

A Do you watch the *Tiny House Nation* series on TV? The latest scenario was about a man who has made his home for the last three years in a house that measures only one hundred and twelve square feet. He made the place himself in seven weeks and it cost him around twenty-five thousand dollars.

B No, I've not seen the show. It sounds a bit strange...

A I find the idea attractive - it's a form of minimalism. Haven't you asked yourself sometimes about all this clutter you have in your life and wondered if it's really necessary? Some people come to the conclusion that downsizing their living environment will free up their time, allow them to pursue their passion or spend more time with their family.

B The living room alone in my house must be one hundred and twelve square feet and we don't find it too large. Whatever could make someone want to live in such a tiny area?

A He says several reasons led to his choice. Choosing to live in this tiny house means he and his friend aren't locked into the rent or the mortgage scenario. By choosing this lifestyle you avoid getting trapped in the machine. The whole series is fascinating - a large number of Americans are reluctant to participate in the consumer society, they're serious about scaling back, moving into smaller size homes, getting rid of what's superfluous.

B Hmm, I very much doubt whether many Americans will take the home downsizing route, unless they're absolutely forced to because of money problems.

A Well, I think a good many Americans find inspiration in the American author Henry David Thoreau, one of the founders of modern-day environmentalism. Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods* recounts the two years he spent at Walden Pond in the tiny house he built for himself. He sought to abandon waste and illusion to discover life's true essential needs. He said he didn't want to discover when he came to die that he hadn't lived. He didn't wish to live what was not life.

B Well, I'd tend to agree with John Updike who said *Walden* had become a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business mind-set, and risks being as revered and unread as the Bible. In any case, I don't see many Americans choosing to move into tiny houses. The size of new houses shrank in the aftermath of the Great Recession, but the median square footage of homes built in the US last year was over two thousand four hundred square feet. That's nearly one thousand square feet larger than the median home built in 1992.

A I think a lot of people want to scale back because they're worried about the negative environmental consequences of our runaway consumer society.

B But big is beautiful, that's the typically American way of seeing things. The bigger the better. Just consider the size of some American corporations, the food companies for instance, like Kellogg's with sales of over fourteen billion dollars, or Kraft Foods Group with sales of eighteen billion dollars. ..

A But these giants have clay feet! During the most recent quarter, North American revenues for Kellogg's cereals and other morning foods fell seven point seven per cent. and Kraft Foods reported a six point six per cent sales decline for meals and desserts. The days are gone when Americans could be counted on to stock up with processed food brands advertised on television.

B Much of that's the consequence of stagnating middle-class wages - those consumers prefer to buy private-label brands. And lower-income Americans now buy at bare-bones retailers.

A What's happening in fact is that the younger generation are more aware of health and environmental issues so they're rejecting the convenience food their parents consumed and they're shaking up the food industry. This generation is demanding products that are rich in protein or antioxidants, low in salt, sugar or fat, free of artificial flavours, synthetic colouring and preservatives, genetically modified organisms, and all the other ingredients that aren't good for your health. They want to know how their food is being made and who is making it. The food companies whose market share is growing today are the small even tiny firms who listen to them and supply what they're asking for.

Outline

The first speaker claims that a large number of Americans are moving into smaller size homes and getting rid of what is superfluous, because they are convinced that downsizing their living environment will allow them to pursue their passion or spend more time with their family. The second speaker points out that the median square footage of homes built in the US in 2014 was nearly one thousand square feet larger than the median home built in 1992: the typically American way of seeing things is "big is beautiful". The first speaker counters that large American corporations like Kellogg's and Kraft Foods Group are being successfully challenged by small food companies who listen to the younger generation and supply what they ask for.

Questions

- 1 Is there a tendency for Europeans to scale back?
- 2 How big does your home need to be for you to live happily in it?
- 3 Do you know any people whose everyday behaviour is determined by their concern for the environment?
- 4 Is the younger generation in Europe calling for products and services that are different from what their parents called for?