**The Search for Freedom, Sustainability, and Economic Security: Henry David Thoreau as Tiny House Pioneer**

Samuel Alexander and Heather Shearer

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**Introduction**

If there is one figure in history who evokes the image of living in a tiny house more than any other, surely it is Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). A pioneering environmentalist and passionate advocate of self-reliance and voluntary simplicity, Thoreau is well known as a lover of nature and author of the unclassifiable masterpiece, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (in Bode, 1982). He is also widely recognised as inspiring Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and indeed an entire tradition of civil disobedience, with his landmark essay, ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ (in Bode, 1982). But more than anything else, Thoreau is remembered as the young, romantic poet-philosopher who built himself a small cabin in the woods on the shores of Walden Pond, in which he lived for two years and two months, before returning to his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, to live out his days as a ‘sojourner in civilized life’ (Bode, 1982: 258).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this article we wish to return to Thoreau and re-examine his life and writings, in order to excavate the historical foundations of the contemporary tiny house movement. What was Thoreau’s philosophy of life? How did he see the world? What drove him to exit his society and build himself a tiny house in the woods? And did his return to Concord after two years mean that his living experiment at Walden Pond was a failure? As we reflect on Thoreau’s philosophy and consider the ways in which he justified his life decisions, a strong case can be made that the contemporary tiny house movement is a modern reflection of Thoreauvian struggles, questions, motivations, and ideals, even as the world has changed dramatically.

The ‘contemporary’ tiny house movement – which purportedly had its genesis in the Pacific northwest of the USA in the late 1990s – traces its roots back much further, to Thoreau and even earlier movements, such as minimalism and voluntary simplicity (Anson, 2014; Anson, 2017; Kilman, 2016; Mangold & Zschau, 2019). We will argue that at the centre of Thoreau’s philosophy of life are the questions of freedom, sustainability, and economic security, and that grappling with these questions was what led Thoreau to build himself a tiny house. Based on personal involvement in the tiny house movement in Australia (Alexander, 2016) and ratified by the emerging empirical literature (Shearer and Burton, 2019; Penfold, Waitt, and McGuirk, 2018; Shearer, 2017), we contend that a very similar struggle for freedom, sustainability, and economic security lies at the heart of the tiny house movement today. This article begins by telling the story of Thoreau’s life and reviewing his worldview in the hope of shedding some philosophical light on the historical roots of the contemporary tiny house movement. After this substantive statement, we then offer a review of the contemporary tiny house movement, drawing on our own quantitative and qualitative research in Australia, and explore the extent to which it can be understood as a reflection of Thoreauvian questions and impulses.

**Crisis of Vocation**

We begin with a brief biographical sketch (see Bode, 1982; Walls, 2017) to highlight some of the pressures and circumstances that led to Thoreau undertaking his tiny house experiment out at Walden Pond.

Graduating from Harvard in 1837, Thoreau found himself facing a crisis of vocation. He had a passion for writing poetry, but his poetry, though often beautiful and inspired, was not a commodity that sold well in the market. Indeed, it did not sell at all. So, upon returning to his hometown of Concord after finishing his studies, the young Thoreau was confronted by those great economic questions all of us must face when trying to establish financial security and independence in a world of scarce resources: *How best to earn a living? How much time should one spend at it? How much does one need to live well and to be free?*

Aside from the fact that his poetry would not sell, there were certain expectations that attached to a Harvard graduate at the time, and being a poet was not one of them. It turned out a teaching vacancy soon arose in Concord, and Thoreau, no doubt swept along by parental and societal expectations, as well as economic need, applied for and was offered a teaching position at the town school. Though he applied himself to this job, within a month he was taken aside by a member of the school committee and reprimanded for not caning disruptive students, which was the school policy and apparently beyond negotiation. In protest to what he considered the absurdity of corporal punishment, Thoreau re-entered the classroom, randomly selected six students, administered to them a caning, then resigned.

With his principles intact (somewhat dubiously, perhaps) but without a job, Thoreau’s crisis of vocation deepened. There was some temporary respite when he and his brother established their own Concord Academy, a private school which ran quite successfully for a couple of years. But by March 1941 the project was abandoned and the vocational crisis re-emerged, as he was not particularly drawn to teaching. Over the next few years, lacking any clear direction, Thoreau found himself periodically employed in a variety of miscellaneous roles, including labourer, pencil-maker, gardener and general handyman at the Emerson residence, tutor for Emerson’s nephew, occasional lecturer, and editor. We review these details because our forthcoming literature review of the contemporary tiny house movement suggests that many people living in a tiny house today, or aspiring to, would sympathise with Thoreau’s crisis of vocation, his economic insecurity, and the struggles he endured trying to find meaningful employment in a precarious job market. After all, if well paid meaningful employment was easy to come by, and decent housing and access to land was affordable, the incentive to explore *alternative* ways of living would not be so pressing (Alexander and Baumann, 2019; Milkman, 2016).

Thus, for Thoreau, the economic problem of how to support himself was not yet solved. How was he to be free to follow his true calling as a poet but still earn a living? It is a question, perhaps, to which we can all relate, in our own way. Feeling that books and his formal education had failed him, Thoreau turned his attention to his contemporaries, the people of Concord, to see whether their lives could provide him with some insight into the art of living well, the art of freedom. His observations, however, far from showing him the way, instead gave rise to one of the most penetrating critiques of materialistic culture that has ever been laid down, one all the more piercing due to the fact that Thoreau was both a ruthless critic and a literary genius. Only by examining this critique can we understand what ultimately drove Thoreau out of his township and into the woods. Again, the relevance of Thoreau’s critique to the consumerist cultures of our own day will not be hard to see.

**Thoreau on Materialistic Culture**

‘Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives,’ Thoreau began one of his essays, noting that since time was short he would ‘leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism,’ (632) as was his way. ‘What is it to be born free and not to live free?’ (650) he asked his fellow citizens. ‘Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast?’ (ibid). America may have been free from political tyrants, but it was painfully clear to Thoreau that it was ‘still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant’ (ibid). A tyrant called Mammon.

This world is a place of ‘incessant business,’ he lamented (632). He felt that ‘It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once,’ but there is ‘nothing but work, work, work’ (ibid). To be sure, Thoreau was not opposed to labour, industry, or enterprise, as such. His concern, rather, was that the ways by which money is acquired ‘almost without exception lead downward’ (643). And ‘those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render’(634). Thus, ‘It is not enough to [say] that you worked hard to get your gold. So does the Devil work hard’ (640).

For these reasons Thoreau thought that to do anything merely for the sake of acquiring money or material superfluities was to be ‘truly idle or worse’ (634). The following passage states his position directly:

If I should sell my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for…. I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living (636).

But Thoreau saw his townsfolk labouring under this very mistake. ‘It is a fool’s life,’ he asserted bluntly, ‘as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before’ (261). He had travelled widely in Concord, and everywhere, in shops, offices, and fields, the inhabitants seemed to him to be leading lives of ‘quiet desperation’ and doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. ‘The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor’ (260). Thoreau likened people’s materialistic cravings to the heads of a hydra, noting that ‘as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up’ (ibid).

In short, Thoreau was telling his contemporaries that they had ‘enough’ but that they did not know it, and so were poor. Always wanting more luxuries and comforts and never content with less, he felt that they did not understand the meaning of ‘economy,’ did not understand that the ‘cost of a thing is the amount of… life which is required to be exchanged for it’ (286). ‘Most men,’ he wrote, ‘even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance or mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluously course labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them’ (261). By a ‘seeming fate,’ there was ‘no time to be anything but a machine’(ibid).

And for what? People’s lives were being ‘ploughed into the soil for compost’ (ibid) just to obtain ‘splendid houses’ and ‘finer and more abundant clothing… and the like’. But as Thoreau insisted, ‘Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only’ (568). Indeed, he claimed that ‘Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind’ (269). Thoreau was astounded by how ‘frivolous’ people were with respect to their own lives, more concerned about accumulating nice things or climbing the social ladder than they were about their own destinies. We can imagine Thoreau being equally or even more critical of contemporary housing trends in places like the United States and Australia, where house sizes have grown to unprecedented levels (McKinlay, Baldwin, & Stevens, 2019; Wotton, Skates, & Shutter, 2018), locking people into decades of labour to pay for them and demanding ever more resources to build them and fill them with stuff, and requiring ever more energy to heat and cool them due to their extravagant size (Kilman, 2016; Wotton et al., 2018). Likewise, Thoreau may well be horrified at the price of houses. Australian (and American) houses are not only some of the largest in the world, but also some of the most unaffordable; for example, Melbourne and Sydney in Australia regularly rank in the top 5 of the most unaffordable cities in the OECD (Cox & Pavletich, 2018; Pawson, Milligan, & Yates, 2020)

Thoreau was living in a time of great economic transformation and for him the railroad was the emblem of industrialisation. He often spoke of it metaphorically, as a representation of the emerging economic system that was fast changing the face of America and indeed the world. ‘We do not ride upon the railroad,’ he asserted, ‘it rides upon us’ (345).

It appeared to Thoreau as if his neighbours had fallen into the common mode of living not because they preferred it to any other, but because they honestly thought there was no choice left. ‘So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say’ (266). But Thoreau was not convinced. He was of the view that ‘there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center’ (ibid). Even ‘the life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind,’ and ‘why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others? (274). Forever the thoughtful non-conformist, Thoreau tended to believe that, ‘What old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can,’ and on that basis he boldly proposed that there should be, ‘Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new’ (264).

It was time for Thoreau to begin his ‘tiny house’ living experiment at Walden Pond.

**The Walden Experiment**

On Independence Day, 1845, a few days before his twenty-eighth birthday, Henry Thoreau left his town of Concord and went to live alone in the woods, on the shores of Walden Pond, a mile from any neighbour. He there built himself a modest cabin – a tiny house – and for two years and two months earned a simple living by the labour of his own hands. Although Thoreau’s example is fairly questioned on the grounds of him being a relatively privileged and educated white man, living on land provided by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and sometimes relying on family and friends while espousing an individualistic philosophy of self-reliance (Solnit, 2013; Bode, 1982), Thoreau’s example and writings remain a great inspiration and provocation to many, raising questions and challenges that many face today. While living at the pond Thoreau wrote, among other things, his masterpiece, *Walden*, which gives a philosophical, literary, and autobiographical account of his two-year stay. This is arguably the greatest statement ever made on the living strategy now variously known as ‘voluntary simplicity,’ ‘simple living,’ or ‘downshifting.’ It is, in a word, he presents a philosophy of ‘sufficiency’ and we will see his central question can be summarised as: ‘how much is enough?’

In the second chapter of *Walden*, entitled ‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,’ Thoreau offers us an explanation for his exit from conventional society: ‘I went the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what they had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived’ (343). He ‘did not wish to live what was not life,’ he tells us, ‘living is so dear;’ nor did he wish to ‘practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary’ (ibid).

Elsewhere he said that his purpose in going to Walden Pond was to ‘transact some private business with the fewest obstacles’ (275). In one sense, this private business was simply to write in solitude, close to nature and away from distractions. In another sense, though closely related to the first, his private business was to solve, or at least better understand, the economic problem of how to be free in a world of scarce resources. Perhaps, Thoreau had decided, the best path was to reduce his material wants and live a simple life. Simplicity of life was to be his means to the elevation of purpose.

Thoreau had come to suspect that if one’s trade were with the ‘Celestial Empire’ (ibid) – by which he meant, ‘If your concerns are “higher” than merely getting and spending’ – then very little is actually needed to live well and to be free, provided life is approached with the right attitude. ‘Simplify, simplify’ (344) was to become his refrain. A modest shelter from the elements should be fixture enough. Old clothes will do, will they not? Grow some of your own food and become more self-reliant.

This, in essence, was the method Thoreau put to the test at Walden Pond, by living simply and rejecting the division of labour. As far as possible he secured his own food, by growing beans, peas, corn, turnips, and potatoes, and occasionally fishing in the pond. He cut down some local trees, gathered some second-hand materials, and built himself a house with but one small room, and made some basic furniture. It was not much, but it was enough. And just enough was plenty. He did not wish to be chained to the economy, so he practiced self-reliance; he did not wish to be slave to artificial material desires, so he practiced self-discipline; and he did not wish to live what was not life, so he practiced self-culture.

The economic significance of Thoreau’s life in the woods can only be understood if we always keep in mind what he was trying to accomplish there. We have seen that Thoreau, in the eight years between his graduation from Harvard and his excursion to the pond, struggled in vain to find an occupation which would not conflict with the activities that yielded his poems and essays. His options, it seemed, were either to make some compromises and pursue a different vocation – that is, to do something for which there was much more demand in the market – or else somehow find a way to become much less dependent on the market.

Thoreau was clearly terrified of falling into the ruts of tradition and conformity, of compromising his dreams and wasting life in the pursuit of luxuries or fine houses, as he saw so many of his contemporaries doing and which he considered to be ‘not so sad as foolish’ (275). He knew that he would not be able to pluck life’s ‘finer fruits’ if he devoted too much of his time to the ‘coarse labors of life,’ and so he set about lowering his denominator, reducing his needs. Thoreau’s experiment with simple living in the woods, then, was not a renunciation of life, but an affirmation of it. He wanted to live without dead time, and he went to Walden Pond to learn how to achieve this; or, at least, to see if it were possible. Building and living in a tiny house was central to this existential enquiry.

**Thoreau’s Philosophy of Housing**

We are now in a position to look more closely at Thoreau’s philosophy of housing. Thoreau did not deny that shelter is now a necessity of life, though he did make a point of noting that there are instances of human beings, no hardier than ourselves, doing without shelter for long periods in colder countries. Assuming, however, that shelter is indeed a necessity of life, Thoreau proposed that we ‘[c]onsider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary’ (283). He had seen Indians in his town living in tents of thin cotton cloth, which in the first instance could be constructed in a day or two, at most, and taken down and put up in a few hours; and every family owned one. He had even seen a large box by the railroad, six feet long by three feet wide, in which the labourers locked their tools up at night, and it suggested to him that anyone who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few holes in it to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained at night, and hook down the lid, ‘and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free’ (284). This will strike some as a ridiculous proposition, but Thoreau was ‘far from jesting’ (ibid). An average house in his neighbourhood cost about eight hundred dollars at the time and Thoreau noted that to lay up this sum would take from ten to fifteen years of the labourer’s life; add the farm and one would have to spend twenty, thirty, or forty years toiling – more than half of one’s life is easily spent. Would the Indians have been wise to give up their tents on these terms?

It is in this context where Thoreau made his alternative economics of housing most explicit, expressing one of his central ideas: ‘If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man – and I think it is, though only the wise improve their advantages – it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run’ (286). On this basis, Thoreau suggested that ‘when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him’ (288). What is more, ‘*if the civilized man’s pursuits are no worthier than the savage’s, if he is employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he have a better dwelling than the former?*’ (289, emphasis in original).

Thoreau wanted to show at what sacrifice our more ‘advanced’ dwellings were obtained and to suggest that, by living more simply, we may secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantage. With this in mind, he went to Walden Pond with an axe, cut down some trees, and in about three unrushed months had built himself a modest but sturdy cabin. Again exemplifying his alternative mode of economic analysis, Thoreau declared that, ‘I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more [in terms of life] than the present one’ (304).

It appears, then, that Thoreau was perfectly content with his shelter, modest though it was. Did this not make him richer than a king who is dissatisfied with his palace? With a little more wit we could all be richer than kings, Thoreau implied; but, unfortunately: ‘Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have’ (290).

Furthermore, Thoreau thought that there is something important in the experience of providing for oneself, of being self-reliant, that has been lost as a result of so-called ‘modern improvements’ and capitalism’s extreme division of labour. He wondered whether ‘if men [sic] constructed their dwellings with their own hands… the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?’ (300). But, alas, ‘we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built’ (ibid).

‘Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?’ (300) he asked, noting that never in all his walks had he come across anyone engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building their own house. ‘Where is [our] division of labor to end? And what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself’ (301). Thoreau had come to believe that his contemporaries were endeavouring to solve the problem of their livelihoods by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. ‘To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle’ (288). But Thoreau showed that, if one is prepared to live simply and with more self-reliance, ‘the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually’ (304) and ‘become richer than the richest are now’ (295).

Thoreau’s calculus here is simple but profound. Perhaps it would be nice to live in a palace or a mansion or even the nicest house on the block, but it must not be forgotten that the more expensive one’s housing is the more of one’s life one will probably have to spend earning the money needed to buy or rent it. So why not keep housing modest and simple? Since housing is the greatest overall expense in most people’s lives, this is an area where people should be particularly cognisant of the time / freedom cost of consumption. Perhaps by lowering our material ‘standard of living’ (measured by consumption in housing) people could actually increase ‘quality of life’ (measured by subjective wellbeing)? Indeed, Thoreau’s suggestion is that by living in modest accommodation people can literally save years if not decades of labour and thereby become ‘richer than the richest are now,’ not in terms of property, of course, but in terms of freedom and contentment. ‘If I seem to boast more than is becoming,’ he concluded, ‘my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself’ (304).

As our analysis of the contemporary tiny house movement will soon show, this type of reasoning is a primary motivation for many people living in (or wanting to live in) tiny houses today. Earning a deposit for a house or even paying rent requires a sufficiently high paying job (Pawson et al., 2020) – not necessarily a meaningful job, just well paid – and for some people of Thoreauvian inclination that is a compromise not taken lightly. The more expensive housing costs are, the more one will be obligated to accept work just in order to pay those costs. So, rather than accepting the conventional path, people in the tiny house movement today – like Thoreau – are asking: how can I avoid the necessity of selling myself (or so much of myself) to the market? As we will see, to some people, at least, living in a tiny house is an answer to this fundamental economic question (Shearer, 2017).

**After Walden**

On 6 September 1847, Thoreau left his cabin at Walden Pond and again took up residence in Concord, where he remained for the rest of his years, a ‘sojourner in civilized life’ (258). Though he always lived a life of voluntary simplicity, he came to accept that industrial capitalism was an impersonally dictated social order within which he had to live, however much he despised it. Since his material needs were so few, however, for a long time he found that he barely had to work one month each spring and fall to support himself (Bode, 1982). At the beginning of life, as at the end, Thoreau was very careful not to be seduced into exchanging his precious time for an insufficient amount of comforts and luxuries. Before proceeding to the contemporary tiny house movement, let us conclude the Thoreauvian analysis by inquiring into whether Thoreau’s living experiment out at Walden Pond can be deemed a success.

*Was Thoreau’s Experiment a Success?*

Even though Thoreau is now recognised as one of America’s finest and most important writers, the focus of this article has been the alternative economics of housing that he practiced during his experiment at Walden Pond, and the question that remains is: Was his experiment a success? The question is a complex one, although perhaps not so complex as it is sometimes made out to be. If, in his experiment at the pond, we attribute to Thoreau the aim of living a life of complete independence and self-sufficiency – like Adam, or Robinson Crusoe, perhaps – a life in which he ate only what he grew and grew only what he ate, neither worked for another nor hired another, and avoided all trade and barter, then we must conclude that his experiment was a failure. Thoreau, after all, lived on Emerson’s land; he borrowed an axe and other tools to get himself started; he set himself up in an unproductive corner of Massachusetts as a marginal commercial farmer whose cash crop did not bring in enough money to satisfy all his needs; he therefore hired himself out as a day labourer when he needed to make ends meet, and occasionally hired labour himself; furthermore, he was no stranger in the village, and would sometimes dine comfortably with his family or at the Emerson residence. These are the types of reasons that led critics like James Russel Lowell to allege that ‘[Thoreau’s] shanty life was a mere impossibility, so far as his own conception of it goes, as an entire independency of mankind’ (see Mazel, 2001: 32).

But this is to misunderstand the nature of Thoreau’s project, and to misjudge it on that account. There is nothing to indicate that Thoreau sought ‘an entire independency of mankind.’ He did not set out to reject features of civilisation that were of genuine advantage or to live as a hermit. Let us not forget that he lived a mile from society, but only a mile. Our point, here, is that before we are in a position to judge the success of Thoreau’s experiment we must have a proper understanding of its nature, and to help us understand this we should look to Thoreau’s own carefully crafted words: ‘My purpose in going to Walden Pond was neither to live cheaply nor live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles’ (275). In one sense, as noted earlier, this ‘private business’ was simply to write in privacy. Since we now know that while he was at the pond he wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the bulk of *Walden*, and probably a draft of his essay ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ – three texts (especially the latter two) which are now considered among the greatest works of American literature – it would seem that his experiment at the pond must be judged a resounding success. But this is to move too quickly, perhaps, since earlier we saw that his ‘private business’ also included his struggle with the economic problem of how to live a life of freedom in a world of scarce resources. To what extent can we say that this struggle was a success?

To live freely according to Thoreau essentially involves: (1) providing for one’s material needs in a way that is meaningful, fulfilling, and respectful of nature; and (2) having the freedom and independence for one’s ‘proper pursuits,’ whatever they may be. On this basis, it would seem equally clear that, in his struggle for freedom, Thoreau met with some real success in his experiment (even though it turned out that the struggle did not so much lead to a destination as much as it was an ongoing creative process). In hewing timber for his cabin on ‘pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man’s discontent was thawing’ (296) he discovered ‘the pleasure of construction,’ he sang as he worked, and ‘made no haste in [his] work, but rather made the of most it’ (297).

As for his work in the bean field, he tells of how hoeing his rows ‘yielded an instant and immeasurable crop’ (408) and attached him to the earth in a way that was nourishing. Even when Thoreau felt the need to hire himself out as a labourer – an occupation which he deemed ‘the most independent of any’ (324) – it was not always time wasted. In one journal entry he wrote: ‘Great thoughts hallow any labor. Today I earned seventy-five cents heaving manure out of a pen, and made a good bargain of it’ (15). Perhaps the most significant feature of his time at the pond, however, was his discovery that by living simply and generally relying on himself for his needs, he could maintain himself by working about six weeks per year only, leaving him with the whole of his winters, as well as most of his summers, ‘free and clear for study’ (323), or, more generally, for following the bent of his genius. On top of these successes, there are good reasons for thinking that throughout his time at the pond Thoreau was, quite simply, happy. ‘My life was ecstasy,’ he wrote in the most successful expression of this feeling.

Nevertheless, before we can conclude that Thoreau’s experiment at the pond was largely a success, we must confront the question: ‘Why, then, did he leave?’ After all, he only stayed for two years and two months, after which time he returned to live in Concord. But if he had secured the freedom, tranquillity, and happiness that he sought, why did he not remain at the pond his whole life? This is sometimes considered a fatal blow, proof that his experiment was an idealised distortion of social and economic reality, one that not even Thoreau could sustain.

We should hesitate, however, before judging his experiment a failure on this account. During his time at the pond Thoreau had learned by experience that very little is actually needed to live well and to be free, if only life is approached with the right attitude. Furthermore, he had cultivated a deep understanding of ‘the essential facts of life’ and developed a genuine love of simplicity. All this meant that he was able to live with an ‘inexpressible confidence’ (410) and ‘calm trust in the future’ (ibid), knowing that if he were ever to lose all his possessions he would be ‘nearly as well off as before’ (310). Could he not then leave his experiment behind yet take its lessons with him? Was he not correct in his claim that, ‘[i]t is not the tub that makes Diogenes, the Jove-born, but Diogenes the tub’? We should not dismiss in advance the possibility that those who successfully prosecute an inward voyage might learn to live in acquisitive society and yet above it, liberated from imprisonment within its values.

‘I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there’ (562) Thoreau tells us near the end of *Walden*. ‘Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more for that one’ (ibid). It should not surprise us that there is a measure of uncertainty in this explanation, given that his time at the pond was an enormously positive and creative period in his life. It would surely have been very tempting to stay. Indeed, a journal entry written five years after leaving the pond reads: ‘But why I changed– ? Why I left the woods? I do not think I can tell. I have often wished myself back.’ In another entry, however, he was less regretful: ‘Perhaps I wanted a change…. Perhaps if I lived there much longer I might live there forever – One would think twice before he accepted heaven on such terms.’ This last point, we contend, gets to the heart of the matter. Sublime though his experience was at the pond, Thoreau’s ethic of self-cultivation and his constant yearning for self-renewal required a stance of openness to new and diverse experiences. Expressing this need to move onward and upward, he wrote: ‘I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now’ (562).

In the end, whether we judge Thoreau’s experiment to be a success or a failure is arguably beside the point, since Thoreau cared little for the ‘smoke of opinion’ (264) and instead chose to think for himself. His own assessment of his time at the pond is perhaps best represented in the following passage (562):

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

**The Contemporary Tiny House Movement: Reflecting Thoreauvian Struggles, Motivations, and Questions**

Let us move now to the contemporary tiny house movement and consider the extent to which it can be understood as a reflection of Thoreauvian struggles, motivations, and questions. As highlighted in the introduction, the contemporary tiny house movement originated around 1998, in the Pacific northwest of the USA (Shearer and Burton, 2019; Anson, 2014; Evans, 2019; Kilman, 2016; Mangold and Zschau, 2019). The movement began largely when some of the creative class – architects, writers and designers – became dissatisfied with restrictive planning regulations (minimum size houses), affordability and a search for more sustainable living, and instead self-built houses on to a trailer base (Ford and Gomez‐Lanier, 2017; Kilman, 2016). This, in essence, differentiated the tiny house from a standard house and reclassified it as a vehicle. The movement started very small and was largely restricted to the continental US, but around 2010 – subsequent to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the rise in the use of social media – interest in tiny houses grew exponentially and spread to other countries, particularly those characterised by housing affordability issues and larger houses (Penfold et al, 2018).

Tiny houses can be differentiated into fixed tiny houses (as in Thoreau’s case) or mobile tiny houses (Tiny Houses on Wheels or THOW) (Shearer and Burton, 2019). The latter (THOW) are often considered as the archetypal tiny house, built on a trailer base to counter planning restrictions, as affordable housing and to achieve ‘freedom’ (Anson, 2014; Weetman, 2018). These are not new forms, however, having their antecedents in earlier tropes as the Gypsy (Romani) Wagon and early ‘trailer’ homes (Evans, 2018). Fixed tiny houses too have been, arguably, the dominant global housing form for much of human history; it is only since around the 1950s, in some Anglophone ex colonies of Britain such as the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, that housing for ‘the average person’ has become supersized (McKinlay et al., 2019; Wiesel, Pinnegar, & Freestone, 2013).

As we indicated in the beginning, there are major similarities between the contemporary tiny house movement and Thoreau’s philosophical goals of freedom, sustainability, economic security, and self-reliance. Empirical research conducted since 2015 in Australia (see Table 1) found that the main drivers for tiny house living has remained constant over the time, with interest continuing to grow strongly (Shearer, 2017; Boeckermann, Kaczynski, and King, 2019). These most common reasons given for wanting to ‘go tiny’ are affordability, environmental sustainability, a DIY ethos, and freedom (Shearer, Bares, Pieters, Winkle and Meathrel, 2018; Shearer, 2017).

**Table 1: Summary of Research Methods**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Method** | **Date** | **valid n** | **Notes** |
| Questionnaire Survey | June 2015 | 56 | 80% aged 40+; 57% female; 10/49 tiny house owner |
| Questionnaire Survey | Sept 2017 | 369 | 78% aged 40+; 67% female; 52/369 tiny house owner |
| Questionnaire Survey (ATHA) | Sept 2019 | 640 | 66% aged 40+; 78% female/non binary; 170/640 tiny house owner |
| Interviews | Jan 2015 - present | 12 | Mix of genders and ages; younger couples more common, 3 had young children |
| Participant Observation | Jan 2015 to present | na | Attended and spoke at numerous tiny house gatherings, festivals and Meetups |

The housing affordability crisis in Australia has prevented many ‘ordinary’ people from being able to afford even the simplest dwelling, reasonably close to services and employment (Gurran et al., 2018; Pawson et al., 2020). Faced with the choice of either buying into a high-rise apartment in the inner city, commuting for hours every day from the outer suburbs, ongoing insecure renting or living in share houses, it is little wonder that people see tiny houses as a way to achieve economic freedom, without sacrificing decades of their lives, or the opportunity to have a pet or garden. As Thoreau stated, ‘There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living’.

Likewise, tiny house dwellers in Australia felt that buying into conventional housing required them to sacrifice their freedom; ‘I don't want to be trapped in mortgage servitude for life and I want to live an environmentally conscious life’; and ‘I’m a single women and I don't need a big house with multiple empty bedrooms, but I'd also like to live somewhere I can have a pet and a veggie garden. A tiny house on its own patch of land would be an excellent compromise. I also worry about renting and potential homelessness if I experience economic insecurity in the future’ (Survey respondents, 2017).

Similarly, the tiny house movement is replete with references to self-reliance and self-sufficiency, albeit couched in more modern terminology such as DIY (do it yourself), off-grid, and even survivalism; ‘I want to be able to be self-sufficient and live on my property in a tiny house. And be able to take my house with me when I travel Australia’ (Survey respondent, 2019). The ability to not only build one’s own simple house, but to do so without (too much) debt and ongoing cost, and in doing so, gain economic freedom was deeply reminiscent of Thoreau when he said, a person ‘..can obtain <a shelter> for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent’. Another said, <the tiny house> ‘…could give me a "home base…as I don't have enough money to build a full house but…I could at least install a road, water tanks and solar power then start building a hemp/lime masonry house and finish it slowly as funds and labour become available’ (Survey Respondent, 2019).

Finally, to unpack the most pertinent, yet the most complex of all the themes arising from the study into the contemporary tiny house movement, that of freedom. Freedom to Thoreau was multi-faceted – as is the concept in the tiny house movement. To him, it meant economic freedom and freedom from the constraints of society (Anson, 2014); and arguably, freedom from regulation – libertarianism. Some even consider Thoreau as the first libertarian (Hamowy, 2008). These interpretations of freedom almost mirror the concerns, dreams and drivers of the contemporary tiny house movement, with the only exception being freedom of movement. As one Survey Respondent (2019) said; ‘We were financially forced into going down this tiny living road, but along the way have come to realise what a freedom it is to live like this, and are very grateful for it, and feel it’s a better way of living.’

This is the crux of the argument; like Thoreau, some feel forced, by external circumstances, into the tiny house movement. Thoreau could not make any money as a poet, and the work he could find required him to sacrifice his principles. Nowadays, many people also feel they are ‘living lives of quiet desperation’ – spending most of their waking lives in jobs they hate to pay the mortgage on a house too large for their needs – ‘Too many people spend money they haven't earned to buy things they don't want to impress people they don't like[[2]](#footnote-2)’. People may go tiny by choice or necessity, but like Thoreau, they find the experience changes them immeasurably. Many also only live temporarily in their tiny houses, but the lessons learned stay with them for the long term – like Thoreau continuing his voluntary simplicity for the remainder of his life – the positive sustainable behaviours of tiny house dwellers continues long after they left their tiny house (Saxton, 2019).

Living in a tiny house with kids stretches you and teaches you lessons you’d never known without the experience. It teaches you to be creative with space and play. Our bed doubled as the lounge, change table and play area. It had its challenges for sure but it definitely drew our family together
(Megan, ex tiny house dweller)

**Conclusion**

So ends our examination of the relationship between Thoreau’s living experiment at Walden Pond and the contemporary tiny house movement. Or does this examination, by its very nature, have no end? After all, living a life of ‘simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust,’ involves solving ‘some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically also’ (270). And this is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing creative process. Our review has left much unsaid, necessarily, and perhaps the discussion has raised more questions than it has answered. But perhaps that is how Thoreau would have wanted it. He was not interested in giving us detailed instructions on how to live a simpler life; nor did he want to save us the trouble of thinking for ourselves. Rather, he wanted to stoke the fire in our souls and inspire us with ideals. ‘Don’t spend your time in drilling soldiers,’ he once wrote, ‘who may turn out hirelings after all, but give to the undrilled peasantry a country to fight for’ (see Stoller, 1957: 123).

Ever since he was a young man, Thoreau believed that the object of life was ‘something else than acquiring property’ (Stoller, 1957: 120) and that true success did not consist in ‘much money, many houses’ but in ‘trying to better [our] condition in a higher sense than this’ (ibid). He had no desire to succeed in the desperate measure of getting rich or comfortable merely. Thoreau’s life is a reminder that dedicated individuals can establish a simpler, freer way of life for themselves, by adopting a new frame of mind and acting upon it with creativity and conviction. Doing so may not be easy, of course, since it will involve moving in the opposite direction to where most of humankind is marching. But as Thoreau would say: ‘If a man [sic] does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away’ (564-5). Thoreau would also advise us not to wait for our politicians or peers to attain enlightenment before we begin our journey toward simplicity, for it might be a long time before they wake up. It seems to us that participants in the tiny house movement today are showing Thoreauvian courage.

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1. Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, page numbers next to quotes relate to *The Portable Thoreau* (1982), edited by Carl Bode. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Source unknown, attributed to Will Rogers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)