

UTNE READER

A Hut of One's Own

by Jon Spayde

I TENSED MY MUSCLES and pushed hard against the timber frame, struggling to erect the skeleton of a wall against the determined pull of gravity. My friend (and fellow Utne contributing editor) Joseph Hart pushed too, then let go and jammed a board against the upright as a brace. We mopped our brows and admired our work: The wall was nearly perpendicular. A 12-foot-by-12-foot hut was in the making. All it needed now were three more walls, a roof, a floor—and Joe as its thoughtful inhabitant.

Joe is a serious seeker of peace and quiet. An independent-minded freelance journalist, he recently abandoned Minneapolis for Viroqua, Wisconsin, a town of about 5,000 souls. Now even Viroqua has proved too urban for Joe, and soon he and his family will move onto eight wooded acres of land a few miles outside of town, where they will build a house and a freestanding home office.

But even on this peaceful homestead, Joe needs a place of retreat, so the first thing he's constructing is a tiny cabin for himself—to give him, as he puts it, "a chance to withdraw from my family and social obligations, and go inside my head to figure out what I think about things."

Joe believes that while a calm outdoor landscape may provide a great respite from life's cares, you're not really away from the world until you're in a small indoor space of your own, one that fits around you: a cocoon, a nest that you get to define, furnish, decorate, or even, as in this case, build yourself. And he's not alone—I know a lot of people who dream of the hermit hut.

While you can make such a nest practically anywhere—I have a particular fondness for little old motel rooms with rickety desks and for the spartan rooms in Catholic retreat houses—there's something special about a freestanding structure, a tiny house with windows. "Sure I want a hole to crawl into," says Joe, "a place where I can practically reach out and touch the walls. But it won't be claustrophobic, because I'll have windows on all four sides, and I'll be able to see in all directions." In other words, a womb with a view.

Though Joe's hut is going up in a quiet corner of rural America, you could see it as part of an international minitrend: The tiny building is on the minds of many architects and designers today. Japan's ultracool architectural partnership Atelier Bow-Wow specializes in little buildings, and they've published a book in Japan celebrating the smallest structures on the urban scene: toll booths, newspaper kiosks, porta-potties, and the like. Spanish designer Mart'n Ruiz de Azca has invented what must be the most intimate dwelling ever: a gold tent that you can fold up and put in your pocket. Closer to home, Boston-based artist Krzysztof Wodiczko contrived a unique combination of cabin and pushcart to give homeless men and women mobile shelter and storage. And Iowa City artist Jay Shafer lives in a house he says is "smaller than most people's bathrooms," which he built as a small-scale replica of the house in the background of Grant Wood's American Gothic.

I don't know why so many dwelling designers have gone small—it may be a reaction against the gigantism of today's international trophy architecture and a renewed interest in human scale—but to me trends in tiny house design are less interesting than what goes on in the minds and spirits of the people who inhabit them. Joe Hart and people like him are part of a long tradition of solitude seekers who, by following an initial impulse simply to get away, soon find that their wee retreats are experiments in what it takes for a human being to be happy and free; eventually, the cabin becomes a lens through which the hermit (permanent or temporary) sees the world, and herself, with more depth and clarity. The house is an ancient symbol of the self, and it's as if by stripping the dwelling down to bare essentials, the human being is stripping himself too, psychically and spiritually, to what really counts.

Though the Christian hermits of the Egyptian desert were the first to make this inquiry—an inquiry continued as a search for right relationship with God by thousands of nuns and monks, from Julian of Norwich to Saint Therese of Lisieux to Thomas Merton—Henry David Thoreau is still the best known of solitaries and hut builders: for him, the big building was a symbol of all the snares and misdirections of his society. "If one designs to construct a dwelling house," he writes in Walden, "it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he finds himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clue, a museum, an alms-house, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead. Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary. I have seen Penobscot Indians, in this town, living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a foot deep around them, and I thought that they would be glad to have it deeper to keep out the wind."

Thoreau's two-year sojourn in his tiny house enlarged his sight exponentially; Walden culminates in a vision of human possibility so huge that only images of sea and sky were adequate to it ("A tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip").

So the hut, dwelt in mindfully, confuses our sense of scale. It is snug—but it can open us to the entire world by helping us clear away the physical and mental clutter of our lives. For me, the most beautiful symbol of this seeming paradox is in the Vimalakirti Sutra, one of the most important scriptures of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. In it, the wise Buddhist layman Vimalakirti, a wealthy man who has embraced what today we call voluntary simplicity, invites disciples of the Buddha into his tiny chamber, where he is lying ill. There he not only teaches them Buddhist truths, but also treats them to a vision of the universe—a fantastic show of all things and all possibilities, within his four small walls.

Legend held that Vimalakirti's chamber was one jang (that is, 10 Chinese feet) square. The term fang-jang ("a square jang") is pronounced hojo in Japanese, and this resonant word reappears in the title of one of the great classics of Japanese literature, Hojo-ki (The Account of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut) by the 12th-century musician and poet Kamo no Chomei. Chomei's era saw the courtly culture that produced Japan's first great literature and art destroyed in brutal wars between military families vying for power. The imperial capital of Kyoto, Chomei's home, was burned countless times, and evil luck brought a whirlwind and an earthquake to the city too—disasters he describes vividly. Eventually he retired to Mount Hino south of the capital. "Now that I've reached the age of sixty, when life fades as quickly as dew," he writes, "I've put together a lodging for my final days. I'm like a traveler who prepares shelter for one night, or an aging silk-worm spinning its cocoon. The size is not even one hundredth of the house where I lived in middle age." It is, in fact, one jang square.

Chomei is writing within a long East Asian tradition of male recluses: men of affairs who retire to the countryside when they have fallen out of political favor or have been driven from home by war. Relieved at last of the stern responsibilities of Confucian official and family life, they attune themselves to the pleasures of solitude and the rhythms of nature—by embracing either the Chinese Taoist tradition of mountain-dwelling "immortals" who live free of care, or Buddhism, with its long heritage of monasticism and reclusion. Chinese landscape paintings often include little images of retired gentlemen taking their rural ease in thatched huts, and the small room where the Japanese tea ceremony is performed is intended to evoke a recluse's dwelling. And although women could become Buddhist nuns, they didn't take part in the mainstream of this tradition. (Instead, some aristocratic Japanese women of the middle ages, all but cloistered in their homes, used their ample leisure to create a great literature of psychological insight and refined sensibility, of which Lady Murasaki Shikibu's The Tale of Genji is the jewel.)

If the vision of life that Chomei presents is austere, thanks to Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and the tragedies he's witnessed ("One [person] dies in the morning, the other is born at evening; they come and go like froth on the water"), still, his description of his little house and the pleasures of solitary life are quietly joyful. He's furnished his hut with a couple of musical instruments, some sutras to chant aloud, and a few books of Chinese and Japanese poetry. When he's tired of his Buddhist devotions, he neglects them and takes a nap. "Sometimes," he writes, "I stir up the buried embers of the fire, making them my companions in an old man's wakeful night, or I delight in the voice of the owl, for there is nothing fearful about this mountain."

Thoreau's and Chomei's souls grew larger in their huts, huts that removed them from distraction, huts they furnished as images of their truest selves. Thoreau was distracted by the materialism and narrowness of antebellum America; in his solitude this somewhat misanthropic man discovered a larger self, connected to all others. Retreating from the chaos and death of medieval Japan, Chomei discovered a truth just as big—that peace and joy can live beside an awareness of sorrow and pain. Their huts were handmade machines for turning solitude into wisdom, relaxation into a more vivid, truer life. No wonder we love the little house whose blueprint we all carry around in our souls.