciate the value of a strong community. With limited space and resources at home, tiny house living requires connection to a local population with a variety of services. In other words, it takes a town to live tiny. (Kilman 8)

A city must have these systems already in place for the tiny house to succeed within its limits. Some of the systems within the horizontal web of associations benefit from

increased utilization—libraries in particular would benefit from increased patronage. Other systems within the horizontal scheme would be strained—there are only so many plots available in the community garden. The benefits and detriments of this horizontal scheme of associations all lie in the degree that tiny homeowners are required to venture outside of their homes to fill basic needs.

An inanimate space has presence and agency. New Materialism teaches us that even things as pedestrian and mundane as our houses have unique character. They are as much a family member as the dog, the beloved potted plant, and the armchair uncle. If people can pack bond with their Roombas, surely they can pack bond with the roof over their head. The tiny house is an excellent example of horizontal association schemes; it relies on community connections for success. Although this housing option may provide a solution to some social justice issues, economic strains of modern life, and a new mindset to address materialism it simply isn't an option for everyone. The significant mindset shifts required to live successfully in a tiny house prove to be challenging. If legality is important to a homeowner, they'll either have to dedicate time to relocating to a tiny house friendly city, seeking out loopholes in local code, or living an itinerant lifestyle. Tiny houses can be used as a vehicle to what's important to many people, but this lifestyle isn't feasible for most.

In Rain 1

Outside, rain beats down on the dark shingles of a house. The shingles were due for replacement five years ago, but jobs like those are expensive so the replacement has been postponed for now. They have held up okay, so there isn't a rush to get the shingles replaced. They do their best when working as a unit, and the little patches they've received over the years have helped the attic stay nice and dry. Even though there has never been a leak inside, they've slowly lost some of their grip. Each shingle is essential in the fight against leaks, but they are getting old and ready to retire.

Before this house stood, there were tall trees. The mighty oaks stood and stretched their limbs, protecting the wildlife underneath. They had their own ecosystem ingrained in the soil. Now, twenty some odd years after they were torn down, the odd acorn will sprout. Eventually someone will leave it to grow in their backyard. Eventually, oaks will stand again, but eventually is not today. Now, adolescent maples root down. They smell sweetest in the springtime, and they're much easier to care for since they don't produce as much litter as the oaks did. Acorns can cause problems for growing developments, so when the developers bought Oak Grove, they filled each lot with plants that held the promise of maturation. Caretakers could picture their family, their trees, and their investment growing up together. Over time, the plants have grown sturdy. The maples do their

best to stretch up into the rain in hopes that they'll grow stronger. The name Oak Grove is a tall order to fill.

The façade feels a light wash of rain. The brickwork is sober and resolute, it doesn't flash with the same colors that the neighbor houses do. No shame in plain old brick red. The renewed and renovated houses in the city are all about exposed brick interiors, but they're always painting over the exposed brick exteriors. That isn't truly exposed brick, just old brick wearing skivvies. This brickwork hopes to never be painted over—it is at its best on full display. Rain deepens the red of the brick façade, and a few pieces feel their connection to the house grow weaker. Before Oak Groves started popping up across the nation, homes were constructed with full brick. Oak Grove offered homes with all the charm of real brick at half the cost. The panels of brickwork have had time to bind on to the stucco board and then work their way loose. One day, the panels of brick will give a great sigh and release their hold on the house. Maybe that will happen after a little while, maybe after forever.

The underlying stucco has been through myriad colors. When the house was first assembled, the stucco was ecru. Today, the stucco is khaki and the water leaves dull spots behind. The stucco was made to be beige. This stucco was assembled in board form. Large panels of stucco work were applied to the house, texturized, and then sprayed down in a rainbow of beige. That texture work, now aging, grows thin where the panels kiss. As rivulets of water slide down the stucco, some droplets are caught in the texture. They sink in against the core of the exterior walls, pushing the

stucco panels out. They bulge more with every rain storm. Repair or replace, either way the stucco is a big ticket item. The caretakers will never admit it to their friends, but they repaint the house a slightly darker shade of beige each time to hide some of the bulging on the stucco.

Inside, the drumming heartbeat of the water echoes off clean walls. Pitter. Patter. Each wall drinks in the echo, reflecting back what it can't absorb. Some walls drink more than others, but most noise is gulped down soon after it begins its bounce around the house and no wall manages to starve. The tall entryway holds most of the echoes, those walls have the strongest memory. It is the heart of the hustle and bustle. It remembers. Builders installing sheetrock to give the walls face. Nails squeaking their way into place. A young family growing in the space. The entryway is this home's first chance to embrace new people, to wrap them in beauty, comfort, and care.

The windows peering into the front lawn are tall and clear, and outside the grass sings a mushy hosanna. The grass here is always singing one song or another, and the windows are always primed to listen. They do their best to translate what is going on outside for the viewers inside. Without them, the mixing bowls would never get a weather report. Today, their translation is a cold wash of dim light that dampens the colors indoors. The windows may translate often, and although they are clear they are not to be forgotten. Their panes need as much attention as the view outside does. They demand it. They always do their job.

The space most aware of the rain is of course the attic. The attic is this in-between space, not quite comfortable enough to qualify as inside, not exposed enough to qualify as outside. It is seldom visited, home to little birds occasionally and photo albums always. The trusses understand the weight of the home, a burden that has only changed with time. That weight has finally settled into their angles, and after twenty years of groaning in Oak Grove they've finally found the right spaces. They have space to breathe with the seasons, to swell and shrink without recourse. The attic is flexible but it still can fail. The rain doesn't make things easier. There's something about the constant chatter of the outside world that makes the attic want to fold into itself. Raindrops that insignificant have no business making the shingles rattle. It was explained that this attic was one-hundred-percent structurally sound and failsafe—but nobody ever told the attic how much work that would be.

The rain beats down on the rooftop. The maples stretch into the memory of Oak Grove. The brick halfway sighs. The ever darker stucco bulges. The walls drink in what they can. The windows provide a weather report. The grass sings a mushy hosanna. The attic is in between. The house is a home. The home is whole.

In Rain 2

Outside, large drops ran down the steep pitched roof of the house. This was the first rain for the little house, the first chance to prove that it was worthwhile. The little house had been imagined by the caretakers years prior. It was built in a garage, bit by bit, with wheels resting where an RV had rested before. Once it was whole, the inside was assembled. A loft, a couch, space for a crib, a unique hanger to stash a guitar away securely, a dishrag. Months of anticipation culminated into today: the first field test. The preliminary trials were satisfactory. The water tanks worked just fine. The wood stove was safe. The lug nuts could hold their own against a bumpy test drive. There was no going back. The shingles were knit together well. The joists were spaced correctly. Outside, large drops *ran* down the steep-pitched roof of the little house.

This house was many things before it came together. Some things were only themselves. Only nails, pulled from bins at the local hardware store. Only river rock, plucked from the banks. Other things had to be created. Fabric was weaved for the couches and sewn into shape. Songs sung had sunk into the fabric, an echo of the whirring machine. Pipes were heated and bent to form fixtures when none could be found. As they warmed with the water, they could recall the warmth that reshaped them. Most things had entered into their second lives. The recycled barn wood had once sheltered sheep. The door knobs had been in three cities now. Every thing now

knit together could be dis-associated in an instant. But it wasn't. It held this menagerie of many together. Miraculously.

The wood creaks into place. Wood breathes, although it lacks lungs. Changes in air pressure and temperate set off a structural asthmatic attack, audible only as creaking. It takes years for a house to fully settle into its bones. Twenty, thirty years can go by before a space has fully settled down. Once a home is settled there is only a window of ten or twenty years before the wood starts to age and settle anew. The new lumber has a long way to go before it can sit comfortably in its frame. Cold, rainy days like this are the perfect way to kick off the settling process. By the time the caretakers are home, the wood will have inhaled some of the outside in. In a few weeks, it should let out a great sigh when the weather warms.

Inside, big echoes fill a little room. Sound beats into the windows, walls, and roof. The thrumming of rain drops against the hard surfaces of the house is consistent, seemingly incessant. The sound of falling water, something that would otherwise fade into the ether of walls and open space in a larger house has legitimate presence. The rugs and blankets muffle noise down. Plushes and textiles are great at dampening sound and drinking in echoes. There seems to be more echoes than there are noise dampeners, and as such the room is filled with the dull roar of the outdoors.

There is no in-between. You are in. You are out. The house holds everything within that the caretakers couldn't live without. A rainy day is momentous to a little house, a first time to prove itself weatherproof and dried in. The conglomeration of

thing has a unique memory; each piece has an individual history. The wood breathes.
The sound bounces and plays between hard and soft surfaces. The house is a home.
The home is whole.

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Jane Bennett introduces the concept of "thing-power" in this essay and traces its earlier appearances in other works. Thing-power, or vital materiality is another interpretation of the New Materialist school of thought, which attempts to place human and non-human matter on a level playing field. Vital materiality accesses the ability of things to animate and act. Bennett uses a collection, or ontology, of objects that she encountered on a walk to exemplify this. A glove, a dead rat, and a bottle cap were among the objects of her fascination. She explains that the things sparked feeling in her—they acted. This ontology shifted between being debris to be ignored and things to be studied as Bennett paused and reflected. During this moment of reflection, Bennett was struck by the "impossible singularity" of something that would normally have gone unnoticed. The litter had thing-power in it all along and noticing the "impossible singularity" of that particular pile of debris didn't imbue it with any more vitality. Thing power surrounds us, quietly humming in the background of our collective understanding of reality.

Bennett deploys examples from legal history, Kafka's storytelling, and the philosophy of Adorno to further introduce the idea that things

have the same vitality that beings do. A vial of gunpowder has the potential to be a star witness in a case. It has power. Kafka's character Odarek, a spool of animate thread, shifts between being and thing throughout the narrative—he/it has power. Adorno's rebuttal, that thing-power is tied to human subjectivity, is quickly dispelled with the reminder that just because something goes unnoticed doesn't mean that it still isn't in the background.

Bennett closes with three pedagogical techniques to shape any approach to New Materialism. The first is to be aware that conceptualization has the ability to obscure faults in the concepts. The second is to use one's utopian imagination. The final is to be willing to play the fool. These pedagogical techniques paired with Bennett's model encounter of "thing-power" can be applied to the other philosophers in this school of thought. Understanding that New Materialism isn't a perfect theory will likely encourage my readers to apply the techniques to their own understanding of my thesis.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing*.

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Ian Bogost introduces the idea of alien phenomenology as a way to solve some of the flaws he sees in other New Materialist rhetoric. He argues that objects exist for more than just human use—that our understanding of Materialism must also take into account the fact that being expands. An object can be simultaneously a part of something else and an independent body. This means that everything matters to the same degree. The concept that puts humans on equal ground with objects is called flat existence. Once we have flattened existence out, it is possible to access the concept of tiny ontology. An ontology is a gathering things, related or unrelated. It often takes the form of a list. Tiny ontology holds that the multitudes contained within each object (Latour would call it the connections of the network around an actor) can be condensed into one singularity. Bogost warns against trying to define the relationships between objects. This is his primary split from Latour's logic. Bogost holds that since the science of New Materialism can only describe steps along the way and not the experiences of the objects, any description would be at least one factor removed from the actual truth. He finishes his book out with a simple metaphor that sums up his position on object. Everything that we encounter is in a sense, just like the marble/universe shown at the end of the first Men in Black movie. That small object within a much larger system contains multitudes.

I am going to apply Bogost's sense of wonder and respect toward my house reasoning. To do this, I'll have to explain that each house is not a super-object

that acts as a tote bin for all the objects within. The siding should be given equal consideration as the carpet fiber. This exercise should produce some interesting linguistic choices for those sections of my study. Beyond that application, I'm going to put the works of Bogost in conversation with the works of Latour. The two thinkers reference one another in their works and Bogost seems more comfortable mentioning other New Materialists in his works. I'd like to compare their theories and see if by the end of the literature review I can't come to a consensus about some of the basic principles of New Materialism. Where Graham Harman is used to explain Latour, I'd like to use Jane Bennett to expand on Bogost.

Bryant, Levi R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011.

Levi Bryant attempts to bridge the gap between old philosophers and new materialism in *The Democracy of Objects*. He pulls examples from Kant, Hume and Aristotle to flesh out some of the opinions held about the nature of objects. Bryant truly attempts to condense New Materialist thought on the nature of objects into one clear guide. He insists that objects exist in a democracy—something Ian Bogost hinted at when he said that all objects equally exist but they do not exist equally. Bryant also makes some linguistic suggestions about objects. Traits like color and smell are just actions that an object does. For his brand of ontology, a mug is not blue. A mug does blue or

a mug blues. Although this feels strange at the start, the first step to acknowledging the autonomy of objects would have to be strange for it to work.

I don't know if I'll fully employ the verbiage that Bryant suggests, but I may use it as a guide to prevent me from examining the nonessential. The color that a house is painted has little bearing on its architectural merit. By pulling these symmetrical qualities (qualities that can snap in and out of existence based on other conditions) out of examination, I'll be able to focus more closely on asymmetrical qualities that are irreversible changes to a structure. Bryant provides some practical information in his book that corresponds with the thought of Bogost. I'm likely to use some of Bryant's interpretations to clarify quotes from Bogost and I will certainly take note of Bryant's linguistic suggestions as I craft my house subsections.

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Harman, Graham. "The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy". *Cultural*

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March 2007, 31-49.

This article is a brief overview of how Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) differs from traditional metaphysics and an explanation of the key terms used in the ANT school of thought. Harman explains that traditional metaphysics draws its strength from Kant's Copernican Revolution, which produced a schism between human awareness and the existence of things outside that awareness. Latour embraces uncertainty with ANT by refusing to cordon the study of things off to harder sciences. Studying objects with soft sciences is at the core of Latour's method.

Harman goes on to outline the four components to Latour's ANT: actants, irreduction, translation, and association. Actants are the pieces on the chessboard of existence. Humans are actants, but so are pitch pipes and the unconscious. Actants are connected with one another and their interactions create our reality. Irreduction is the concept that no actant can be reduced or irreduced into anything else. Each actant is its own entity. The concept of translation reinforces the sense that no interaction can occur between actants without something being lost. The final concept Harman outlines is associations. An actant grows more powerful when it associates with more things. Visualize a PI's office cork board with photos and an overlay of

strings. The photo with the most strings connected to it is the most powerful, for it is the most connected—the same principle applies to actants large and small. These four theories combined form the meat of Latour’s ANT without providing any of the prescriptive advice Latour gives on deploying ANT.

As a contemporary of Latour, Harman has a great deal to say in support of Latour’s ANT. This article provides some fairly concise background on Latour’s place in the realm of modern philosophy and explains the rationale behind ANT in the simplest terms possible. More than anything, this work will serve as a mini guide to Latour’s theories. Feeling certain in my understanding of ANT will help me deploy its concepts more sure footedly.

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Pflugfelder, Ehren Helmut. "Rhetoric's New Materialism: from Micro-Rhetoric

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441-461.

Pflugfelder's article puts the work of Bruno Latour and Ian Bogost in conversation with one another. Both Latour and Bogost are important figures in a new field of philosophical inquiry. Pflugfelder describes how these two philosophers, as well as many others, subscribe to the New Materialism school of thought. New Materialism holds that objects are just as worthy of examination and study as humans are. This allows for more nuanced study of interaction and causation by giving things some form of agency. Pflugfelder rolls out a new approach to rhetoric that will go along with New Materialist thought: materialist rhetoric. He explains that although big rhetoric worked well for Kantian philosophers who searched for answers about the nature of humanity and persuasion, big rhetoric doesn't fit well with the tenets of New Materialism. Small rhetoric is more concerned with the artifacts that rhetorical trains of thought produce. If big rhetoric is visual in nature, small rhetoric is kinetic. Because small rhetoric concerns itself with the methods of

understanding things, it is most functional in the context of materialist thought. Small rhetoric guides the arguments of both Latour and Bogost.

This particular brand of micro rhetoric is at the core of the New Materialist school of thought. It attempts to give agency to all actors, “giving objects their due”. Understanding that New Materialism demands an entirely different kind of rhetorical approach will hopefully prevent me from straying back into the familiar land of big and small rhetoric. Pflugfelder includes a discussion of the function of a microbrewery as a way to demonstrate micro rhetoric. This discussion will likely prove useful in shaping my own discussion of residential construction.

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