

Background and context:

The paper below is the 5th chapter of my dissertation, with no edits. Because of the lack of post-dissertation revision, I expect that there will be some things missing that would normally be included in a journal article, which is the destination for this material. For example, I have a ton of information about my respondents, methods, and so on, that is not in Chapter 5, but that will be included prior to submission. I am happy to discuss this in person, and excited to hear your ideas about what to include / not to include to strengthen the paper.

I will likely submit this to *City & Community*, which is ASAs urban sociology journal.

Thanks in advance for your feedback!

-Nik

Chapter 5 – Does the Application of Middle Class Taste to Informal Living Make Tiny Homes an Example of Gentrification?

Introduction

Most of the literature on gentrification focuses specifically on *urban* gentrification, following Ruth Glass' (1964) coining of the term to describe a host of changes underway in the postindustrial cities of the United Kingdom in the 1960s. Although scholars generally recognize gentrification as a “chaotic” process (Rose, 1984), with myriad causes and variation across context, a rough consensus exists that if two conditions are present, so is gentrification: (1) middle-class incursion into poor or working-class urban neighborhoods, (2) that leads to the displacement of the original inhabitants of the neighborhood, resulting in neighborhood turnover by social class, race, and/or ethnicity. Despite the widespread currency that this paradigmatic model of “classic” (Halle & Tiso, 2014) or “first-wave” (Hackworth & Smith, 2001) gentrification continues to have, scholars have recently argued that this type of neighborhood transition is a relatively small part of the contemporary urban landscape (Brown-Saracino, 2017; Hwang, 2016a, 2016b).

Nonetheless, the concept of gentrification retains widespread usage, and has become a stand-in for a variety of processes that contribute to place-based inequalities, segregation, and displacement. Some scholars argue that the concept is no longer that useful for studying contemporary urban life, but the decline in scholarly estimation is not matched by a similar decline in the public consciousness. Instead, gentrification has become a generalized concept, describing examples of symbolic upscaling that have little or nothing to do with the displacement of the poor and working class in urban areas. For example, one might refer to the application of high-class modes of aesthetic evaluation to “exotic” or popular cuisines as the “gentrification of food” (Gander, 2017). Or gentrification may do the work of signaling cultural appropriation

across racial and class lines, as when the phrase the “gentrification of jazz,” originally a black art form, is used to describe the appropriation of jazz into elite musical institutions by whites (S. Williams, 2014). Gentrification may even refer to a transition of political sensibilities within a community as punks, queer folks, and radicals become mainstream and conservative over time; a “Gentrification of the Mind” (Schulman, 2012).

In analogous fashion, tiny home enthusiasts are often charged with the cultural appropriation of poverty by voluntarily living in small, cramped spaces (Martinko, 2015; Ponti, 2016). According to these observers, tiny home enthusiasts cheapen or mock real experiences of material poverty, and are a form of symbolic invasion of the small living field. In this way, we may discuss the “gentrification of alternative informal living,” or attempts to apply middle class taste and aesthetics to alternative structures or habitation patterns often associated with the poor and working class. In light of these discussions, and of the obvious class privilege that most in the tiny home community enjoy despite their typically modest earnings, the issue of gentrification must be reckoned with. Are tiny homes an example of gentrification? If so, how are they similar and how are they different to other examples of gentrification throughout history? I answer these questions in this chapter in an attempt to generate insights for better understanding gentrification, tiny homes, and the housing field more generally. First, I describe how the landscape of urban gentrification has changed since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when classic gentrification was in its heyday. I do so because the affordability crises that many metropolitan areas are now experiencing have direct impact on the tiny home community as well as implications for locating tiny homes within the history of gentrification.

Supergentrification and Middle-Class Affordability

To be sure, part of the change that has occurred in post-industrial cities over the last forty years has followed the classic gentrification model; the highly educated, wealthy middle- and upper-class, the gentry, moving back to city centers from the suburbs, or from one city neighborhood to another, sometimes leading to the displacement of the poor and working class. But it is difficult to label everything that has contributed to “social upgrading” or “upscaling” *gentrification*, as sometimes happens in discussions of urban inequalities. One example of upscaling that does not fit the understanding of classic gentrification is “super-gentrification” (Lees, 2003), which occurs when even the modestly affluent middle-class is priced out of urban neighborhoods by the construction of luxury condominiums for financiers, executives, and other financial elites (Lees, 2000). Financed through massive capital investments, units in these large-scale projects are purchased by the global elite, often as investment properties or part-time residences for use when traveling. For example, the Hudson Yards development in West Chelsea, New York, among the largest housing developments in the history of the United States, boasts multiple gleaming skyscrapers full of multimillion dollar units that young artists-cum-baristas could never hope to afford. Thus, the processes that underlie the construction of the Hudson Yards bear little resemblance to those described by Ruth Glass in the 1960s, straining the utility of the original gentrification concept.

Super-gentrification is indicative of the affordability problems that now plague many metropolitan areas. Along with the poor and working class, middle class would-be residents have been pushed out of city centers, sometimes out of neighborhoods that they themselves, or others like them, gentrified in the past (Hackworth, 2007; Lloyd, 2004, 2010; Zukin, 2010). Whereas there was an enormous supply of affordable urban housing in the postwar years, on up through at least the 1980s, contemporary cities have witnessed a “middle-class decline” (Brown-Saracino,

2017) due to a “loss of middle-class neighborhoods” (Woldoff et al., 2016) and affordable rental units (JCHS, 2016). As a result, middle income people have been searching for ways to live affordably in desired cities. These include straining to achieve high-cost tenancy, often by crowding into rental units or settling for substandard accommodations (Corson, 2015; Misra, 2015; Semple, 2016).

Others in the middle class have given up on cities altogether, opting for rural or even wilderness areas, reflected by the emerging literature on rural gentrification (Phillips, 1993, 2004, 2005; Qian, He, & Liu, 2013; D. P. Smith, 2002; D. P. Smith & Phillips, 2001). In some cases, these have been back to the earth moves motivated by the high value some in the middle class place on nature, ecological preservation, and “natural” experiences (Carfagna et al., 2014). Others would very much prefer urban life, and they settle for nearby rural areas as a way to stay close enough to cities to stay abreast of economic and social opportunities but with a price tag they can afford. Flexible and remote work helps some balance a lifestyle split between their rural environs and nearby urban centers (Hwang & Lin, 2016). But the lack of affordable urban housing for the middle class has also spurred interest in a variety of alternative shelter options, including living full-time in houseboats, modified vans and buses, recreational vehicles, cabins and yurts, earthen and cob shelters, and, of course, tiny homes (Robinson, 2017; D. P. Smith, 2007).

In an attempt to answer the question of whether the emergence of the tiny home community should be considered as an episode in the long history of gentrification, I highlight three similarities and three differences between tiny homes and classic urban gentrification. In this chapter, I focus on the tiny home community, using the discussion of classic urban gentrification in Chapter 2 as a point of comparison. The similarities are that (1) the types of

people who were responsible for classic urban gentrification are very similar to tiny home enthusiasts, (2) the search for affordable housing is a primary motivator of both, and (3) both involve the application of middle-class aesthetics and taste to symbolically-stigmatized housing. The differences are related to the fact that (1) tiny homes are a largely informal housing type, which limits their market potential and restricts them to a niche position within the housing field. The “rough” and “gritty” neighborhoods that are upgraded during instances of classic gentrification may be stigmatized, but they also offer housing that fits with conventional institutions and tastes, especially after properties are rehabilitated. The informality of tiny homes (2) limits their potential to cause the physical displacement of the poor and working class and (3) limits the opportunities that large-scale capital has to generate profits from the tiny home field. As I explain, tiny home television shows have been the primary way that large-scale capital has generated profit, in contrast with the enormous and pervasive real estate implications of classic gentrification.

Ultimately, I argue that whether one views tiny homes as an episode of gentrification turns on the physical displacement of the poor and working class; if one views displacement as a necessary condition of gentrification, then tiny homes do not qualify. Whatever the opinions on that matter, I also argue that the history of gentrification, as well as other urban processes that have contributed to the middle class affordability issues in many metropolitan areas, has encouraged a nontrivial amount of middle class people to voluntarily opt for alternative informal living. Faced with a lack of autonomy in high-priced rental and housing markets, the decision to live in a van, a houseboat, a remodeled RV, or to build your own tiny home may not seem an outlandish decision, especially if it allows you to stay in a desired metropolitan area, or to retain a sense of control over your modest financial resources. I close this chapter with a summary

discussion of what we learn from the comparison of tiny homes with classic urban gentrification and some reflections on research directions moving forward.

The Tiny Home Community as the Gentrification of Alternative Informal Living?

Although with some notable differences, the story of the emergence and maturation of the tiny home community parallels the story of “classic” urban gentrification discussed in Chapter 2. Motivated by a search for affordable housing aligned with their preference for authenticity, the social and cultural specialists of the modest middle class apply their aesthetics and symbols to a low-status form of housing associated with the poor and working class, symbolically upgrading the housing along the way. Through their application of middle class aesthetics and symbols, and bolstered by their roles as “cultural producers” (Crane, 1992) and as the cultural vanguard for the broader middle class, they generate interest in this new form of housing; interest that, after the new field has been “tamed” (Hackworth & Smith, 2001), is amenable to large-scale capital investment and commodification.

Similarities between Tiny Home Enthusiasts and Early Urban Gentrifiers

Composition of Capital

Tiny home enthusiasts and the early urban gentrifiers of classic gentrification are united by a central distinguishing characteristic: they tend to have high levels of educational achievement but relatively modest incomes. In Bourdieu’s terms, their class position is characterized by a mismatch in “composition of capital” (Bourdieu, 1984), as they have abundant human and cultural capital, but limited economic capital. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of tiny home enthusiasts in my sample reported a household income of \$60,000 or less, and about 40% reported a household income of \$40,000 or less. At the same time, respondents reported high levels of educational achievement, as just under two-thirds (64%) have a Bachelor’s degree

or higher, and nearly the entire sample has attended at least some college (93%). In contrast, among the general adult population of the U.S., only about 31% of adults a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 60% at least some college or higher.¹

Some of the mismatch between education and earnings is explained by life course issues, as people are either past or have yet to reach their peak earning years. Logan, in his twenties, and engaged in a period of human capital investment, is very much interested in conventional homeownership but opted for a tiny home as a “stepping-stone” to deal with a low-earning period in his life. For others, low-earnings are likely to be a long-term condition, in part because of the selection of low-earning, but meaning-providing, occupations. Tiny homes can be a strategy to gain the financial flexibility needed to pursue risky artistic and creative endeavors, low-earning occupations such as teaching, or simply to work less. Lauren describes what she has seen in the tiny house movement, and why she wanted a cheaper house that would allow her to work less:

People want to be able to spend money in ways that they want to. ... it's people who want to pursue their passion – they want to be a painter and they can't make money at it, but this is a way they can live that enables them to live that passion. Or people who are outdoorsy who want to work less hours so they can go on more adventures. I think it's not just a financial decision, but there's a lot of financial decisions that lead you that way. Because people want to spend their money the way they want to spend it. They don't want to work all those hours to pay for something that's sort of ok, when something else offers so many other tertiary benefits besides saving money. Getting time back. There's a lot of metrics and value, and I think tiny homes let you explore those all. Whether that's relationships – I'm staying home, I chose to work less, so I can stay home and raise my kids, and focus on those relationships more. And there's plenty of people who are outdoorsy, there's plenty of people who are writers, and they want to be able to make a living doing what they want. It's getting your time back to choose how you want to spend that. And I think a lot of that is cutting those finances in some fashion or another.

¹ And these figures actually likely understate the differences since they are calculated using Census data that only considers adults aged 25 and over (to allow for time to attain degrees), whereas the results from my tiny home survey include adults aged 18-25 as well, some of whom are less likely to have completed degrees simply by virtue of their age.

The mention of artistic occupations is consistent with the occupational characteristics and cultural preferences of early migrants in the literature on urban gentrification (Lloyd, 2004; Zukin, 1982), and is reflected among the survey results for the tiny home sample. Using the Standard Occupational Classification major groups as a guideline, and adding students, the self-employed, and those who work in advocacy or as volunteers, tiny home enthusiasts who are employed are spread across 26 occupational groups. The largest concentrations of respondents are in educational occupations (12%), design, art, and media-based occupations (11%), business and finance (10%), and health care practitioners and support (combined 13% across two categories).

That the third largest concentration was among people who work in business and finance seems to counter the thesis that tiny home interest comes mostly from social and cultural specialists. However, closer inspection reveals that this latter group is less likely to actually live in a tiny house (27.78%) than are artists and designers (52.38%) or people who work in education (40.00%), and more likely to report mere interest in tiny homes. They may eventually end up living in a tiny home, but the fact that artists and designers and those employed in education are more likely to already be in a tiny home mirrors the stage model of urban gentrification in which wealthier members of the middle class (e.g., bankers, doctors, etc.) enter the field after the cultural specialists. And indeed those working in business have higher incomes than those working in education or design-based occupations. Among those working in business, only 31% of respondents earn \$50,000 or less per year, whereas 51% of those working in education and 63% of those working in design-based occupations earn \$50,000 or less.

Measuring what job respondents currently work also significantly underestimates the preference they have to work in artistic, creative, design-oriented occupations. Among those who

preferred to be employed, when asked about their ideal occupation, 26% of respondents selected artistic and design occupations. The next most-concentrated categories for ideal occupation were occupations in education (10%) and being self-employed (10%). The desire to work in artistic occupations, but needing to work elsewhere to make ends meet was a common theme in the qualitative responses. Consider the following comments from Ann Marie, in which she describes the events that preceded her decision to move into a tiny home:

I was having trouble finding my niche as an artist and working in the food industry and not being able to make ends meet month to month. And I ended up moving back home.

Ann Marie sounds like one of Lloyd's (2004) creatively-inclined baristas working to make a living in Wicker Park while also nurturing artistic passions in the neighborhood. Tiny home enthusiasts also exhibit consumption and lifestyle behaviors, and aesthetic preferences, that align with those typical of the low-economic-capital, high-cultural-capital (LECHCC) consumers I discussed in Chapter 2. I say more about this below, and return to the issue in depth in Chapter 6. For now, just as one example, environmentalism was a common theme among my respondents, echoing the finding that *high-cultural capital* consumers have adopted an "eco-habitus" that guides their consumption and lifestyle decisions (Carfagna et al., 2014). For example, 85% of respondents reported that "Environmental issues (e.g., sustainability, carbon footprint, etc.)" were at least moderately important in motivating their interest in tiny homes.² Suggesting some validity and reliability across these measures, 93% of respondents reported at least "Somewhat" agreeing with the statement "It is important to me that my home be environmentally sustainable in both construction and everyday function,"³ and 82% selected protecting the environment over economic growth when asked to choose.

² 62% reported environmental issues were either "Very" or "Extremely" important.

³ 73% said they "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."

Katie exhibits concern with reducing housing costs and strong environmental concern, both typical of LECHCC consumers, when asked about what motivated her interest in tiny homes:

I think my carbon footprint is probably [the] biggest motivating factor. Wanting to just be as environmentally-friendly as possible and do my part in the change so to speak. And so I would say that is the biggest one. But also the financial aspect is, there's no denying it. You can do a lot more living so to speak. You can travel more and experience more and spend more time just being out in nature if you don't have a large mortgage that you have to constantly keep up with and if you don't have all these financial responsibilities. There's more life to experience.

Born in a different time and place, and facing a different set of market realities, tiny home enthusiasts may have contributed to the gentrification of Wicker Park, or Soho, or Bunker Hill. Their similar socioeconomic profiles and occupational preferences suggest a set of shared experiences and predilections, additional evidence of which is presented below, including the emphasis on “authenticity” in consumption and lifestyle and a rejection of the mass market.

The Search for Affordable Housing

As Phillip Clay (1979) wrote in an early piece on urban gentrification, the fundamental need of the urban gentrifier is affordable housing. Whatever other cultural preferences exist, middle class people are drawn to poor and working class neighborhoods in large part because they lack the financial means to purchase upmarket alternatives. A similar desire for affordable housing motivates interest in tiny homes. Nearly all respondents (94%) reported that “Financial Freedom” was either “Extremely Important” or “Very Important” to motivating their interest in tiny homes, whereas only 73% said the same for consumption reduction and 65% for freedom of movement, the closest competitors. Financial freedom appears all the more crucial when the most extreme responses are separated out. Viewed that way, 81% of respondents reported that financial freedom was “Extremely Important” in motivating their interest in tiny homes, compared with 39% who said the same for freedom of movement, 38% for consumption

reduction, 36% for dissatisfaction with conventional housing, and 34% for environmental issues. In other words, tiny home enthusiasts were more than twice as likely to view the desire for financial freedom as the central motivator of their interest in tiny homes than any other factor.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

These results may reflect, in part, that financial issues are a higher-order concern than the other, “postmaterial” issues. According to theories of postmaterialism (e.g., Inglehart, 1997), people turn to lifestyle issues such as, in this case, consumption reduction or environmental protection, only after their material needs, such as the need for food and shelter, have been met. Since money income is the primary way that most households provide for themselves, it is perhaps not surprising that financial freedom is desired above other goals. However, the point stands that when asked to choose among a menu of possible responses, respondents overwhelmingly selected financial freedom, making it unlikely that these are people for whom money is no object and affordability issues unimportant. Moreover, the qualitative responses support these quantitative patterns, elucidating what respondents mean by financial freedom and illustrating a variety of reasons why they viewed tiny homes as a solution to several different types of financial problems.

Respondents often directly linked their decision to pursue tiny living with unaffordable rental and housing markets, showing how they planned to find financial freedom by reducing housing costs. For example, consider the following exchange between partners Hayley and Mark, and myself:

Author: So we talked about the environmental motivations or consumption reduction or whatever, and for other people a lot of it is also the desire to avoid taking on debt and mortgages and –

Mark: Yeah.

Hayley: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, was that a consideration as well?

Mark: That was a huge thing.

Hayley: Totally. Because that's why we were thinking about doing it when we were out in Denver because our rent was \$1,475 a month for both of us and I was not making much as a teacher. A first year teacher. I pretty much left Denver owing him money for rent, so, yeah, this is huge because also since it's not really affecting anybody else on the property, we're not paying rent. I mean, we're going to help everybody out here –

Mark: With the water and electric.

Hayley: We'll pay for water and electric.

Mark: And we put a deposit down in case we trash the property.

Hayley: But, I mean, not many people see us as an inconvenience for them... They (owners of the property where their tiny home was parked) asked for \$300 a month between the both of us.

Interviewer: So a lot cheaper than \$1,475.

Mark: Yeah!

The expensive rent they were paying in Denver, exacerbated by the low wages that come with being a new teacher, directly motivated their interest in tiny homes, which they saw as a tool to gain financial freedom. Similarly, despite a fairly high household income – \$64,000 for her and a dog – Marge, a middle-aged professional, felt she could not afford rental prices in the upstate New York metropolitan area where she lived:

...people are forced now to rent. And renting is incredibly expensive. I mean, the amount that you spend on rent for a maybe 800 square foot area is equivalent to two mortgage payments. It's ridiculous. So, it would be, the only option for people like me that I see, I have a decent income, but I'm not wealthy, and I'm single, and I'm alone and renting, I have a dog. Renting is just not a viable option, nor is a conventional home. So other than relying on my family, which my father has housing, there's really not another option for me except for a tiny home.

Marge's comments show how people may be pushed down the housing ladder in successive stages, until they reach the conclusion that an alternative solution like a tiny home is the best option for them. Later in the interview, Marge mentioned that she was formerly a homeowner, and she noted that she felt like she was "financially straining" to hold on to homeownership and that it was "so much work" for her. She might have opted to rent, but was

put off by what she perceived to be “ridiculous[ly]” high prices where she lived, as mentioned in the quote above. As a result, she moved in with her father to regain “peace of mind” and “more control over” her “personal affairs.” However, wanting her own space away from her father, and anxious to give him his privacy, she began to see tiny homes as a solution to her housing troubles.

Respondents tended to talk about rental market prices in stark terms, with multiple people describing high prices as “ridiculous,” as Marge did, saying there is “no way we could afford rent,” or lamenting “exponentially” rising prices. Reflecting deep frustrations, and perhaps media narratives, several respondents spoke of “rental crisis” where they lived. One such area is Asheville, North Carolina, as Meredith explains:

The biggest issue that Asheville is facing is affordable housing. We’re growing like crazy; it’s a popular place for tourism, and there’s a lot of retirees coming down here. So there’s less than 1% rental opportunity and what is available is usually, most people that work in the service industry are priced out of the market. But the service industry is the most important industry here because it’s what we do. So by having accessory dwelling units and things like that, that made it easier.

Although Meredith did not live in a tiny house full-time at the time I interviewed her, she joined a local tiny house association in a volunteer capacity since she viewed them as one part of a multipronged solution to the affordability issues in Asheville, along with accessory dwelling units and other types of alternative shelters. Echoing this theme, Lisa notes the difficulty of finding affordable rental units where she lives in Oregon, especially while trying to work in low-paying, meaning-providing occupations.

Well, I don’t know if you know this about Oregon, but there’s kind of a rental crisis here, so there’s not a lot of available housing and we didn’t make a lot of money and we thought this is ridiculous we shouldn’t have to be doctors or lawyers or whatever just to have a place to live. We want to be artists, we want to be writers.

Rental prices in Denver also motivated Ashley’s tiny home experience:

We rented (her and her partner) and we spent more than twice as much on rent (than for their tiny house) in Denver for four years and like a four hundred square foot space, so not much bigger than our tiny house now. And it was terribly setup – it was a really cool vintage, 1918 building –

but it was a terrible setup. So not nearly as personal, I guess, for us, as our tiny house is now. And so that was, we spent over forty six thousand dollars on rent for four years in Denver, and so we both wanted different jobs and we wanted to move and we didn't want to spend that much money on rent somewhere and not have anything to show for it.

It is possible that the nearly \$1,000 a month apartment in the “cool vintage” building was located in a gentrifying or recently gentrified neighborhood. But for Ashley it did not allow for the “personal” customization or mobility that she desired. This is an example of how urban housing and rental affordability should not be considered in a vacuum, but in relation to other demands that households consider. Ashley and her partner could technically afford their vintage apartment, perhaps even without greatly straining their finances, but in light of looming career changes and plans to move, conventional urban rental markets did not make much sense. Balancing career and lifestyle with housing and neighborhood preferences is a common feature of housing choice for those with a degree of autonomy in conventional markets, but as desirable urban areas have grown more expensive, alternative informal living has become an attractive option for some.

Respondents also viewed renting as wasteful, echoing the conventional wisdom that renting is a poor asset-building strategy, especially compared with property ownership that allows households to build equity. Respondents spoke of “throwing away” money on rent and of having “something to show for” their investment in a tiny home, rather than spending that much money on rent anyways and being left with nothing. The undesirability of renting vis-à-vis tiny homes is underscored by the modest cost of most “tinies,” despite concerns respondents voiced about the changing nature of the community and the entrance of expensive, luxury tinies into the field. 71% of respondents spent \$40,000 or less on their tiny home, which is less than the roughly forty six thousand over four years that Ashley and her partner spent on their vintage Denver apartment. Among those who built their tiny home, rather than purchased it, 84% spent less than

\$40,000, reflecting the conventional wisdom in the tiny home community that DIY “builds” are cheaper than purchasing a prebuilt or custom tiny home. Even if you assume yearly maintenance costs and an inability to sell the home when they are done inhabiting it, it might not take long to recoup the costs of the home in saved rent considering that many respondents live rent free or informally pay small amounts on land-rent.

It is still early to know whether an active, robust resale market will emerge for used tiny homes, but it is clear that some people have been able to sell the tiny homes that they build, after having lived in them for a time. One respondent even mentioned that he had his tiny home professionally appraised for tens of thousands of dollars. For those able to find a buyer, the original cost of their tiny home may appear all the less costly as weighed against conventional tenancy from which they do not financially benefit. This, of course, depends on the ability to find a low-cost plot of land to site the tiny home, which is among the central concerns of tiny home enthusiasts.

Frustration with the cost of conventional markets extended to the housing market as well, as some tiny home inhabitants would have elected to purchase a conventional home had they been able to afford it. Logan, mentioned earlier, and his partner, despite being a “young couple,” “wanted to start planning and getting serious with having assets and moving forward” with their goals, but they “couldn’t get financed for a home,” echoing the well-chronicled difficulty millennials are having affording homeownership (Demand Institute, 2014; Drew, 2015; Fisher & Gervais, 2011). Alana, for her part, thought that she would have purchased a “conventional American house” if she had been able to afford one “just to do it as a status symbol” even though she viewed large homes as wasteful.

Other respondents viewed housing market costs in relation to debt and their overall financial situation, rather than simply in terms of the absolute cost of a down payment and a mortgage. The costs of conventional homeownership were also viewed broadly, including, for instance, maintenance obligations and the difficulty of selling a home in a depressed market. After being asked if she believed she was missing out on the wealth-building opportunities of conventional homeownership, Sophia responded:

Absolutely not. I've owned two homes and sold them. And I owned a home in Montana and sold it in 2006 just before the housing market collapsed. ...I moved from Montana back to Pennsylvania for a bunch of reasons. I was able to use that money I made on the house to pay for my college 100% and live on it for two years while I finished college and went to grad school. So there was definitely that huge benefit there and at the time that was right for me and it was what I needed and it made sense. And then after I finished school I bought a house up in Northern Pennsylvania where I got a job up there. And I think if I would have maybe looked at other options then I wouldn't have bought a house but it just seemed like that's what you were supposed to do. And so that's what I did. And then when I went to sell the house to move I actually lost money because I had owned it for almost six years, and I had a good down payment when I bought it but just because the uncertainty around the housing market, the money I had to put into the house for repairs and upkeep, it just really kind of left a bad taste in my mouth for homeownership and having to take that on by myself. I'm a single mom, so it's just me. And having to spend hours of my weekend to mow the yard, to re-stain the deck, to fix all the things that need fixed, to clean the gutters, it was just not how I wanted to live my life. And when I sold that house, it was so freeing [laughs]. It was just the best feeling in the world to know I didn't have that debt anymore, I didn't have that responsibility anymore. It just opened up a lot more options for me in my career; it's more time with my kids, and I've been able to contribute to my retirement fund, to up that, pay off my car sooner. So I see that financial freedom as a much greater benefit than kind of almost being enslaved to a house that takes up all your time [laughs]. You spend all the time maintaining it, putting into it, and with just the uncertainty of the housing market it's just, to me it's not worth it.

For Sophia, the singular material desire of American society, the great carrot that is supposed to motivate workers and induce good citizenship, the suburban home on its own lot, has become a burden that she is happy to avoid, despite the fact that she benefitted financially from homeownership in the past. Perhaps in economic times that she viewed as more certain, or in an era when it is unlikely she would have been living independently as a single mother, a conventional home would have been appealing. In her current situation, she views the costs as outweighing the benefits.

Although respondents, like Sophia, did have critiques of conventional rental and housing markets, many of them would have been content to rent or buy a conventional housing product had markets provided them with something they viewed as affordable and desirable. In other words, whether perceived or real, their lack of financial resources relative to the prices for market products changed their housing calculus, and provided a large part of the motivation for an interest in the pursuit of tiny homes. Although the search for affordable housing aligns tiny home enthusiasts with classic urban gentrifiers, that alone would not qualify tiny homes as an episode of gentrification; for that, the application of middle class tastes to symbolically-stigmatized forms of shelter is also necessary.

Middle Class Aesthetics and Symbolic Upscaling

As I will explain in much greater depth in Chapter 6, as urban gentrifiers before them, my respondents draw on a consumption and lifestyle culture that is characteristic of high-cultural-capital consumers (Carfagna et al., 2014; Holt, 1998) to symbolically constitute their homes as “real” homes and themselves as “authentic” homeowners. They emphasize the *biography of production* in consumption and lifestyle, or a tendency to locate the value of consumption in the *process* that lies behind the final good or service (e.g., a home), from the raw materials stage to consumption by the end user (Currid-Halkett, 2017). And they believe in consumption carried out by an *authentic self*, aware of her own “true” needs, priorities, and passions, and symbolically distanced from the inauthentic world of commodity consumption and mass production. In both cases, the mostly LECHCC tiny home community is walking a symbolic tightrope – attempting to distinguish itself from lower-status housing and from the housing of the financial elite; a feat they are able to accomplish by emphasizing “correct” consumption and

lifestyle behaviors, arrived at through a process of personal investment, and knowledge and skills acquisition.

Responding to a question about whether it was important to build her own home, Tina offers an eloquent statement of the importance of the biography of production:

It was really important that I understood how the home was constructed, from what materials, and that my labor, and the labor of those who helped me, was embedded in the materials of my home. That felt more meaningful and more ethical for me personally.

For Tina, and for many of my other respondents, meaning and ethics are bound up in the production process, knowledge of which, and personal involvement in, are highly valued.

Although a somewhat crass comparison, one can see the distance from a standard model of commodity consumption in which decisions are made primarily on price and quality, and judgments about “embedded” labor or knowledge of the production process are subordinate, if present at all.

My respondents also hope to consume according to their most authentic selves, and the way to do that is to begin by engaging in abstract and critical reflection upon one’s consumption and lifestyle behaviors (see Holt, 1998). The inauthentic self pursues commodities, luxurious or not, spends superfluously, without thought or intention, and is supported by marketing and global capitalism, led astray in directions that do not contribute to human fulfillment or organic community. In contrast, as the following quote from Derrick suggests, “correct” consumption is rooted in authentic desires and passions, often linked to some creative, existential identity:

Yeah, well it’s [his tiny home] something I’ve always been thinking about since I was a little kid. I love Legos, and so when I was a kid I would build a little truck, and it had all my tools in the truck, and then there’d be a trailer, and that’d be extra materials, and then there’d be another trailer with a little bed, and then that’s where the little dude slept. And then you drive around and [noises] – you’re fixing stuff and building things, and then you pack it all back up. And basically what I’m saying is, my young, if young Derrick found old Derrick he’d be very happy. Got a cool truck. With my truck I can fix any problem. I’ve got all the tools, I know how to fix it all. And then hook up the trailer, got my home, and I’m gone. It’s got everything. So it’s kind of like an almost innate thing that I’ve been searching for. It’s been kind of frustrating that it’s been such a movement right now. It’s not like this is my idea, but it’s like I’ve been thinking about this a long

time, this isn't just cute for me, this is something I've been dreaming of. When I built it, I had already thought of it all.

Derrick's comments also exhibit the reaction that LECHCC consumers tend to have to perceived inauthenticity, even *within their own consumption communities*. In fact, LECHCCs are continually at the forefront of novel consumption norms; always pushing into new fields and creating new forms out of a desire to maintain the benefits that their distinctive consumption patterns yield. Knowledge of "correct" consumption practices yields no benefits – distinction, identity, sociability in alternative consumption communities – if that knowledge goes mainstream, manifested in conventional consumption behaviors. This is the source of the "hipster" (T. Frank, 1998) phenomenon.

In applying these aestheticized, intentional codes to consumption and lifestyle behaviors, the LECHCCs in the tiny home community make attempts to symbolically upscale tiny living; to turn a formerly stigmatized type of housing (i.e., living informally in small spaces) into something that is reputable and that conforms to middle class tastes. This is very similar to what the "new middle class" (Ley, 1996, 2003) did to abandoned warehouses and properties in "rough neighborhoods" during the first waves of classic gentrification in the 1960s and 1970s (Zukin, 2010). They made "junk into gold" and turned formerly stigmatized neighborhoods into attractive "spaces of consumption" that would end up luring wealthier members of the middle- and upper-classes (C. Allen, 2008; Lloyd, 2004; Zukin, 1982). The emergence of middle class consumption and lifestyle cultures in a neighborhood is a defining characteristic of gentrification, and so in that respect the development of a paradigmatically high-cultural-capital culture in the tiny home community is indicative of a gentrification-like process. In this case, though, the invasion is mostly symbolic – as in the invasion of the middle class into informal

living via structures not typically used for full-time living – rather than physical – as in entrance into a poor or working-class neighborhood.

I want to note that not everyone in the tiny home community adheres to these consumption norms (biography of production and the authentic self), but even those who do not do exist within a community defined by the symbols and meanings of the larger normative environment. In this way, the biography of production and the authentic self function as what Swidler (2013) refers to as a public or semiotic code. According to Swidler, for culture to influence action the person so influenced need not believe in the practice themselves, they need only have “knowledge of *what their actions would mean to others*” (Swidler, 2013, p. 162).

Rose, who with her husband built a self-defined “high end” tiny home, talks about how the do-it-yourself ethos dominates the cultural environment of the tiny home community:

There’s a reverse snobbery in the tiny house community that we’ve experienced. It’s a mindset of “I can build my house smaller, cheaper and using more reclaimed materials” than you can! I don’t see people who live in mobile homes saying that. Just like standard houses, there exists inexpensive, well built “no frills” tiny houses and there are tiny houses like ours that have full sized appliances, high end appointments and are more expensive. Tiny houses are usually custom built for the person buying them. This puts them in more of a “niche” market whereas, mobile homes are mass-produced with lower quality products. I’ve met snobs who live in 150 sq ft tiny houses.

Even though Rose and her husband built their home themselves, even at the pain of her husband losing three fingers in a terrible construction accident, their luxurious aesthetic did not fit with the dominant low-cost, anti-consumption norms of the tiny home community. The need to justify luxury spending only makes sense in a community dominated by an ethic of utilitarian consumption, discussed further in Chapter 6.

To return to when Derrick says he was frustrated with the tiny home community being “such a movement right now” what he was referring to is the popularity of tiny home television shows, the emergence of a nascent market for upscale tiny homes, and, generally, to the

enormous spike in popularity of the movement since the early 2010s. But despite this spike in popularity, a widespread market for tiny homes as full-time residences has yet to emerge. This marks a crucial difference, among others, between tiny homes and first-wave urban gentrification, a set of differences to which I now turn.

Differences between Tiny Homes and Classic Urban Gentrification

Informality of Tiny Homes

The fundamental difference between the emergence of tiny homes and the processes of classic urban gentrification is that tiny homes are functionally illegal⁴ in most places, if not outright banned, and are orthogonal with existing institutions in housing, finance, and regulation as a result. Thus, the current niche market is tenuous at best, and the likelihood of mainstream adoption is low. This means that tiny homes are also unlikely to lead to widespread physical displacement of the poor and working class, and that large-scale capital needs to find a different way to profit from the emergence of tiny homes as a cultural object. Another way to say this is that because tiny homes are an example of informal living, the outcomes of the process are likely to be very different from urban gentrification, which involved the rehabilitation of stigmatized spaces, yes, but legal, mainstream spaces.

Of the 147 people who responded to my survey who were living in a tiny home at the time, or who had in the past, only 1 person reported living in a space particularly intended for full-time tiny home residence (<1%). Most commonly, people lived on the land of a friend,

⁴ Tiny homes are often not outright illegal, in the form of prohibitions on houses of a certain size, though in some places they are. But even where they are technically legal, it can be difficult to build according to building codes and zoning ordinances. Just as one example, although it may be possible to demolish an already existing house and build a new, tiny house, the point of tiny houses is often to build cheaply. This also tends to rule out pouring foundations. And tiny houses as secondary units on the same property opens up a host of regulatory issues. Tiny homes on wheels face much more legal opposition than tiny homes on foundations because of their mobility and the concerns that introduces (i.e., transience, hooking up to utilities, leases, etc.).

family member, or acquaintance (54%), often in backyards or driveways, sometimes paying rent (40%), and sometimes not (14%). Others had no stable living situation (3%) or lived full-time in an RV park (14%). Only 17% lived in their home on their own land, a marked contrast with conventional homeowners. Still others had experienced several types of living situations, had lived in idiosyncratic situations such as on public lands, or had traded labor for the right to locate their tiny home on a farm or ranch (11%). One person even traded tutoring services for the right to locate their tiny home on a college campus.

The point is, because tiny homes often run afoul of building codes, zoning regulations, and neighborhood association covenants and deed restrictions, tiny homes are typically located in marginal spaces not intended for full-time residence. And the more discrete the location the better, so as not to arouse suspicion from neighbors or building inspectors. Finding these spaces can be challenging, and is one of the central concerns for people within the community. Just over half of my respondents reported concern with neighbor reactions or the legality of their home moving forward. Forced into these marginal spaces, practical issues such as parking, utilities, and privacy are abiding concerns for tiny home inhabitants, and for sympathetic governments interested in legally permitting tiny homes. For example, during a meeting I attended with an affordable housing working group in a mid-sized Midwestern city that was considering tiny home legalization, one of the main concerns was how to write codes and regulations for hooking up tiny homes on wheels to sewage and electrical systems. If tiny homes are to be located in the backyards of existing properties, who is responsible for the hook-ups? What should the legal relationship be between the owner of the conventional home and the tiny home owner? Is a foundation required? If the tiny home is not built to fire safety codes how might allowances be made? It is here that tiny homes bump up against the latent standardization that characterizes

conventional housing and regulatory institutions that are not well-equipped to deal with radically small homes, especially those on wheels.

Lauren, a prominent member of the tiny home community, illustrates the frustrating position that would-be tiny home inhabitants find themselves in, forced to interact with government officials and neighbors on their own, with little or no institutionalized assistance in navigating a path to legality:

...[W]hen I was building my tiny house I tried to be very forward with it. I went to the city, and they said there's no, there's nothing for that, there isn't anything, they didn't give an alternative. It just, you can't do that. So I did it anyways, because you can do that. And I tried to be above board on it, and I took the risk knowing that it's probable that I would be talked to down the line about not being able to live in this tiny house. And so I just took the risk, I did it. I found a place which ended up being in [city omitted] which isn't too far, probably about 8 miles from where I was. But a different jurisdiction. So I asked the neighbors, everyone was cool with it, which I knew lessened my probably of being reported, and since the issue is only an issue if it gets a complaint I was able to locate it for three and a half years. And then there ended up being a development going in across the street – it's a low-income housing development, with 50 units, in what is otherwise a residential neighborhood. And so that got a huge uproar from all the neighbors and since it was right across the street we got a lot of new faces, a lot of new people, and there's kind of this, people are more aware of what a tiny house is now so they saw it. Someone probably thought that I made the neighborhood a target even though that's ludicrous, because that development was in plans for many, many years before I even got here.

Lauren's comments also suggest that tiny homes were more acceptable to her neighbors than a development intended to explicitly address low-income housing. As I have noted elsewhere, homeowners tend to be hostile to any land-use that they perceive as damaging to the character of their neighborhood or the property values of their homes, and low-income housing proposals, as in Winnetka, IL (McCabe, 2016), often meet with fierce opposition. Tiny homes toe an interesting line in this respect because they are intended as affordable housing for most of those living in them, but they also conform to middle class aesthetics, and most inhabitants come from middle class backgrounds. In these ways, tiny homes are socially and symbolically acceptable in ways that other types of affordable housing are not. Hannah, another advocate for tiny home legalization, further illustrates this tension:

...[S]o one of the things that I was very careful not to say when I visited the city are the words affordable housing. I never uttered those words because I did not want them to equate what I was talking about with government-funded, section eight housing which a lot of the times is what city planners or zoners or anyone like that, when you say the words affordable housing, those words are loaded and they trigger a picture of something that might be draining on resources to the city. It's more of a negative connotation. ... So I never said those words and I brought lots and lots of pictures of beautiful neighborhoods and of very detailed intricate tiny homes so that they really understood that this is a choice and this is a lifestyle choice, and it's not housing built by desperate people that don't have any other way to live.

In this way, the symbolic upscaling that tiny home enthusiasts apply to their homes helps to mitigate their orthogonality with conventional institutions, giving them access to spaces where other types of affordable housing, associated with the poor and working class, would likely be resisted. Even with the benefit of these symbolic tools, tiny homes are often denied outright by hostile municipalities or neighbors, and tiny home inhabitants must reckon with the extent to which they want to press for legalization or simply "fly under the radar." Exposing oneself to the authorities by advocating for your right to legally site your tiny home is perceived as risky for some in the community who prize the freedom to build as they wish, and who are content to live in the marginal spaces they have been able to find. Others view flying under the radar as the riskier option, especially if they have some connection with their local community, such as children in local schools, which would raise the opportunity costs of being asked to leave.

Lizzy's comments illustrate this point:

Yeah, I really have enjoyed the flying under the radar portion, it's pretty good. But as a family, people often bring up child protective services, and so for me to not be living legally is always in the back of my head, my mind, concern. I don't like to worry about it or live in fear, that's why we're very much, our family is pretty much a lot in the public eye, because we want to share how awesome family style minimalism is. I think it's a very good choice, a very awesome way to raise a kid, so we advocate for that. But having it be legal and fully accepted, I want to be accepted. I want my family to be accepted as, this is, for any of this lifestyle to be considered in any way illegal is frustrating and angering, and it's very much a sign that our culture is huge, very slanted to the consumerism, I don't know, whatever. I would prefer it, and I'm happy that it's on its way to being legal, because I want to be not afraid of someone from the zoning coming along and finding that I need to change what I'm doing or whatever, have any type of issues with my family.

Regardless of which side of the legalization issue people come down on, the orthogonality of tiny homes with existing institutions is something nearly everyone in the community must reckon with in some way at some point during their tiny home journey. And because tiny homes are of dubious legality, and experience varying levels of acceptance in different communities, the prospects for the development of a mature market for tiny homes as full-time residences is dim. Even after a recent passage of a tiny home appendix in the International Residential Code, and other moves toward legalization, including in places such as Fresno, CA and Rockledge, FL, widespread legality seems unlikely because of the path dependency inherent to existing housing, financial, and regulatory institutions.

Although many tiny home enthusiasts are less interested in this option, one avenue for full legality moving forward is if tiny homes were to be accepted as accessory dwelling units (ADUs). ADUs are an attractive strategy to increase affordable housing in many areas since they require minimal capital investment or new infrastructure (Chapple et al., 2011; Wegmann & Chapple, 2014). Compared with large, multifamily developments, ADUs are more diffuse, can be sited throughout suburban neighborhoods reducing the concentration of resource demands (i.e., parking), can provide an opportunity for tenuous homeowners to supplement their household finances with rental income, and can increase social diversity in neighborhoods (e.g., young single people in neighborhoods that cater to families).

Small Chance of Displacement

Because tiny homes tend not to be concentrated in any one area, because they are often in marginal spaces, and because they are often sited in middle class suburban neighborhoods, they are unlikely to lead to the physical displacement of the poor and working class, even if a mass

market for tiny homes were to emerge. For example, consider where Nate has placed his tiny home that he lives in with his partner:

Basically, right now we're just, we're actually parked where I work. Just because we're moving out to California pretty soon so we just decided that it's easiest, and we only have the one, we only have the truck, so it's just easiest if we're here. So I'm actually literally right where I work. ... We're in an industrial area so there's not many people living next door. We're literally in a parking lot that's like 100 feet from the road. If you're driving by and you looked in you could see the house but we haven't had any problems. I work here too and they're all familiar with the house and we haven't had any issues.

Or consider Rachel, who lives off-grid in her tiny home in the middle of a vast expanse of private and public land in a rural state:

I have the best location in the entire country. I live on, it's not on my own ground, I trade some work to the ground owners for being able to park there. They have a huge property, they have their own huge house. But I'm just tucked in the woods, in a little clearing that's totally private, I've got a stream right alongside it. I have wildlife that constantly walks through the area. I live right outside two glorious, or grand, national parks. Inside millions of acres of other public grounds. It's amazing. ... I am parked in a very secluded area and they have a very large property so you can't see my house from anywhere. So, most people don't know that it's there, which prevents reaction, period. Of any kind. The few people in the area that do know I'm there have been very positive about it, they think it's great. It is definitely not a legal living situation in my county, as far as I know no one in the government knows I'm there. And in two years it hasn't become a problem.

And even when tiny home inhabitants own the land they live on, it is often in undesirable parcels, or parcels that are unfit for the construction of a conventional home, as Lizzy's quote shows:

And then we started looking for realty, more actively for the end of the last 6 months, and what we were really looking for was a...property that no one else would want. Like something that, there were a lot that we saw that didn't have utilities, didn't have a driveway, because we're adaptable, we can start with few utilities, and you know what I mean? So we don't need a full setup like already a neighborhood built in place where we just put the house up. So because of our adaptability and because we thought we wanted something that the city or the county might let us have because it's a piece of property that no one even cares about, no one is going to use it anyways, it's not functional for other people. So that's what we were looking for, plus it meant that hopefully it'd be cheaper. And as we were looking this one came into what we found was amazing because the person, it's a lakefront property, but people didn't want it because they couldn't build on it. The parcel was too small, the house has to be 25 feet from the shore and 25 feet from the road, but that left no room for the house. The property had two RVs on it in the picture, and I said how did they do that? You have to have a main home structure first, before you put on a secondary or even an RV, it's illegal. So then we found that it's too small for a house so then we thought they might kick us out and if we waited around and asked all the questions for

the city and everything we were just going to take forever and maybe miss out on this opportunity. So we made a couple of phone calls and got a couple of yes', but kind of like very tentative yes'. Yes, kind of, probably yes. We thought well we'll just do it... And we got that, they did come and take pictures and ask a couple of questions but so far we've been accepted. We did not get like a document that, what is it, a certificate of occupancy. We did not receive anything like that, but we have also not received a cease and desist. So we are kind of in a hazy point where we're, they know we're there and they've not kicked us out and we've been there for a full year.

These types of living situations are possible only because tiny homes are a niche housing product. If they ever were to achieve mainstream acceptance, especially inside town and city limits, it is likely they would need to interface with regulatory and financial institutions in a much more intensive way. This type of tiny house project is illustrated by Hannah's experience of advocating for the construction of a fully legal "pocket neighborhood" of tiny homes in her Florida town:

...[A]s it stands right now, we are iterating our site plans with the city and with the engineer. So, we have been to the city, this doesn't meet these things or these things or these things, these requirements...he has to redesign things and take it back again. And the city might say, yeah, this looks good but then the engineer and the developer might say well that's going to cost twice as much and then you're like, ok, well I don't have anything that's really marketable. And then you have to keep going around and around until you can make everyone happy. And that's the process that we're in right now.

Another factor that limits the prospects for mainstream acceptance and, thus, displacement is that part of the appeal of tiny homes for many in the movement is the very fact of their countercultural, marginal status within the housing field. Not everyone in the community holds to this aesthetic, but the DIY, artistic symbolic origins of the movement are threatened by the entrance of wealthy people creating a nascent market for luxury tiny homes. As Alana says:

...A lot of people have been purchasing their tiny homes and have encountered a lot of difficulties. A woman who came to see our tiny home...loved it so much she decided to buy one herself and it cost her a hundred thousand dollars...It is a monstrosity...and she was so unaware...if anything were to go wrong I think she would probably...want to move back into a conventional house just because she wasn't involved so much in the build process. And I think since we did it ourselves and struggled a lot but have come to a place where we understand the house completely inside and out...I think that a huge part of the tiny home movement that we've seen change is the lack of the DIY ingenuity that I think was very common in the beginning...We really thought that building it yourself is part of the process and part of the adjustment that you need to make. And it's a huge lifestyle change...So yeah, we are afraid that a lot of people are

going to do the fad thing and give up...because it's too difficult, and it is difficult. But if you ease yourself into it by building it yourself or by having a radical change in your lifestyle...then I think a lot of people would...be able to stick with it. So I think the building aspect is really important and I think might be lost in how commercial it's become.

Although the origins of the tiny home community lie in the low-cost, do-it-yourself ethos, which symbolically dominates the cultural environment, attempts have been made to commodify tiny homes and to otherwise profit from their emergence in the housing field. There are now dozens, if not hundreds, of specialized tiny home builders across the country, and a smattering of developers pursuing opportunities to build local tiny home communities. However, these remain mostly small-scale efforts, with modest capital investments and a craft model of construction wherein homes are built by contract for specific clients. With recent estimates putting the total number of tiny home dwellers nationwide near ten thousand (Jones, 2016), all of this activity does not amount to much compared with the overall housing market.

Relationship with Large-Scale Capital

Although large-scale capital has not been very active in the nascent market for tiny homes, it has still profited from their emergence through the popularity of cable television shows. At the time of writing, at least seven tiny home television shows have been active since 2014, spread across several different channels and two ownership groups. The first show, *Tiny House Nation*, aired on July 9th, 2014 on the “fyi” channel,⁵ quickly spawning two additional shows on fyi, *Tiny House World* and *Tiny House Hunting*. HGTV, the third-most watched cable channel in the United States,⁶ also entered the tiny home television business in 2014, with *Tiny House*, *Big Living* and *Tiny House Hunters*, both originally airing in December of that year. HGTV now has two additional tiny house shows – *Tiny House Builders* and *Tiny Luxury* – as

⁵ Owned by A&E Networks, a joint venture of The Walt Disney Company and Hearst Communications ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FYI_\(U.S._TV_network\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FYI_(U.S._TV_network))).

⁶ And owned by Discovery, Inc.

well as a digital series called *Trapped in a Tiny House?* in which hosts from their other shows spend a night in a tiny house. That several of these shows have lasted four years, and as many as seven seasons, and that the original shows spawned numerous spin-offs, suggests tiny homes are good for business.

That tiny homes are a niche housing product, for reasons discussed above, has not stopped large-scale capital from profiting off of the generation of value that tiny home enthusiasts created by “innovating” tiny homes. This suggests the generalizability of Zukin’s (1990) model of cultural capital in the housing field. LECHCC members of the middle class, squeezed by affordability problems, seek out low-status, low-cost housing, and modify that housing according to the aesthetics and symbols of their consumption and lifestyle culture. This leads to symbolic upscaling and the generation of latent value since the broader middle class takes its cultural cues from those with high-cultural-capital. In the case of urban gentrification, LECHCCs “tamed” (Hackworth & Smith, 2001) gritty urban neighborhoods, allowing wealthier “yuppies” to move in on a massive scale. That will likely not happen with tiny homes; instead, LECHCCs created a housing product that serves as fodder for entertainment for the broader middle class, and large-scale capital has profited from their creative act in a different way.

Discussion and Conclusion

I began this chapter by posing the question: Are tiny homes an example of gentrification? After reviewing the similarities and differences between the emergence of the tiny home community and first-wave urban gentrification, reasonable arguments can be made for and against the conceptualization of tiny homes *as gentrification*. Ultimately, I believe the issue turns on whether one views the physical displacement of the poor and the working class as a necessary condition for the application of the concept. To say “gentrification” has taken place is to suggest

a neighborhood has changed character; that it is now associated with the gentry. Otherwise, the neighborhood is perhaps transitional, or integrated, or heterogeneous. But with tiny homes there is no neighborhood whose character might change; no geographical site of contestation between the middle class on one hand, and the poor and working class on the other. In this view, informal living that is geographically dispersed may be incompatible with gentrification, lacking the anchor of a specific place to host a process of social and economic change.

In another, more symbolic, view, tiny homes may yet qualify. If one views the application of middle class aesthetics and tastes to low-status, stigmatized living patterns or spaces as the defining element of gentrification, then the conceptualization fits. Crucial in this respect is an attempt to achieve the symbolic elevation of those living patterns and spaces to middle class “respectability,” which is certainly present in the tiny home community. But in this way, tiny homes are not much different from the elevation of macaroni and cheese to high-status cuisine, or punk music to a high-status art form, which leads back to a discussion of symbolic distinction and the preservation of material inequalities through social closure. Tiny homes have a limited direct impact on material inequalities between people in different socioeconomic positions, but as part of a broader consumption and lifestyle culture repertoire, they are likely implicated in the preservation of symbolic boundaries and, thus, contribute to class privilege.

The similarities between tiny home enthusiasts and those often responsible for classic urban gentrification are numerous and striking. The motivations and socioeconomic positions of the middle class seekers of affordable, yet “authentic,” housing are similar across case, suggesting that what has changed, and what has encouraged the emergence of the tiny home community, is the context of the search. In particular, symbolically acceptable and affordable urban housing is not as plentiful as it has been over the last sixty years, especially in high-priced

metropolitan areas. With declining opportunities for middle class housing in formal markets, it should not be surprising that many have turned toward informal housing, just as the poor and working class have long done. Also, following from models of class habitus and action repertoires (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992; Swidler, 2013), it makes sense that when the turn to informal living happens, it will happen in ways that align with tastes rooted in socioeconomic position.

Setting aside, then, the issue of whether tiny homes “count” as gentrification, with respect to the housing field, what they undoubtedly are is relevant to research on the affordability troubles that the middle class is experiencing in many high-priced metropolitan areas (Woldoff et al., 2016). The middle class is an umbrella term, covering a heterogeneous group of people, and tiny homes are an example of just one reaction to affordability problems among those groups. Others include more undistinctive forms of informal living such as not leaving the family home or moving in with adult children, crowding into rental units, or moving out to cheaper rural areas and commuting long distances for work or leisure. In tiny homes there is evidence of a group of people trying to reframe the American Dream by downsizing it into a smaller alternative, rather than delaying homeownership until more prosperous economic times. In this respect, tiny homes evoke Merton’s strain theory; desirous of a valued cultural goal, but lacking the institutionalized means to achieve it, people innovate an alternative (Merton, 1938, p. 676). Should the link between the middle class and homeownership prove as tenuous as tiny home enthusiasts perceive, we might expect to find persistence in the alternative informal living field.

Future Directions

Given current economic realities, it is likely that finding affordable housing will continue to be a challenge for middle class Americans of modest financial means, even independent of

trends in rental and housing prices. To be sure, rental and housing prices matter, but if the absolute and / or relative costs of higher education, healthcare, and childcare remain high, or rise, the appeal of reducing the costs of housing, typically a household's number one expense, will remain significant. Housing has been the central part of a wealth-building strategy for the middle class since the postwar era, and most financial analysts agree it remains a sound investment strategy over the long-term. But it has become risky enough, even if only in perception, that the calculus has changed for many middle class households, especially at low-earning points of the life course. Tiny homes may turn out to be a fad, nurtured by the luxury models advertised on cable television shows, but the broader desire to reduce housing costs, to unburden oneself of one of the many financial obligations one must juggle, is likely to persist.

The study of alternative informal living, then, represents a promising direction for future research. Tiny homes, living in vans, remodeled buses or recreational vehicles, cohousing, house-sharing, informal accessory dwelling units, communal living, and any number of other types of alternative informal living might have relevance for community resilience, alternative political economy, housing justice, homelessness, housing affordability, and consumption, at the very least.

Figure 4. Common Motivations for Interest in Tiny Living



