The Tiny House Movement
Guest: Jay Shafer
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Jay Shafer of Four Lights Houses is the author of The Small House Book.

WOODS: Before we get into how you got into this, I want to make sure my listeners understand just how tiny is tiny. The house you live in right now—how many square feet are we talking about?

SHAFER: Well, the house I live in right now is palatial by the standards that I had been going by for the last decade or two because it's 500 square feet for four people. Before that I was living in 100 square feet for over a decade. I love living simply.

WOODS: I want to start with your own personal story. What would make you decide to do something like this?

SHAFER: Well, my therapist would have maybe some other answer, but I would say I just didn't want to be saddled with the burden of a 30-year mortgage and the heating bills, not to mention just the stuff and the space and the whatnot that goes along with more than one needs. So I built myself a very little house in 2000 to live in, and with my modest grocery store salary, or wages, at that time, I was able to pay it off within a year.

WOODS: What impresses me about this is that so many people looked at this and said, yeah, this is something I think I'd like to do, too. Did you expect that that would be the case?

SHAFER: Well, I was hoping it might be at least a little bit the case. I think it seems to be crazy pushing tiny houses in a country that really embraces big over everything else, but since I was really into living simply, there might be others. And it turns out that there is almost a universal appeal when it comes to very small, simple, efficient houses. If people don't think they can live in them, at least they are very interested in the idea.

WOODS: Well, I'm certainly interested in it. I don't think it's something for me, but I am very interested in it as a phenomenon.

When you say 500 square feet or 100 square feet, these aren't 500 or 100 square feet that you'd see in a typical American house. You are extremely efficient with your use of that space. Give me a couple of examples of how you're able to make the most out of what most people would consider to be an extremely small space.

SHAFER: Oh, to be honest I think it's my OCPD finally paying off. I am just really obsessive about making small spaces work. So I will sit there for literally a hundred, if not sometimes thousands of hours designing a tiny house to ensure that every inch is doing something. I guess I have a real predilection towards wanting to see meaning in everything around me. So every house has to mean something, and everything within every house I design has to mean something. And I guess it's that drive that gets makes my stuff efficient. It's just that I can't stand anything else.

WOODS: I don't know if this is in your houses or not, but I know I have seen cases in tiny houses where, well, certainly people are sleeping up in a loft, so you make use of space up in the air, but then also in the bathroom I notice that the toilet will be in the shower area, and you have a curtain that keeps the toilet from getting wet when you take a shower—that kind of thing.

SHAFER: Yeah, there are a few spots in the house that are extremely, like, they tend to be a little harder to get, or they are not very efficient in the standard American house. So if you do like what's called a wet bath, common in other countries, where the toilet is in the shower, the shower is the bathroom; then you don't have to make extra space for that. Putting the bed up, so you're using more of the vertical space and saving the horizontal space, that's great. One of my favorite things I've designed as of late is a tub that's only two feet by two and a half feet. So it's more vertical, like a Japanese-style tub, and that is really a space saver.

WOODS: When I started looking into your background before we had you on, there was one statement you made that when I heard it I said, my listeners are going to like this guy. It had to do with being allowed to live in a house of this size. You said something along the lines of: as soon as I found out I was not allowed to live in a house this small, that's when I knew I had to do it.

SHAFER: That's true. I don't play that point up very often, as often as I probably should, but you know, I probably would never have decided to live simply if it weren't for the laws that prohibit living simply in this country. When I found out the housing industry and insurance industries have created the building codes that almost every city in the nation now uses as a minimum-size standard for housing, I thought, gosh! I don't want the industry to decide how much of their product I'm going to buy. So I'm going to find some loopholes here and live very small. It's kind of like civil disobedience, but it's very comfortable civil disobedience. No tear gas. Just living simply and comfortably.

WOODS: But apparently a loophole around this is if you have wheels on the dwelling. Is that right?

SHAFER: Yeah, that's one of the easiest loopholes to find, is if you can call it an RV or a vehicle, you don't have to meet those minimum-size standards for a house.

WOODS: Even if you don't really in practice drive around with it.

SHAFER: That's true. It's not very often that I actually pull my house around. It's on wheels. In fact, most of the people I build for, and most of the people living this way, don't move their houses that often. It is just a way to accommodate the codes, just be barely legal.

WOODS: Now, you were saying that there are building codes. We are all familiar with them, and I think they have been presented to the public as codes that are meant to improve people's welfare and to prevent people from being taken advantage of, to make sure that everybody has what the industry considers to be the bare minimum that's necessary for a happy life inside a house. But as you say, and as we tend to note on this program, there seems to be a bit of a conflict of interest here between the industry and the codes. Of course, the industry would have an interest in making sure that the codes require all kinds of amenities, or in particular, large square footage, because that means they get to build more. That means they get to sell more. Do you look at it as a deliberate attempt to promote the self-interest of the industry, or do you think it's just good intentions gone awry? What do you think is going on?

SHAFER: Oh, there's probably a little bit of consciousness in it, but I don't think it's either consciously evil or not evil. It's just the way nature is. It's just a self-serving organism, and it's probably not that it's set out consciously, or maybe it is. I have no idea. But I can say that one way or the other, if you allow somebody to do something, of course, they are just going to wind up doing it. Consciously or not, these codes serve the industry, so of course, they are going to just happen. I don't know that it's a mean thing, or a money-making thing. It is ultimately, and yet, it taxes people incredibly, and 2008 was a great example of that. People cannot afford to live in more house than they're forced to live in if that's not really what they want in the first place.

WOODS: Did you in fact notice an increase in interest in tiny houses after what happened in 2008?

SHAFER: Yeah! It seems like every business was struggling, and yet our business was doing a little better at that time. Since then it's just continued to improve.

WOODS: You mentioned that you had grocery-store wages at one point, and now you're actually involved, as I understand it, in designing these houses. How did you make the transition from living in them to realizing that you had a niche here and a talent for actually designing them?

SHAFER: Well, actually the design part came first, because I was closeted in my tiny house design thing for a long time. It was one of those things that didn't really seem to serve a purpose, but it was a great way to procrastinate doing laundry or anything else. So I would design very small spaces, and then at some point I just came out and decided to make it happen

in my own life and show other people what the ideas were. So the design part was the first part, and then actually turning it into a business—I am not a business type, so that's the challenge, actually selling houses.

WOODS: But apparently you've had some success. You were on Oprah more than once. I won't give away what you told me on the phone today, but there seems to be a growing interest in what you're doing.

SHAFER: Yeah, it's growing it seems exponentially. It's like every year I think, oh, my gosh, this thing has gotten so much bigger this year than last year, because it's true. Every year it seems like more and more people are catching on to the idea. This last month or two is particularly good because it seems to be going a bit more mainstream, which is good, because it needs to get out there. There's a couple of TV shows coming out now. So people are getting the idea.

WOODS: What about the idea of using one of these, if not as your primary residence, then maybe as something you might live in when you're on vacation?

SHAFER: Yeah, a lot of people do that. I design the houses to be primary residences, but that doesn't mean that people don't buy them for other purposes. So maybe a third of the folks who buy my houses buy them as sort of a vacation home. Another third actually put them in their back yard as an extension to their existing home because they may need another bedroom because their house is too small for that extra person. The last part is the folks who live in them full time.

WOODS: I think one question that might be on people's minds is: how do you entertain when you have so little living space?

SHAFER: Well, you either live in California like I do and go outside to entertain, or you rent out the entire Holiday Inn on the weekend with all of the money you saved on a mortgage.

WOODS: (laughs) With all the money you saved on a mortgage. That is very, very good.

When you're reaching out to the general public—surely, as you say, there seems to be growing interest in this and sympathy for it, but you must run into some resistance or objections. What would be the most common reasons people say they couldn't possibly do this?

SHAFER: Well, I have been very lucky that—I haven't met with much direct resistance like from the industry or from anybody. It actually seems like maybe it's being embraced there because people see that there is a market for it. The one thing I do hear a lot, which is almost all the time is: it's a great idea, I love it, but I couldn't do it myself. One thing I would like to remind people of is that a small house is not really just the 100-square-footers I design. I design bigger ones, too, but it's just using whatever space one has very efficiently so that every inch of whatever space one occupies is actually being used. So I think it's a great idea for everybody. You just got to assess what your needs are in terms of being happy and move into the right size space instead of one that's actually guzzling a lot of your resources unnecessarily.

WOODS: When I look at a movement like the eat-local movement—local community-supported agriculture, I notice that in recent years it's no longer a homogeneous group of people who are involved. It used to be people who just happen to be, let's say, very environmentally conscious or were interested in organic produce, or meats where the animals were raised a certain way, but these days it seems like a whole bunch of people there: soccer moms are interested in it, Ron Paul libertarians are interested in it. It's a very diverse group of people. Now, what about the tiny house movement? Is this more or less a very homogeneous group, or do you find that it's all walks of life who are showing interest in it?

SHAFER: It's the most all-walks-of-life thing I've ever seen in terms of—you know, it's funny. I really expected it to be sort of a libertarian, maybe liberal, sort of clientele, but it turns out that everybody understands the basic message. It may be in a different way, so some folks—I have gotten some really interesting requests from folks: gun turrets on the roof, bulletproof walls, whatnot. So there are all sorts of different ideas for how to use a structure, but I get called by very conservative media, very liberal media, all of them in between media, and it's because their audiences apparently seem to appreciate it.

WOODS: Well, tell me: in a 100-square-foot house—I walk into that 100-square-foot house. What do I see? What's in there? What is it stocked with?

SHAFER: Well, I always try to shoot for the universal human needs because it's so hard to know what anybody in particular is going to need. So I always have some "I am going to live in the house because I'm fairly average," even though there's no real average person around. So it includes a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom, and a lot of storage. Storage is very important in a small space. Within those areas I usually include the basics that you would find in the other house, just smaller versions of them.

WOODS: Now, if we go to your website fourlightshouses.com, are we going to be able to see exteriors? Interiors? Both? of these houses?

SHAFER: You can see exteriors, interiors—anything you want, and once you're online looking at tiny house, be careful, because if you're like me, anyway, it's like addictive house porn. I can get sucked in to all sorts of websites featuring tiny house stuff.

WOODS: Well, ever since the Internet came along and you can, frankly, look inside people's houses on real estate websites. I am always so curious, that you're right, I can't keep myself from it, either.

You wrote something called *The Small House Book*. How many years ago was that?

SHAFER: I wrote that—I started that book before I even started building my first house. I started out when I lived in my test run, which was in a 100-square-foot airstream trailer out in the woods, not quite enough insulation for Iowa, but I started writing that and spent—I update it every once in a while, so I guess that work Is never quite finished, but 20 years ago I started writing about the merits of living smaller.

WOODS: So somebody reading that book is going to be reading a small house manifesto? Or is it also going to give them tips on how to live in this way?

SHAFER: I try to make it the be everything book within a small book, of course, it's small. I call it *The Small House Book*, and so it's a little bit of each. It's really mostly the manifesto, the philosophy, a little bit of a biography in there about how I got into it in my experiences, and yeah, there's a little bit about how—there's a bit in there about how to build the small house, and for that matter, how to design—everything small is in the book.

WOODS: You said at the beginning you didn't have much of a sense of business, or this isn't what you would naturally imagine yourself doing. How does a guy like that get noticed by Oprah more than once?

SHAFER: I think I've been very fortunate in stumbling upon the perfect storm in terms of media attention, because it turns out the media likes cute pictures with good stories, and small houses are perfect fodder for imagery. And there are a lot of great stories behind the small house stuff. So it's good because the message goes along with those particular personal stories.

WOODS: Are you always working on new designs for houses, or have you more or less settled on a series of templates that you're happy with?

SHAFER: I thought for sure I would be done designing houses by now, but it seems that it's never-ending, like the ideas for making an even more efficient house are just never-ending. So this year I think, ooh, I have designed a perfect house. It's the most efficient house ever, and I'm sure five years down the road, I will look back at it and think, oh, my gosh, I would have done a lot better than that, but yeah, I think it's probably a—it's just the way I love spending my time. So it's unlikely that I'll ever stop.

WOODS: Is there a part of the country where this movement seems to be most concentrated?

SHAFER: It seems like it's most popular in expensive areas, so like the two coasts: East Coast, West Coast. And any other like urban area or near an urban area. The problem with—I guess why they are probably not as popular in places where real estate isn't as expensive is because you can buy a mansion for $60,000 in an area. Why would you buy a tiny space for the same price? I know why. It's because the long-term costs are much higher on the big house. It's an easier sell where people understand the value in efficient space.