

a semester into the exploration of micromobility:

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Preliminary Skepticism

I will admit, that at the beginning of this exploration into the world of micromobility that I found myself a bit apprehensive on the subject. It was not that I was nervous about what I would find or learn from the subject, but I was nervous about my preconceived opinions with the subject matter. It is no secret that a large percentage of the population associate the idea of living in a mobile or recreational vehicle to be aligned with certain stigmas or negative views. In his book, *Galloping Bungalows*, David A. Thornburg begins by summing up this notion fairly accurately stating:

“We Americans are obsessed with freedom: the mere mention of the word makes us want to start singing songs and waving flags or gun barrels around. But the plain fact is, any time one of our neighbors actually begins to get a little freedom-begins to rise up out of the flock and flap a tentative wing- it first makes us nervous, and then jealous, and finally angry.”

There is no arguing with this idea either. It is in our nature to look differently at those who live in a way unlike our own. Perhaps this is where my apprehension was rooted, but it was definitely where my exploration stemmed from. At first, I began to research the topic under the lens of why? Why were people choosing to live permanently in this way physically, and psychologically? As the semester progressed however; it became clear as to why one would opt to live

this way and my study switched to how they were living this way.

Before the Organized Study

I had begun this study of both micromobile architecture and microarchitecture early on, writing a written statement of intent to perform continual research on the subject for entry into the integrated Post-Professional Masters of Architecture program at Penn State. I knew certain directions that I wanted to take with the material, understanding American's obsession with the material and the more minimalist lifestyle that living permanently in one of these dwellings would have to account for. I questioned why and how someone would deal with this physically, psychologically (with a particular focus under the umbrella of the Oneiric), and socially. To me, these three areas were key for answering the question as to why people would choose this lifestyle- largely inquiring design considerations, practicality, efficiency, and sustainability. [ref:Exploration of Microarchitecture]

Early Group Exploration

This may be obvious then, as to why I chose to focus my semester searching to answer the question: Why Micromobility? Working alongside three other students and being lightly guided by our professor, Rebecca Henn, we

each chose topics to explore that included technology, style and design, marine micromobility, finances, and real world examples and situations. Through participating in weekly roundtable discussions and posting bi-weekly individual blog posts on our site, sites.psu.edu/micromobility, we began the basis of our research.

To understand why, I first set out to gain some understanding through a general history of micromobility by reading James B. Twitchell's book, *Winnebago Nation*. He suggested that a principle reason behind a life of being mobile was purely due to human nature. We were meant to be mobile living statically is a relatively modern idea. This notion can be traced back to examples like families making the long trek in the American covered wagon during the movement towards the west frontier and also English Romanticism. During the English Romantic, the wealthy would participate in vacationing to the countryside in vehicles that were more or less packable and moveable bedrooms. It was elitist camping, and a fad that has both swelled and died as the less affluent either began to catch on or lose interest. It is an idea closely aligned with patterns of classes in the growth or decline of suburban sprawl versus city living. Regardless, it was clear that being mobile represented freedom- not tied down to a particular place, time, or obligation. [ref: *Westward Ho the Wagon*].

Community Redefined

Another thing that I gained from reading *Winnebago Nation* is the questioning of what we consider to be a community. We have a long withstanding idea of the word as being a group of people, living in close proximity statically alongside one another but it is not limited to this. A community can be formed by those sharing a

similar interest, and they can exist without boundaries. Twitchell explains how micromobile dwellers, or RVers in particular, are all members of consumption communities, but by sharing affiliations either physically or in mindset they form groupings on their own. Many of those who choose to live this life of micromobility are either searching for a sense of community or find themselves tied to one. Across the country, groups and communities have been formed:

- Temporarily through organizations that come together on the basis of vehicle type or mobile club membership
- Through affiliations with a particular religion, sexual orientation, or interests
- Permanently through established campgrounds, parks, or neighborhoods
- Even more mobile through cyber-communities on the internet

Regardless of type, it was made evident that these full-time dwellers are looking to engage in some sort of community and have found themselves successfully doing so. [ref: *A Sense of Community*]

The Interest in Mobility Continues

A factor that was discussed in *Winnebago*, was also reinforced in *Galloping Bungalows*- that no matter what, these dwellings and vehicles were interesting in and of themselves. We discussed a lot about the style of these units and how we see them as either ugly, or sleek, or cool but as Thornburg explains:

"Where was the magic in these little boxes? Part of it lay in their very miniaturization, in what may be called the doll house effect. Any small copy of a familiar object has a fascination all its own: models of ships and trains and cars and airplanes, museum dioramas, toy soldiers, architects' models, midgets, babies, Statue of Liberty Models, shrunken heads. Small may or may not be beautiful, but it is always and inherently interesting."

Early on in the 1920's and 30's, trailer and mobile dwelling displays were the highlight of

fairs and displays. No matter what the outside looked like, people were enthralled with the idea of seeing their way of living being shrunk down to the parameters of a house on wheels. Everything had purpose, it was minimalist but it held all of the essentials of living. I began to consider the pure interest in aesthetic and simple style of living to be a major factor as to why people would live in this way.

Thornburg, a personal full-time occupant in micromobile vehicles speaks almost as a personal advocate for living this lifestyle, and carries a "Why not?" live like this attitude throughout his book. He expresses his father's interest in the ability to pick up and move towards warmer weather whenever they wanted, the positive proximity of family that the parameters provide, and the exciting idea that no day on the road is ever the same. His arguments are compelling as he expressed the ideal living in the parks or on the road and the sense of adventure associated with all of it.

He also conversed of the negative stigmas associated with this type of living as it was still not found to be overly popular within the common society. As expressed in the introduction, Americans are typically overwhelmed when they see a group of their counterparts tackling a decision to change the way that they normally live. At the height of trailer dwelling, in the transitory period of the 40's and 50's before the age of television- society saw it as a break from tradition. People scathed at the dwellers who would wear t-shirts and shorts, hang their laundry outside, or prefer a life of seeming confinement over one with a static home and yard.

With all of the bad came the good of micromobile living and it was becoming clearer at this

point, through research and discussion, why people may choose to live like this. Logistics, such as satisfying physiological needs were slowly being figured out, and I soon turned towards figuring out how people were living like this.

The Jump from Micro to Macro(mobility)

Our study group spent a lot of time focusing on how people can afford to live mobile, full-time. We determined that the largest portion of the mobile populations were inevitably retirees and that they were probably living on savings, not worried about working. One of our group-mates analyzed the cost of living for an average user but we still questioned how younger people, those living and working on the road were able to do this. It was at this point that I decided to zoom out and observe trends of the workforce across the country to begin an analysis of how and where people working in general.

This lead me to a few articles published in the New York Times. The first two analyzed trends in the workplace geographically. It appeared that it is no longer the definite trend for people to move towards the San Francisco, New York, or Washington D.C., but rather to cities like Denver, San Diego, or Philadelphia. Not only that, but people are moving towards these cities and jobs appear to be following the people. That does not mean that the workforce is mobile however; in fact it is less mobile than ever before.

My initial assumption was that most people working and living on the road were doing something accessible from anywhere, and made possible through the use of the internet. This assumption ended up being more or less true but another New York Times article expressed how the internet was affecting the

workforce overall. It stated that the Internet is the reason why the workforce is no longer as mobile as it used to be. The internet provides job security where you don't have to blindly move to a place anymore and there is job security guaranteed before you move.

This is contradictory to our nature the article, *Why Are American's Staying Put?*, expresses as being one with economic mobility and geographic mobility being closely linked for much of our American History." Because of this, I began to think that micromobile living full time made sense. The internet could guarantee job security for the permanent dwellers while on the road while living nomadic and in impermanent locations simultaneously. [ref:Forces Driving (micro)Mobility]

Back to Mobile Through the Modern Age

I had now found reasons supporting why and how people were able to live like this but was not convinced enough-still searching for specific examples of people living like this. We had been searching in books and blogs of full-time RVers over the course of the semester but we had not yet looked into the most popular blogging and sharing site for our generation: Reddit. It was here that I found a page, *Go RVing*, where strangers were posting about full-time mobile living issues, stories of their experiences, sharing advice, or posting external links of articles related to micromobile living. [ref:Go RVing]

It was from Reddit, that I found specific examples of families actually living like this. There were people like:

-Tim and Amanda Watson, a couple in their 30's who had been living in their 25' Airstream and traveling since June of 2012. They can afford to live like this by being web developers and writing for travel websites.

-Pippi Peterson who hosts a YouTube advice channel for sharing her experiences and advice for full-time living in an RV. She makes a living performing various tasks for strangers, workcamping, or web-designing while on the road.

-The Kellogg Family, a family of fourteen who live fully on the road supported by the father, Dan, working as a software developer. [ref: People are Actually Doing This]

All of these people were actually living like this and they were not alone. There were tons of examples of families, couples, singles, and recent retirees posting about their experiences. I had mentioned earlier the sense of community that people search for when living mobile. Well, this interconnected group of people sharing advice, lending a hand, sharing stories, and living similarly seems like a fairly stable community to me.

The Good, the Bad, and the End Result

The experience that we had diving into this subject matter resulted in mostly positive findings. But, for all of the pros there were also a ton of cons associated with this way of living and online communities were fairly eager to share them.

A common con expressed on the internet is the maintenance that comes with living in a mobile vehicle. For a dwelling that is in constant use and motion, there is a lot of upkeep that comes with it. A user must know simple maintenance tactics, how to deal with a lack of extra space, be proactive with keeping clutter to a minimum, and to get used to the lack of privacy associated with living in such a confined space.

Of course, the cons also have tremendous benefits pros to counteract them. Living in a micromobile vehicle provides freedom. Freedom from clutter, from many of the stresses of common life, and the freedom to go wherever and whenever. Being able to live and work

while on the road provides tremendous travel opportunities and the chance to experience them with close loved ones and friends or completely on your own. [ref:Varying Pro's and Con's]

This preliminary exploration into the world of micromobility slaughtered my ignorant preconceived opinions and apprehension of the subject material. It provided the openness to explore information that interested us individually while collectively being able to benefit the group's understanding of the topic as a whole. The roundtable discussions and loose structuring of the class format helped to guide the investigation towards positive and well-rounded results. In terms of continuing the research on the topic, examining the material through the lens of a particular type of person could aid in a more direct and guided synthesis of the material. Personally it has motivated me to continue research, not directly related, but more towards the psychological relationships related to architecture. I will also look towards adopting a more Thornburg-like approach to a topic and look at everything less as why?, and more towards why not? ■

Sources:

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[ref:<https://sites.psu.edu/micromobility/category/projects/why-micromobility/>]

- Westward Ho the Wagon
- A Sense of Community
- Forces Driving (micro)Mobility
- Go RVing
- Varying Pro's and Con's
- People are Actually Doing This