

Tiny houses could help mitigate homelessness

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Clockwise, from left: Cate Mingoya; a tiny home in Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon; and a similar home in Occupy Madison Village in Madison, Wisconsin. Credit: Cate Mingoya

In recent years, the "tiny house" movement has picked up speed in the U.S. Most often, the advocates of the small homes promote them as a

lifestyle choice for those seeking to save money, reduce possessions, or otherwise simplify their lives.

But now, momentum is building to adopt tiny houses to aid the more than 600,000 Americans facing homelessness, says a recent graduate of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning. Cate Mingoya, who received her master's degree in city planning in June, performed a comparative study of two such efforts: Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon, and Occupy Madison Village in Madison, Wisconsin.

"Tiny houses offer an alternative approach to helping those experiencing homelessness in a way that provides the human basics—such as heat, shelter, water—while going deeper and providing autonomy, respect, and care," Mingoya says. "I was curious as to how well these villages were working, how they came to be, what challenges they face, and what lessons planners, developers, municipal officials, activists, and residents could take from existing villages."

Tiny homes are generally defined as freestanding dwellings as small as 90 square feet—the size of a standard parking spot—to as large as 300 square feet. In most municipalities, such homes are considered too small for human habitation, so tiny house builders have found ways around the regulations, such as placing the houses on trailer beds or wooden blocks to take advantage of technicalities that place the structures in an unregulated zone or under the purview of motor vehicle regulations.

"Many municipalities aren't quite sure how to handle tiny house villages for the homeless," Mingoya says. "The villages bring up a lot of sensitive issues and uncomfortable questions: Why are there so many homeless? Where will people be comfortable with them? Is this safe? Will this work? Is this a good use of taxpayer money when we have so little already?"

Mingoya's research, however, finds that if municipalities embrace the concept, and institute appropriate regulations, tiny house villages offer significant advantages to cities and the residents.

Housing the chronically homeless can save municipalities millions of dollars in annual health care costs by reducing [emergency room visits](#) and time spent in hospitals or respite centers, Mingoya says.

Additionally, providing permanent housing to these individuals reduces legal costs, as they have fewer run-ins with the law for crimes such as trespassing, public urination, loitering, begging, and public consumption of alcohol. Placing the homeless into permanent housing can also save lives: Homeless adults have a mortality rate that is three times that of the general adult population.

These advantages, however, do not come without challenges—and therefore most cities and towns have not even begun to consider tiny house villages, according to Mingoya. Tiny house villages often face "not in my backyard" opposition over concerns such as safety or property values in adjoining areas. Other issues relate to how such villages are built and organized.

"Some volunteer-built tiny homes are poorly constructed and pose a threat to the health and safety of the residents," Mingoya cautions. "Poor siting may further cluster and isolate the deeply poor, and rigid and inflexible governance structures can rob those experiencing homelessness of the autonomy and dignity needed to stabilize."

Nonetheless, Mingoya advocates the wider adoption of tiny houses as a productive and effective tool if properly regulated to ensure the safety, well-being, autonomy, and dignity of the residents. "Tiny houses have the potential to be a long-term tool with short-term flexibility," Mingoya says. "With some underutilized public or private land, a few thousand dollars for construction, a zoning variance, and some volunteers, millions

of municipal dollars can be saved. And most importantly, a group of people who are traditionally cast to the edges of society can now be integrated and given a safe place to call home."

Phillip Clay, the Class of 1922 Professor in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, who served as advisor on the project, says Mingoya's research offers a tough-minded analysis.

"Everyone wants to find a remedy to the problem of homelessness that combines shelter, affordability, dignity, and sustainability," he says. "Cate searched deeply for an elegant solution, and her work offers a valuable guide for communities willing to think in nontraditional ways."

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