

# Little Boxes: Exploring voluntary simplicity.

🕒 July 17, 2016   📅 Sunday Talks   👤 Steff Werman, Nancy Howie



*Little Boxes: Exploring Voluntary Simplicity*

## Steff Werman & Nancy Howie

Steff Werman & Nancy Howie © 17 July 2016

[Nancy] We have spent the better part the last eight years together in little boxes. Five years ago, we lived in this little box.





*First Little Box*

Two years ago, we had moved into this little box.



*Second Little Box*

A combination of incremental shifts and major life changes led us to our latest little box. These days, we call this little box our home.



*Home*

I spent my childhood on a 44 foot sailboat with my mother, father, and sister,





*Sailboat 1*



*Sailboat 2*

so when Steff and I were throwing around ideas for our post-uni OE, spending a year in a VW camper didn't seem too much of a stretch.



*VW Camper*

We were only vaguely familiar with the idea of downsizing at the time, but we were well aware that we'd be extremely short on storage space in the van.



*short on storage space*

So although it had not initially been our intention to experiment with tiny, downsized living on our trip, we soon found that, with only a small cupboard's worth of clothing storage each, two guitars and a lot of secondhand books, we were having one of the best years of our lives.





*best years of our lives*

[Steff] As we travelled around the US and Canada, meeting new and old friends and working on permaculture designed farms, homesteads and suburban plots,



## *permaculture designed farms*

we got to know people who were living differently. It was in this context that we were first explicitly introduced to the concept of voluntary simplicity. We met people living in community, sharing land, cooperating on a neighbourhood scale in the city and suburbs, and homesteading. These people were rediscovering and disseminating food traditions and filtering out the noise and chaos of our Western cultural landscape. We were drawn to their approach because it was a practical expression of our life values.

[Nancy] Upon selling our beloved van, we returned home in 2011 with ample inspiration to begin living simply ourselves, and tried in earnest to apply some of the skills and philosophies our friends had modelled for us in North America. Although we had success in integrating a few good habits (like making a weekly batch of ricotta and learning to cook a delicious meal from scratch), we also soon found ourselves being sucked into a daily routine that didn't fit with the enlightened lifestyle we had envisioned for ourselves. Our Canadian and American friends had made this simple lifestyle thing look so seamless. Yet our new routine was largely governed by the monstrous \$410 weekly rental payments we were struggling to afford on our city apartment. The pressure of training in new skills, starting a business, and staying true to our morals while keeping up rent was immense and took its toll on us emotionally and psychologically.

[Steff] When we first moved into our small apartment, the space seemed expansive and luxurious compared with what we had adjusted to while van-dwelling. We could stand up fully while cooking in the kitchen, we didn't need to pack away our bedroom to have a living room, there was a loo and shower inside our home! It seemed like we were rattling around in the space, but as time wore on that space started to fill up. We got our belongings out of storage. And while we tried to separate the wheat from the chaff and be conscious of what we brought home, it was as though all the extra storage filled itself automatically. Once it gained momentum it was hard to stem the tide. Our belongings seemed to be breeding out of control.

[Nancy] It became clear that city living wasn't working out for us. And so, after three years, we made a quick calculation and realised that what went down the rental sinkhole in 18 months could translate to a home owned outright, debt-free, even. So in January of last year, we chose not to renew our lease, moved out of the city, and, having never constructed a thing in our lives, began the build on our tiny house.

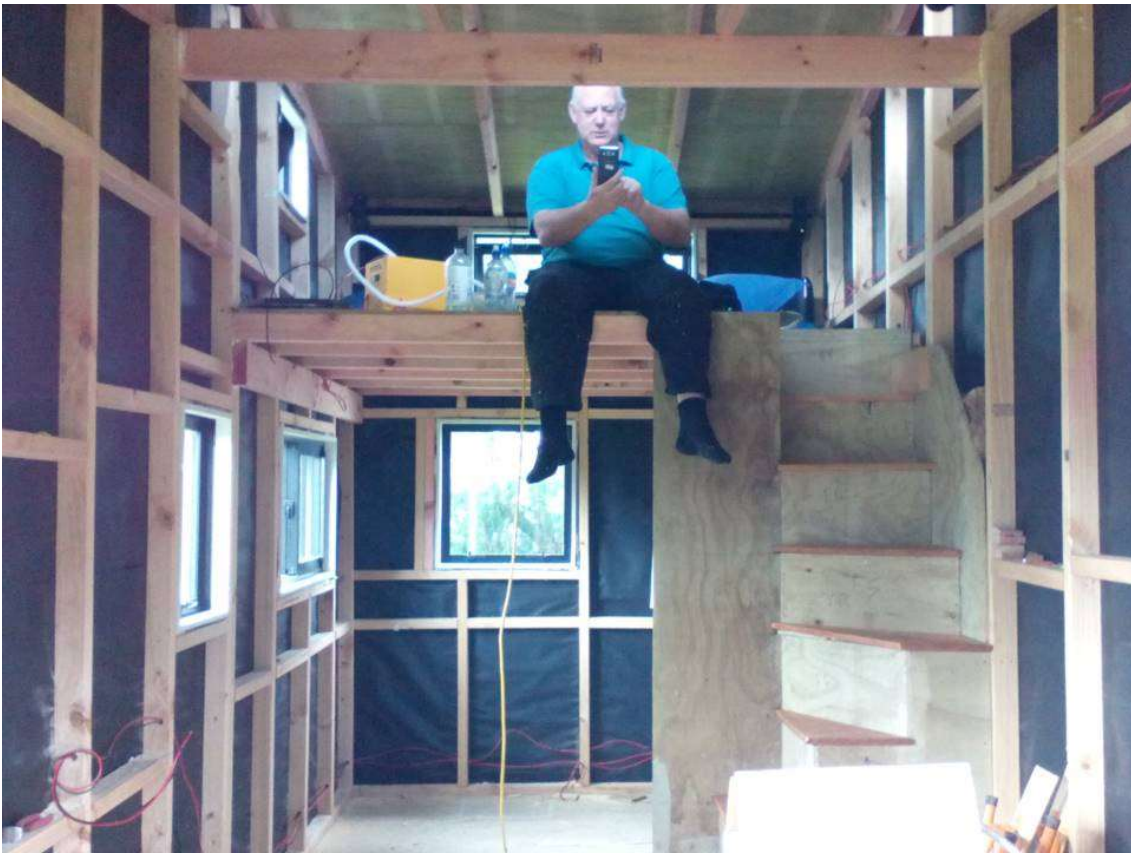




*Building a House 1*



*Building a House 2*



*Building a House 3*



*Building a House 4*



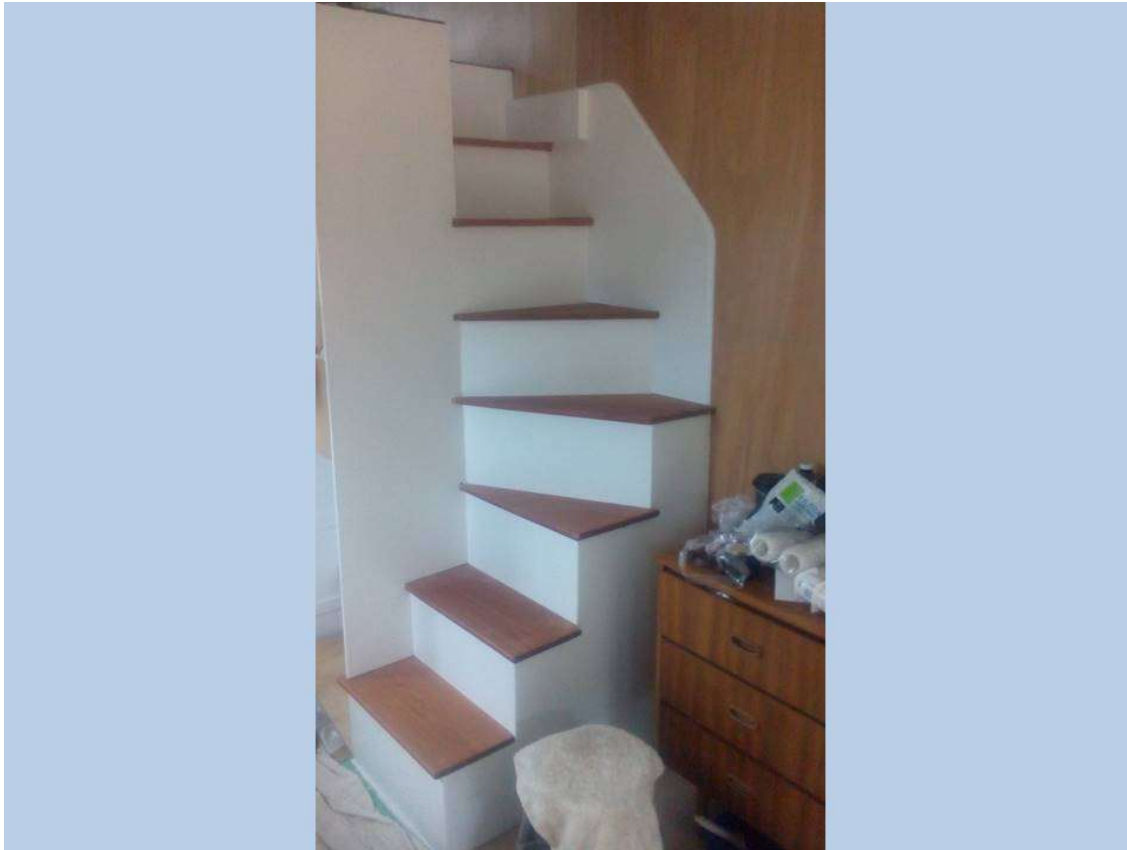


*Building a House 5*



*Building a House 6*

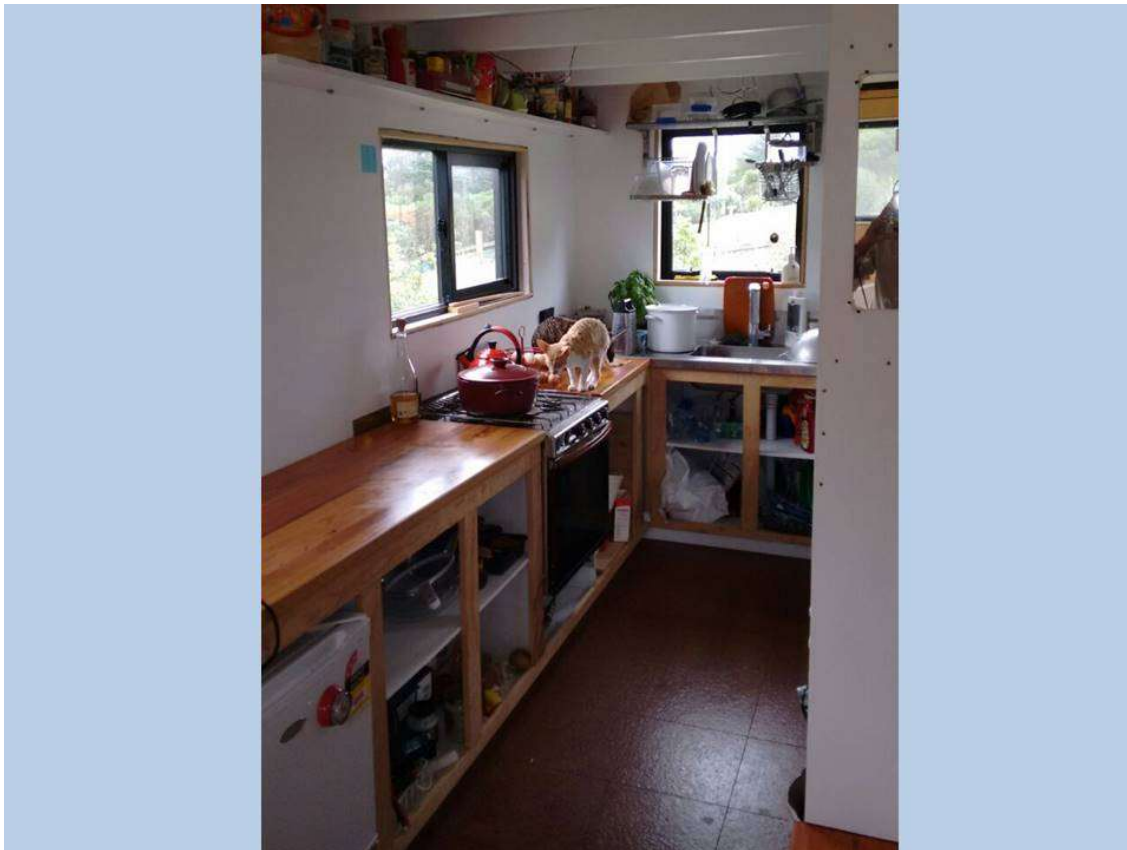
[Steff] This is our house today, not quite finished, but completely liveable. We have fewer possessions than most, we are living off the grid, and we're trying to re-establish a lifestyle in line with our ethics and living out our values in a voluntary simplicity lifestyle.



*completely liveable 1*

[Nancy] A couple of weeks ago, Clay gave us a rundown of the age of neoliberalism in which we find ourselves. "Neoliberalism reduces all values to money values. The worth of a thing is the price of the thing. The worth of a person is the wealth of the person", he told us. But as author Simon Powell states, "large groups of people, particularly the youth and the dispossessed, are challenging the status quo and looking for alternative cultural modes of being". Voluntary simplicity is one such alternative.





*completely liveable 2*

[Steff] According to The Simplicity Collective, voluntary simplicity “involves providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible, minimizing expenditure on consumer goods and services, and directing progressively more time and energy towards pursuing non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. This generally means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in exchange for more time and freedom to pursue other life goals, such as community or social engagements, more time with family, artistic or intellectual projects, more fulfilling employment, political participation, sustainable living, spiritual exploration, reading, contemplation, relaxation, pleasure-seeking, love, and so on – none of which need to rely on money, or much money...



*completely liveable 3*

It should be noted that voluntary simplicity does not, however, mean living in poverty, becoming an ascetic monk, or indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not involve regressing to a primitive state or becoming a self-righteous puritan. And it is not some escapist fad reserved for saints, hippies, or eccentric outsiders. (Although I do identify as a hippie and I identify as an eccentric outsider) Rather, advocates of simplicity suggest that... ‘the simple life’ of voluntary simplicity is about discovering the freedom and contentment that comes with knowing how much consumption is truly ‘enough.’”





*completely liveable 4*

In short, voluntary simplicity seeks to find alternatives for the ecological, economic, and emotional turbulence of our current Western paradigm.

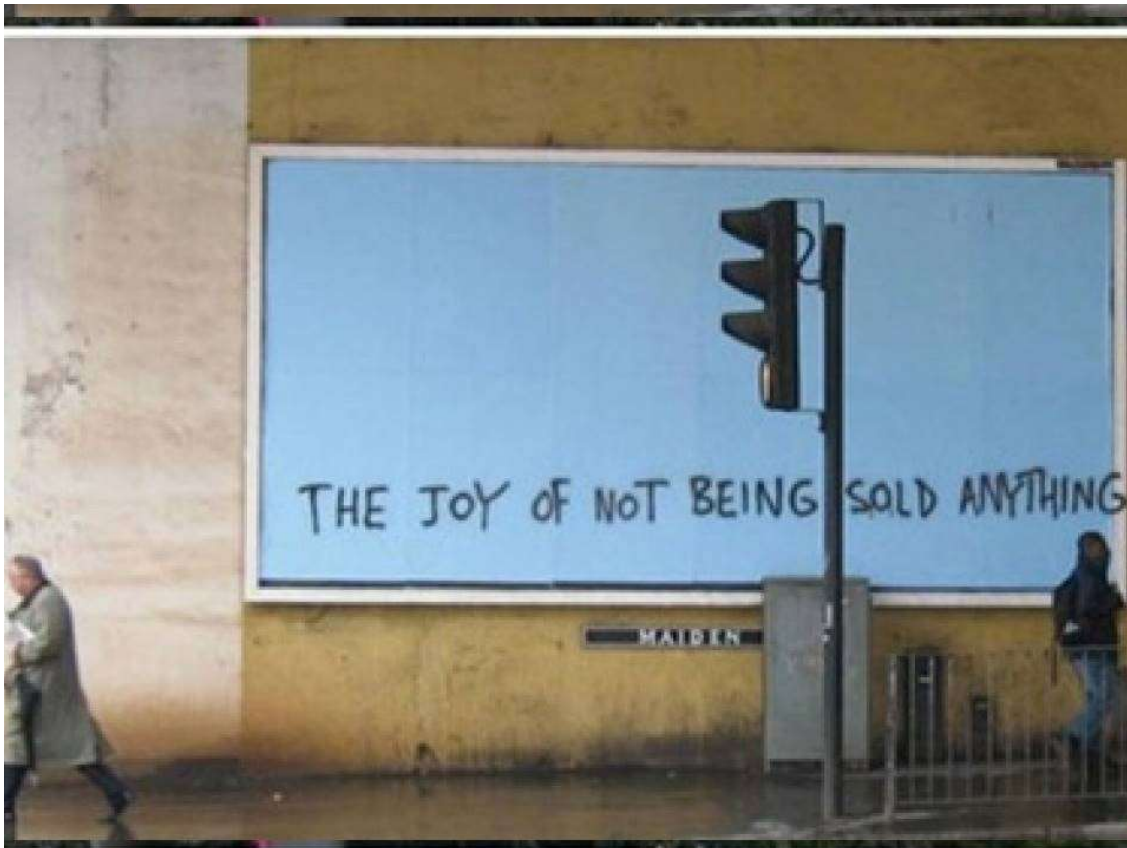
[Nancy] So where does voluntary simplicity play a part in our lives? It inspired us to learn how to build, for a start. It has also motivated us to ditch our television, mend our own clothes, begin a garden, and keep backyard chickens. This week we're getting a worm farm, in order to reduce our waste by way of composting. Living simply allows us to lead our lives more closely according to our ethical framework, indirectly and directly reducing our impact on the planet.



*completely liveable 5*

[Steff] For example, it is an active rejection of consumer culture. By virtue of the size of our home, we have a real physical limitation on what ‘stuff’ we can bring home. As a result, less “stuff” is making its way to the landfill. We got rid of our TV before we travelled in the van and never bothered to replace it – finding that instead we filled the time with reading, music, socialising, reflection, and playing games. We still watch movies and the odd show, but we are no longer exposed to the commercials. We noticed that removing this major source of direct advertising allowed its affects to wear off. Soon we weren’t craving certain products, or keeping up with what was new.





*Billboards ... made no sense to us*

Billboards and bus ads, print versions of campaigns linked to TV ads made no sense to us and they soon faded out of our awareness.

[Nancy] For us, choosing a simpler lifestyle is direct response the specific social and economic climate in which we are coming of age.

[Steff] For instance, Auckland's housing crisis: In my first year in uni, Auckland's average house price was \$400k, and over the past decade I've watched property prices slip far out of reach to over \$800k. For us, our tiny house represents the security of having our own space, affordably. We now pay a small fraction of what we paid in the city for our current ground rent. Our house also unlocks the ability to save and acts as an obvious physical reminder to live to our values. Besides, buying an \$800k starter home is just not economically viable for us right now!



*watched property prices slip far out of reach*

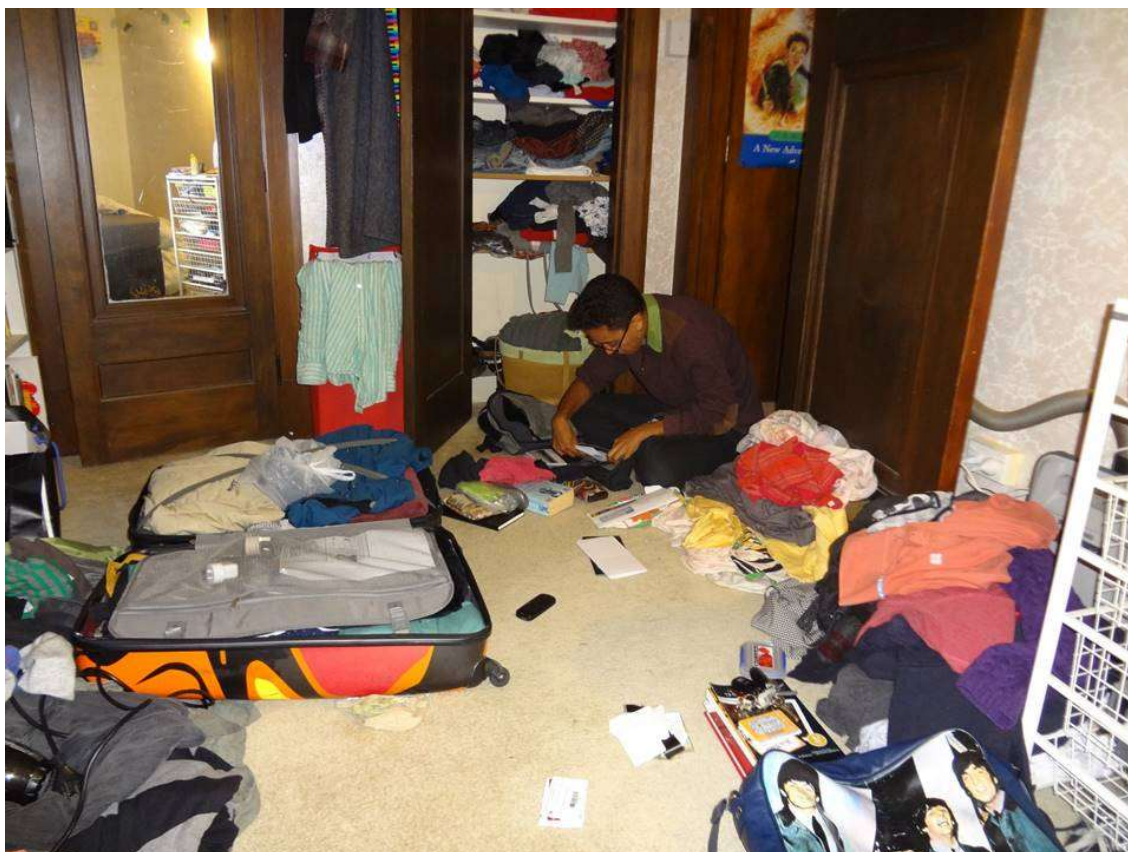
[Nancy] Finally, it's empowering to possess the skills to build a house, grow our own food, collect our own rainwater, mend our own clothes and make our own music.

It is crucial, however, that we acknowledge the place of privilege from which we have chosen to lead our life of simplicity. We had to have been born into wealthy nations with illogical consumer habits in order to make the choice to reject them. Even within those wealthy nations, obscene numbers of people have dispossession thrust upon them. Further, we are enormously privileged to have been able to take off time from work to build our home, and to have had locations to build and situate it.

It is also worth noting that voluntary simplicity is not without its challenges.

[Steff] Downsizing takes time, can be daunting, tedious and confronting and it's an ongoing process. However, not only have we not missed a thing that we've gotten rid of, we can scarcely remember what those things were. With some trial and error, we discovered that it is better to approach downsizing in small bursts and to be methodical.





*it is better to approach downsizing in small bursts and to be methodical*

We used to have this diabolical drawer in our apartment kitchen, filled with self-multiplying utensils. One day, we put them all away in a box. As we needed a mixing spoon, veg peeler, or whisk, it was returned to the drawer. Those were the tools we used. We donated the rest. This long-term approach was a much more successful strategy than the shoving-things-hastily-in-boxes method we employed as we neared our move-out day. We store our off season clothes under our couch, and at the end of each season, we get rid of things we didn't wear.

Another challenge is time. We still don't have heaps of spare time, with the standard working week plus commute that is the unfortunate norm in our modern culture. But now we are not as stressed about making ends meet and we spend our free time more productively and thoughtfully.

[Nancy] I realised at some point earlier this year that as my business has expanded, I've not had as much time to write music as I used to. However, because the pressure of our weekly rental payments has all but been removed, I found I was able to take off Friday afternoons for songwriting.

[Steff] The changes we make are incremental and inconsistent, and forming good habits takes self-discipline self-forgiveness and a sense of humour. As we learned in the flat, our North American friends didn't arrive at an idyllic lifestyle by snapping their fingers, and indeed, this oft-glorified lifestyle can be totally without glory.



*totally without glory*

Good intentions don't always line up with practical application, and sometimes we just want to watch bad movies and eat pizza.

[Nancy] We can't be fundamentalists, and there are some things we won't be sacrificing. For example, we have a huge book and vinyl collection currently stored in basement of my very tolerant parents. There's no sense in getting rid of everything that brings you joy. Our ideal future situation would include a separated office with a bookshelf or two.

The part that has not been a challenge in the least, is living in a house considered tiny by today's standards. Since we moved in in November, we have yet to even notice how small our house is, as strange as that may sound.

[Steff] Being thoughtful about how much space and resources our lifestyle takes up is not just a coping mechanism in today's society but also figures in our vision of the world to come. In this imagined future, Auckland is still populated by little boxes, but these little boxes are surrounded by chickens, unruly veggie patches, and parcels of native bush for the local fauna. There is co-housing. There is local waste recycling. There is decentralised power generation. These little boxes form part of walkable and cycleable village hubs connected by public transport. Picture strong communities, equitably sharing resources in step with the needs and limits of Earth and the web of life she hosts.





*imagined future*

[Nancy] We'd like to finish up with a song (we promise it's not "Kumbaya"). This particular song is one we've both loved for a while, but which has taken on a new meaning in light on our current living circumstances. Please sing along if you feel so inclined. This is "Our House", by Crosby Stills Nash and Young.

#### Our House

I'll light the fire, you place the flowers in the vase that you bought today.  
 Staring at the fire for hours and hours while I listen to you  
 Play your love songs all night long for me, only for me.  
 Come to me now and rest your head for just five minutes, everything is good.  
 Such a cozy room,  
 The windows are illuminated by the evening sunshine through them,  
 Fiery gems for you, only for you.  
 Our house is a very, very, very fine house with two cats in the yard,  
 Life used to be so hard,  
 Now everything is easy 'cause of you and our—  
 La, la, la  
 Our house is a very, very, very fine house with two cats in the yard,  
 Life used to be so hard,  
 Now everything is easy 'cause of you and our—  
 I'll light the fire, while you place the flowers in the vase that you bought today.



*Our House.*

## Chat with your neighbour

What aspects of your lifestyle do you think could fit under the philosophy of voluntary simplicity?

What changes could you incorporate into your lifestyle to live more simply?

*Questions.*



