

Living small, dreaming big

An ethnographic research on the meaning of living in a small alternative house in the Netherlands.



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Master thesis, Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship
Utrecht University 2018-2019
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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of tiny houses and how a choice for living in a small alternative house can stand for a bigger idea about the current society. It starts with the challenging road to building and designing your own house, which is often quite a challenge. In addition to this, it is also necessary to find a location for this new home. This is equally difficult as a result of the strict housing rules and lack of space in the Netherlands. Once the house is designed, built and placed, life in and around it is very different from the mainstream. The basic facilities influence the life of the residents and they have to adjust their consumer behaviour and habits to the small space of the house. Living in a small alternative house often means living and working together in a community, but that collaboration does not always go as smoothly as one would hope. Members of a community can give each other a hard time. To conclude, it is explored how those three aspects of living in small alternative houses correspond with the ideas of an environmental movement.

Keywords: material culture; materialism; community; environmental movement; tiny houses; small alternative houses

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Foreword

I was sitting in my student room trying to come up with a subject for my thesis. I was looking around and trying to think of a topic that would interest and inspire me to dive into the subject and write about it for more than half a year. I got distracted by my own interior and all the memories and stories that the objects bring to me. I started thinking of a better way to furnish or decorate my room. This is how I came upon the subject of houses. Not the average ones, because I had seen so many of them already. Instead, I wanted to meet people that are living in their personal dream houses that somehow differ from most houses in the Netherlands. I wanted to visit them and talk to them about why they chose their houses and why they cared for them in a certain way. I then thought of small alternative houses. Those might be interesting to see! And throughout this process I was not disappointed. It was inspiring to see all the little homes and to hear the stories of the houses and their owners. For that, and for their time and passion for the subject, I want to thank all of my informants. I also want to thank my supervisor, Roos Keja, who always stayed positive and motivating.

Introduction

‘I always wanted to live in a small cosy house. While searching online I found pictures of tiny houses in America. This was exactly what I wanted: it was sustainable, back to basics, it was affordable and I could live with others in a community of tiny houses. It was all I had ever dreamed of.’¹ Marjolein Jonker started realizing her dream house in 2015. As one of the first tiny house builders and owners of a tiny house in the Netherlands, she was part of a new phenomenon: not much information was available to her. She had to figure out how to design and build a tiny house, and on top of that she had to find a legal place to stay. In 2016 she achieved her dream and placed her own tiny house on a piece of ground in Alkmaar with a permit for five years.

Marjolein Jonker is seen as the tiny house pioneer of the Netherlands. At the moment, she has lived in her tiny house for three years and spreads her story to everyone who wants to listen. I listened to her story in Leusden at a lecture in the local library. It was the second lecture she gave there. The previous one had been sold out so quickly that a second lecture was scheduled so that more people would have the opportunity to attend. The lecture was crowded with many interested people from Leusden and neighbouring villages attending. After the lecture she asked the audience whether they would want to live in a tiny house as well, but she made the question specific: are there people that want to achieve this within three years? Seven people out of fifty confirm and three different people explain they have already founded initiative groups of five to twenty-three people, all living in or around Leusden.

The enthusiasm for living in a small house is not specific to this particular town. There is a lot of attention for living smaller and owning less stuff (Visser 2019). Our economy is based on growth and people are used to the idea of wanting more and more in various aspects of their lives: they desire a growing amount of money, they want a better car, more clothes or better looking furniture, and last but not least a bigger and better looking houses (Vail 2016, 360). To achieve all this growth and to be able to consume more and more, people have to work more in order to earn more money. However, some people disagree with this way of living and decide it is enough: they do not want to work that hard to earn money for things they do not really need. They decide they do not want to have an ever-growing list of possessions, but choose to own less. This idea of decreasing the amount of your possessions is

¹26 March 2019. Lecture ‘Lezing: Tiny Houses’ in the library of Leusden.

becoming a wide-spread phenomenon in the western society. There are all kind of books, blogs, series and documentaries telling us how to throw away our possessions and keeping us away from buying goods. One example is the popularity of Marie Kondo's books 'The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying' and 'Spark Joy', in which she describes how to go through your stuff systematically and only keep the things which give you a spark of joy. She is well-known and even has her own Netflix series. Another famous book is 'Stuffocation' by James Wallman. He talks about how we ruin our planet and lives with our all-you-can-get consumption. He argues that we should focus less on possessions and more on experiences. In addition to these books there are also numerous articles and documentaries about living with less. There are even organisations which help you to tidy up your house. Marjolein Jonker and the other people I have met during my research have also implemented the idea of having less stuff, but they took it even further and chose to live in a smaller house. They argue that you do not need that much space in a house to have a good and fulfilling life. They are part of a growing amount of people who are following this trend of living smaller in a tiny house or another small alternative house (Van Orden 2018, 17). Since this is quite a recent phenomenon there has been a lot of media attention, but academic research is still lacking. The research that has been done is carried out in different disciplines, such as law (Tweehuysen 2017), urban planning (Schneider 2017) or engineering (Verhoeven 2019). In the Netherlands they are often done by bachelor or master students, as the research of Verhoeven and Schneider.

Research question

This study is an addition to this quite unknown phenomenon in the literature. It contributes to an understanding of this new idea about living in smaller spaces. I use an anthropological lens to look at how people in the Netherlands live in a small alternative house and what it means for them. The aim of this research is to find out what attracts people to living small and what it actually means to live in a small alternative house. This research will explain more about the life in a small alternative house by answering the following research question; 'What does it mean to live in a small alternative house in the Netherlands in everyday experiences and perceptions of the owners?' This research question will be answered by answering three subsidiary questions;

- What is the everyday experience of people living in a small alternative house in the Netherlands?
- What does the life in a small alternative house mean for the owners?
- What do owners of a small alternative house think of the current society and what alternatives do they want to show to others?

In this thesis I will discuss my findings from fieldwork and I will relate my findings to some anthropological debates. To understand the life in a small alternative house and to find out what this life consists of I use some of the data from the human relation with materials and the story of materials itself. Material culture and materialism are the guidelines to understand the lifestyle in a small alternative house. Material culture tells us that every object has its own history as an object of itself or as part of a category of objects (Appadurai 1986, 34; Kopytoff 1986, 66). In material culture, a thing or a house is more than a static product. Rather, it has a story and an influence on its environment. Thus, people are influenced by their possessions and the stuff that surrounds them. A certain meaning can also be given to an object or house which is part of the idea of materialism. Materialism is about the meaning that we give to things (Cieraad 88; Dant 2005, x). The things around us reflect who we are and shape our identity. It can show your values and that you are part of a certain group of people with the same values. Some decisions for certain objects or houses are more than reflecting values: they could be part of a statement to the outside world. In this thesis I discuss whether living in a small alternative house is more than a way of life and can be considered as a statement. I relate the discussion to literature on environmental movements. An environmental movement is a critique on the current society. The people in the movement confront others by stopping their use of existing materials or habits and starting to use alternatives (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 177). I relate this to the choice to live with less possessions and in a small alternative house.

The small alternative house

Before diving deeper in the subject, it is important to discuss the definition of a small alternative house as used in this research. A small alternative house in this research is defined as a detached house with a relatively small floor surface with owners who made a conscious choice to live there. An important aspect is the conscious choice: they can afford to live in a bigger house but choose to live small. The largest houses included in this research are 70 square meters, although most of them are below 40 square meters. The smallest one is about 9

square meters. A small alternative house is an umbrella term for different types of small houses. This research includes different types of small houses: an expanded caravan, a tiny house, a log cabin, a kota (which is a small wooden house originally from Finland), a yurt (which is a Mongolian round tent), a sailboat and some self-made houses. A tiny house is the most known of them, and gets the most media attention. A tiny house is defined as a house with a maximum of 50 square meters (Small House Society 2019; Tiny House Nederland 2019a). Some definitions also add some other aspects, such as that the house functions as a full time house, is a high quality construction, is (partly) self-sufficient, stands on the ground and is built aesthetically (Van Orden 2018, 11; Tiny House Nederland 2019a). The tiny house movement can be observed in America, Europe and Japan (Van Orden 2018, 14-17). However, not everyone in a house smaller than 50 square meters has a tiny house or sees them self as a tiny house owner. There are people who live tiny all over the world, but for the purpose of this research people who are forced to live in a small house are not tiny house owners. Tiny house owners are those who live in a tiny house by their own initiative, not out of need but out of want. To make a clear division in this research, I will maintain that a tiny house is a tiny house if the owner thinks it is.

Small alternative houses can be found everywhere in the Netherlands. The (reportedly outdated) map of existing tiny houses and initiative groups on the website of Tiny House Nederland (2019b) shows how widespread tiny houses are in the Netherlands (appendix). Tiny House Nederland is an organisation specifically with information about tiny houses. They promote tiny houses and facilitate information exchange (Tiny House Nederland 2019a). However, they do not provide any information on the number of tiny houses in the Netherlands. Therefore it is also difficult to obtain information on how many alternative houses there are in general in the Netherlands. An indication of the popularity could be the Facebook group from Tiny House Nederland for people who live in a tiny house or are seriously considering it. Since January 2019 the number of members of this group has expanded from 7.500 to over 9.000 members, and the Tiny House Nederland Facebook page has almost 27.000 followers. However, a large amount of the people in the Facebook group is currently not living in a tiny house. Other small alternative houses have no specific umbrella organization with information, which makes it hard to form an image of the current situation of small alternative houses in the Netherlands. This research contributes to creating more clarity about this situation.

The informants

Once in the world of alternative living, many different projects come along. The people I visited are therefore quite diverse but they have in common that their way of living differs from the mainstream. In this part I will introduce the different houses that I visited and their owners. All the informants have anonymised names to protect their privacy. Only the place Frijlân is called by its real name. The group of people that lives there is very actively spreading a message about their lifestyle. A lot data comes from this community and to call the place by its name gives some credits to their work.

I stayed in the ecoparadise Frijlân, which is a sustainable living in the north of the Netherlands, for a week.² Their mission is to inspire people with their own ecological way of life (Frijlân 2019a). They want to become an inspiring and often visited breeding ground for permaculture, which will be explained in the last chapter. They want to implement the ideas behind permaculture on the ecological, social and economic field. The community exists of four women, Marije, Ilse, Bente and Marja and two children. At the end of my visit a fifth woman and her child were building up their place to stay there for a half year trial period. Two of the residents are living in yurts, one is living in a log cabin and one in a kota.

In addition to this stay, I visited and interviewed nine other people living in a small alternative house or something closely related to it. One of them was Mats, a tiny house builder.³ He makes tiny houses on request. He has one of the few tiny house building organizations in the Netherlands and is quite known in the tiny house world. He already made several tiny houses and he is fully booked for the coming period. I visited one of his tiny houses where Marianne lives with her husband and their six year old child.⁴ They are living in a tiny house community with four other tiny houses. I visited two other tiny house owners. One of them was Laura, a young woman in her twenties, who built her own tiny house together with her father.⁵ Her house is located in her parents' garden. She is also active in the organisation Tiny House Nederland. The last tiny house I visited was from Tijn, a man in his thirties who built the house himself.⁶ He was one of the first tiny house owners in the Netherlands. His house is located in a garden of a community house where several people live. He used to live in the community house but now has his own house in the garden,

² Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019.

³ Interview 14 April 2019

⁴ Interview A 17 April 2019

⁵ Interview B 17 April 2019

⁶ Interview 22 March 2019

although he still uses some of the community house facilities. Furthermore I visited a lecture of tiny house pioneer Marjolein Jonker, and have read blogs and articles about living in a tiny house.

I visited a group of squatters, where I spoke to Milou who is in her twenties. She built her own house from waste and discarded materials.⁷ The squatters are living on an unused field. Their stay in the field is illegal, however they are not sent away by the municipality until they have better plans for the field or when they cause a nuisance. They have to move every now and then to another place and every time they build a new home. Milou decided to make her current house on wheels so she does not need to start all over again when they are sent away.

Three of my informants are living on a campsite.⁸ It is a campsite where everyone lives permanently. This way of living is also illegal, but the campsite owner protects them from the rules of the government. Almost all of their houses started as a caravan. They expanded the caravan during their stay and transformed it into a house with a maximal surface of 70 square meters. The campsite is surrounded by forest and is situated in a natural park. I spoke to three women. Emma had only been living there for some weeks and was still building her house. She is in her forties. The other two women, Irene and Wilma, have lived there for some years. Both are around the age of sixty or seventy and live together with their husbands.

The last informant is Daan, who is in his thirties and lives on a sailboat of ten meters long.⁹ He lives in one of the three harbours in the Netherlands where permanent living is allowed. He does not know how to sail yet, but just wanted to live smaller and a sailboat was the perfect solution for him. He enjoys living in nature, between the elements. I interviewed him and the other informants and walked around their house with them and in the environment around the house to see how they live.

Research methods

Doing this research I used several different methods to collect my data. I did several interviews, using mind maps and participant observation. I also used materials and the house itself as a source of information. I did several unstructured interviews, which is an interview with some topics I want to discuss, but giving the informant the opportunity to tell their story

⁷ Interview 5 April 2019

⁸ Interviews 26 April 2019

⁹ Interview 9 May 2019

with the aspects and subjects which are important according to them (O'Reilly 2012, 120). The interviews give the informants space to share their thoughts and opinions, using their own insiders perspective without having to stick to certain questions and subjects.

Four of the informants made a mind map. In some cases it was not necessary, since people already started telling a lot, or it felt better to do an interview without a mind map. When using the mind map I asked the informant to make one centred around their life in a small alternative house. I used the mind maps because they are able to capture the individual perceptions, reflections or experiences associated with a certain topic (Wheeldon 2010, 42). Mind maps also ask for another way of thinking than a regular interview. Therefore the person will give and think of other information different from when the informants only tell their story (Wheeldon 2010, 96). The mind map can bring up subjects which otherwise would be forgotten and shows what is really important for informants. The influence from the mind map on the interview differs per interview. Two times the whole interview revolved around the mind map, using the mind map as an outline for the interview. The third one gave a good idea and jump-started the interview, but the interview itself was separated from the mind map. Another informant made a drawing, instead of a mind map. It was less comprehensive, although it gave still a good impression of how he sees his life and what he considers the most important aspects. The use of the mind map was interesting, to see how people used it in different ways and some provided a lot of insight into the subject.

In addition to the interviews and mind maps, I observed the houses and the area around the houses to get an idea about the life in a small alternative house. A room can say a lot about someone (Carsten 2018, 107). It influences the person living in it and the other way around: the person has influence on the room. Observing the room allows one to make a cultural biography of the room and its residents together (Allerton 2013, 19). A small alternative house can therefore give a lot of information about the person living in the house and what it means to live in such a house. During every visit the informant showed me the house, its surroundings and explained what the house meant for them. By doing so I was able to get an idea of how the house and its surroundings influence the persons living there. I focussed on the different facilities and what the house and its interior say about the life there.

As a last method I stayed at Frijlân for a week to experience how it is to live in a community of small alternative houses. Joining informants in their daily routine is different from interviews: you can feel it yourself and observe what they are doing (Spradley 1980, 53-54). People also sometimes act differently to what they say, or they forget to mention something because it is normal for them, while it is different, specific or important for their

lifestyle. I only stayed at Frijlân for a week, which is quite short for good fieldwork. However, it gave me a good idea about their life. Combined with the other methods and visits it gave a lot of useful information about the life in a small alternative house. Those different visits and information sources allow me to study the subject from different perspectives and make it a broad research, but it is also still specific and allows me to see the similarities between all those people living in different small alternative houses.

Thesis outline

The data collected in this research is analysed through an anthropological framework. The existing anthropological debates will be related to the data I collected in four different chapters. The first chapter is the anthropology of houses, focussing on how to achieve a small alternative house and everything that is part of the process to get their home ready to live in. The second chapter is about the inside of a small alternative house and everything people that live in a tiny house eventually possess. I will discuss the identity of the small alternative house owners from the perspectives of materials, with the view of materialism as well as material culture. The third chapter discusses the community that residents are part of, with Frijlân as example. How a community is a motivation to live there and how it can motivate people to help each other out, but at the same time how it can make life hard and make people want to go away. The last chapter shows if and how the choice for the small alternative house can be seen as part of a statement and a (sustainable) movement. It discusses what it means for people to live in a small alternative house. The thesis ends with a conclusion answering the main question and an overview of what we know and what still needs to be researched.

The road to a small alternative house

In this chapter the house and the sometimes difficult stages in achieving it will be discussed. It is about the house and what it takes to choose to live in an alternative house, how such a house is built and how to find one's way between the many rules concerning housing.

The story of a house

The story of a person is not only about the person itself, it is also about the place around them. In this case, the relevant aspect of that story is the house in which they live. A home is not only a house, it is a place with an emotional meaning (Cieraad 2010, 92). Memories are part of a place, of someone's house. They will be related to it and keep people thinking about the happiness found there or the tragedies they experienced there. A house is a home which means something special to the resident. It contains more than a passer-by sees at a visit. Not only current houses are important: also former houses influence people and their current house, especially the childhood home will remain a point of reference for the current and future houses (Cieraad 2010, 93). Current homes often reflect the childhood home in terms of the environment in which they are situated or the style in which they are furnished. Someone's first own home is probably quite small, sometimes only a student room. Current tradition in the Netherlands entails that a home is supposed to upgrade every time a person moves house (Cieraad 2010, 86). A new house often means an increased amount of space and comfort. We have more material opportunities than before including housing, comfort and the aesthetic pleasure of well-made things, some of them clearly luxury goods (Dant 2005, 12-13). The informants of this research, however, chose a different direction: they do not live in a bigger house and with more luxury goods. Instead they 'reverse' this path and start living smaller with less luxury. This decision and ideas about objects and possessions is specific to the group who is living small. They live different from the mainstream and consciously decide that they want to live differently. In addition, the materials that they use and possess and their view on materials say something about their life and identity. They say something about who they are or how they want to be seen.

Building your own house

We know Marjolein Jonker is one of them and always dreamed about a small cosy house in nature. Searching online she found out people actually live that way in tiny houses or other small houses. She started to think of making her dream reality. Before the actual building or

buying of a house, she and my other informants thought about what they expect from their future house and what it should look like. Some people had some specific wishes, like enough storage place for a surfboard, a room for a child or a place for the cat, the possibility to stand everywhere with a high ceiling, having a place for a specific bookcase or having a big enough kitchen. They had ideas about whether their house should look similar to their old home, or have a completely new style. Everyone has their own specific requirements and wishes. When planning and designing a tiny house, you have to figure out how much space you need or want to have. Tijn lives in a house of 11 square meters. He sees tiny houses as a house which is as tiny as possible but still comfortable to live in.¹⁰ What is comfortable, however, differs per person and some people need more space than others.

Some of my informants use only second-hand materials or decide to build their house themselves. A choice for material or the decision to build the house yourself are not practical decisions only. This decision can also have ideological aspects or can make a statement. According to Schlosberg and Coles (2016, 164), using local and sustainable materials or building the house yourself, are acts of individual resistance and of institutional reconstructions. Some people only work with second-hand materials, bought or found as waste. Mats, the tiny house builder, expected his clients would want to use used products because of their environmental friendly image, but to his surprise most of them wanted new materials in their new tiny house.¹¹ People asked for all kinds of things and gadgets in the house, which does not relate to sustainable building or living. This could be explained by Miller (2010, 95): he proposes that people tend to choose furniture that fits with their house. This refers to furniture from the same period or a reproduction of it. The newly built tiny houses could require new materials and furniture to fit with the new house. The clients' choice of building and material might in this case not be an act of resistance, but this could be different for the people who only use waste and second hand products to make their house. For the squatters and the people at Frijlân it is certainly a conscious environmental choice to use second hand materials: they do it with a statement.¹² Other informants who built their own house did it out of financial motivations or to challenge themselves.¹³

Building your own house is not very easy. It asks for certain skills and a good amount of motivation. The way in which a house is built has changed overtime. In medieval times the

¹⁰ Interview 22 March 2019

¹¹ Interview 14 April 2019

¹² Interview 5 April 2019 and fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019.

¹³ Interview 22 March 2019 and interview B 17 April 2019.

craftsmen used to learn by doing, rather than applying theoretical aspects (Ingold 2013, 52). They knew how building worked practically and were able to construct buildings based on their own practical experiences. This strongly contradicts to the modern-day architect, whose work is strongly rooted in theory. The architect makes a building plan, with academically learned skills. Today the architect drawings are precisely showing the whole structure and building plan. There is not much space for the craftsmen left to improvise and use their practical experiences (Ingold 2013, 55-56). The architect gives the lineaments of the structure, the builder has to unite the structure with the materials (Ingold 2013, 59). When building your own house, you are often the architect as well as the builder. Therefore, you need to make the plan, although often without academically learned skills and a builder who makes it for you. The informants who built their own house are more like the old craftsman, they learned by doing. They looked online for some theoretical information and talked with people who have more knowledge about building a house. Building a house in this manner is a matter of trying and looking if the materials fit with the plan. This requires a great deal of flexibility, as it is often necessary to change the plan throughout the process.

Before taking the step from designing the house to making it reality, many of my informants were doubting if this was really what they wanted and if their dreams would actually be possible. They searched online on forums, websites and in Facebook groups, made a mood board on Pinterest, watched building videos on YouTube, visited open days at other small alternative houses or talked to people that were already living small. Some of them decided that they did not want to do it themselves and asked a company to build their house for them. The builder of tiny houses asks for the specific requirements and builds in consultation with her or his clients. He makes a design and decides with his clients what the best options are. Other informants chose to build their own house. Most of them did not have any building experiences. They were not always confident that it would succeed, but still started the process. For example Milou, the squatter, and Laura, who lives in a tiny house.

'I did have a plan for my house, but no idea how to build it. I just started with the floor, having no idea of what the roof would look like.' - Milou¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview 5 April 2019

'At the start of the building process I told my friends I would not see them for some time, since I would need all of my free time to build my house. I told only a few people I was going to build a tiny house. My reasoning was, if I didn't tell everyone, I wouldn't have to tell them when I failed.' - Laura¹⁵

They are enterprising, creative and have the courage to start building their own house. They were insecure if it would work, but nevertheless just started. They did some preparation and at some point simply started even though they had no idea whether it would work out and if they would succeed. They worked without a good architectural plan as often used in mainstream building processes. They worked more on a trial-and-error basis. During the building they experienced all kind of problems. All the information that can be found during a preparation process is never directly applicable to your own building process. Therefore, you have to be creative and adjust it to your own situation. During the building process the design changes, as problems such as misfits need to be solved. Some have built with second hand products only, which they found online or as waste from someone else, which makes it more challenging to build according to a plan, since the design has to adjust to the kind of materials found. You need to think very practically and creatively to make a house work. For example, when Milou found some rotten places in her wall, she made a window out of it instead of fixing the wall.

Laura said if she had known in the beginning what building a house brings along and how much work it is, she would probably not have dared to do it.¹⁶ In both Milou's and Laura's case, some of their friends thought it would not be possible to build your own house, but both of them just started anyway. It is a process that includes a lot of learning by doing and things do not have to be perfect on the first try. Some things will fail, but you learn from failing and just need to start even if you are not sure whether you will make it. After the building process, almost all of my informants experienced that they were able to do more than they had initially expected. It gave them confidence to know that they were able to build their own house. The process involves a lot of hard and challenging work. This is even harder when you are only able to work on weekends or in the evenings, or like Milou in the short and cold winter days.

¹⁵ Interview B 17 April 2019

¹⁶ Interview B 17 April 2019

Once finished one might think that their house is ready and that they can live in it without problems, but it does not work that way. The idea on paper is very different from the reality of finished buildings and how they will be used (Latour and Yaneva 2008, 82). The building and designing process does not end when people start living in a house: there are still many things that turn out to work differently than expected and need to be addressed or changed. People expect that houses are first built and when they are finished people come and live in it. But that moment of shifting from building to living is not that clear as one might expect it to be (Ingold 2013, 47-48). Completion of the house does not even exist according to Ingold (2013, 48). Even when people live in it there is still work to do. Some of my informants always continue building and changing their house, improving it every time. They never think of it as finished or as the perfect house. Others only do maintenance. For example, the sailboat has to be lifted out of the water to maintain the underwater bottom of the boat and a yurt needs to be taken down every year and set it up again so that it can air out.

The people that are often working on their house share a philosophy of when you need something you can buy it with money, act as a consumer and buy what is broken, or you can make it yourself costing time instead of money. Those people building their own house are clearly choosing to invest time instead of money. They work hard to achieve something that others often buy. Most people in the Netherlands buy a house or let it be built by construction workers. Some of my respondents chose to do it themselves.

Living between the rules

The building of a house is difficult but it might be even harder to find a place for the house. Living in a tiny house is quite popular nowadays and there are a lot of initiative groups wanting to start a tiny house village (Van Orden 2018, 146). Municipalities face difficulties with these groups. There are no clear rules for tiny house villages yet and there are not many empty places to start a village (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 218; fieldnotes of Lecture in Leusden 2019). The squatters and the people living on the campsite do not wait for permission but look for a place to live illegally. They do not have permission to stay there, but their stay is tolerated. They all said they do not think it is right that their way of life is illegal;

'We [the squatters] are tolerated, but they will send us away at some point. While we live perfectly. We do everything ourselves, living very sustainably, giving no nuisance, and being self-sufficient. But the Netherlands has too many rules. Some friends went

abroad where there are fewer rules. In the Netherlands you can't even paint your window frames green. Well, maybe green, but not purple.' - Milou ¹⁷

'You need to live for yourself, in a way you feel comfortable. This is difficult in the Netherlands, which is famous for all its rules. If something goes wrong they just make a new rule. A rule from outside, that makes me unhappy. I want to listen to the rules from inside, from myself, not from outside.' - Emma ¹⁸

The Netherlands used to be one of the few countries where squatting was tolerated, but since 2010 it became illegal (Lopez 2012, 9). Milou and Emma have difficulties with the relatively new rules. They sometimes feel like they are treated as a criminal when the police of municipality are checking on them. It makes them feel unwelcome. The squatters often have to explain that they are good people, and mean to do no harm (Dee 2013, 257). They feel like they are living the perfect life, not disturbing anyone or harming the environment, but still they are illegal and have a bad image. Both the squatters and camping residents think the Netherlands has too many rules that do not correspond with the actual reality. They want to live legally, with permission, but this is impossible due to all the rules and regulations around housing. Their style of living is simply not allowed.

Some of them have experiences with being sent away. The squatters always bring the case to court, not because they have any chance to win it, but to get a little more time to stay at their place and start looking for a new place to stay. At the campsite, the campsite owner helps to protect the residents from the municipality. There are rules to ensure that people do not stay there permanently, but the campsite owner messes with the dates of presence so that it looks like the residents are staying there temporarily. A lot seems to be possible if you ask him nicely. In the beginning the camping rules need to be taken seriously, but later on one learns that the strict rules are mainly in place comply with the laws and municipality regulations. In practice, the campsite owner is not very strict in enforcing the rules. For the people that live on the campsite, their stay is now quite certain, but they keep in mind that there is always a chance that the owner will sell the campsite someday, and with a different owner the situation could change and they might have to leave.

¹⁷ Interview 5 April 2019

¹⁸ Interviews 26 April 2019

The other option, that most of my informants opted for, is to live legally, but people who choose to ask for a legal permit also face a lot of difficulties in the process of getting a place to live. There is not much space in the rules for people who want to live in an alternative house (Van Orden 2018, 149). It is difficult with all those rules and the sometimes complicated communication with the municipality to find out what is possible. After a long route they can get a piece of ground to stay on, but almost all tiny house villages are only temporary. The municipalities will only accept the houses if it is a contribution to the city and to the public interest.¹⁹ At the lecture I visited in Leusden there were already three different initiative groups who wanted to start an alternative small living community. Although the municipality counsellor was interested and open for new ideas, finding a place for one group already proved difficult, let alone three of them. Even when groups are able to find a place, there are still a lot of rules. Milou, the squatter, told me that a tiny house owner visited them once, who was quite jealous of them because they live the way he would like to live.²⁰ But in reality, he needs to confirm to all the rules. For example, for him it is not allowed to build things on the land without permission. The squatters do not have that problem: they already live illegally so they do not have any rules to adjust to and can just build and create their place in the way they want.

At Frijlân they live legally. After a lot of effort, they obtained a piece of ground from the government.²¹ They are registered as an experiment and are a sort of free state. They do not need building permits. They are allowed to use the ground in the way they want, like the squatters. As an experiment they are allowed to stay there for five years. If they are successful they will be able to get five more years. After the ten years are up, there is no space in the rules to let them stay longer. Although the residents hope the municipality will find a way to give them more years. At the moment they are happy that they got those five and maybe ten years, and do not worry about what comes next. This reality does bring them a great responsibility towards the municipality, since the municipality invested in the project and are helping Frijlân a lot. Marije, one of the residents, said that she wants to be successful in the project and show that the municipality made the right choice to trust them, so that they might invest more in them and in other alternative living projects. If they fail, the changes for similar projects in the future would decrease. She already knows how hard it is to start a successful project, since she tried permaculture and alternative projects before. They failed

¹⁹ 26 March 2019. Lecture 'Lezing: Tiny Houses' in the library of Leusden.

²⁰ Interview 5 April 2019

²¹ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

because of not getting a permit or for another reason like a group not working well together or for financial reasons. For this project, she is trying her best to make it succeed. She feels like she must make it this time.

The house itself is not a house alone, it is part of someone's history of houses. The house has a meaning to the residents. It is a house they worked hard for to achieve, through the building process or in finding a place for their house. The choice for a house different from the mainstream asks for some dedication. They have to be sure that this is the house they want and be motivated to work hard for it. Their choice may need more thoughts and considerations than buying a regular house, which indicates that this house is more special to them than a regular house, even though the latter would involve less work. This small alternative house may not be an increase in size in comparison to their previous house, but it is an increase in effort and it is closer to their dream house.

Inside a small alternative house

Once a person has a small alternative house, the next step is to move all the possessions into it. All these possessions say something about the person or persons living in the house. All the things have their own story, and people also give them a meaning. In this chapter two anthropological debates are discussed: material culture and materialism. This is followed by certain aspects of small alternative houses and how they can be seen through the lenses of these debates, namely the facilities of the houses and the process of throwing things away.

The materials

Materials influence our life. They help us achieve our goals and make us part of a society. We use things all the time; clothes to wear, pencils to write, a bicycle for transport, a phone to communicate or kitchen equipment to prepare food. All these materials which surround us, shape the world around us and enable us to do what we want or need to do (Dant 2005, x). Materials are an important part of our lives since they influence our life in many different ways. Due to materials, we can live the life that we want. Following and examining such an object can therefore tell a lot about the culture and life of people of which it is a part. Material culture is about the story of a thing, the stories of materials. It is about the information an object gives to us.

A way to understand an object is to look at its history: the history of a thing. There are two kinds of histories of things, the social history of things and the cultural history of things. A way of researching things is to look at the social history of things, which is about a certain type of product (Appadurai 1986, 34). It focusses on the large scale of one specific product and shows the longer term shifts in use or demand. It is a history of a certain type of product, which gives insight in shifts in society. The importance of a product or the design, which changes overtime, can indicate a broader change in society. The cultural history of things is about the life of a particular object (Kopytoff 1986, 66). Kopytoff speaks about the biography of a thing. A biography of a thing shows information which otherwise would be unknown. Following the life of a thing can provide a lot of information (Kopytoff 1986, 67). It shows how something goes from hand to hand, is used in multiple ways and has a different meaning for the different persons around it. An object is more than its practical function: it has a whole story to tell.

The history of things reveals that some things get a symbolic meaning. Objects are able to serve as more than their expected function: they keep memories alive (Cieraad 2010,

95). Things carry stories and memories with them and they can help one remember experiences. We even ascribe human characteristics to things (Dant 2005, 62). Objects can get attached to a place, an experience or a person. The objects are loved or hated, are used with tenderness or regularly spoken to. These are all reactions that driven by a symbolic meaning. Miller (2011, 89) therefore sees all people as museum curators, who are responsible for their possessions. We have to maintain them. People also choose what is suitable for public display, and which objects could be historical evidence for past events or evidence for taste. People decide what is displayed, what is standing where and what gets a prominent or not so prominent place.

Where material culture focuses on the story of the object, materialism is focused on the meaning people give to materials, the desire to have certain things or how valuable something is for someone. People consciously choose the things that surround them because someone's identity is shaped by material conditions (Cieraad 88; Dant 2005, x). What someone wears or has in possession is functional or symbolic, and reflects their identity and sense of who they are (Dant 2005, 62). People chose to have things and consume things that fit with their identity and their idea of life.

Appadurai (1986, 31) argues that consumption is not passive and private but is rather active, relational and social. In this sense, objects are more than just an object. A choice to have or use a certain object is not just a private choice. It has influence in how others see you and it says something about your place in society. Materials create someone's identity and can indicate if someone is part of a social group or certain social norms. Materials can also mark boundaries of certain groups (Dant 2005, 147). A choice to live in a small alternative house is not only for the self, it is a choice to belong to the group of people who live small. It puts you in an alternative living group. Thus, a choice for a particular thing says more than one might initially think.

Facilities

Choosing to live in a small alternative house community is therefore a choice with a story. The choice for the type of facilities has an influence on the life of the owners and indicates a broader choice for a certain lifestyle. The communities they live in are places of hope for a better and more sustainable life, and laboratories for alternative ways of living, with alternative and innovative facilities (Loyker and Veteto 2013, 235). They try out all kinds of new ways of living sustainably, with new and some old technologies. The small alternative houses and villages are places to experiment and to try out different facilities. One example is

the biomeiler at Frijlân.²² A biomeiler is a large amount of compost with water pipes going through the centre. The composting process produces heat. This heat is absorbed by the water in the pipes, which thus gets heated. This warm water can be used for laundry, taking showers and the heating. They have some solar panels to heat the water a little extra to get to the 64 degrees Celsius necessary to match the regulations around preventing legionella. This project is a collaboration with an organization specialized in biomeilers. This is their biggest biomeiler ever made. In a year from now, which is two years from the beginning of the project, the biomeiler will be emptied and the compost can be used for the ground. They will refill it with the compost from the toilets at Frijlân. According to one of the residents, the biomeiler is an example of combining the good from the past and the innovations from today, composting and solar panels. Visitors often say that life at Frijlân resembles a life from the past; not having much luxury and living in nature with only a certain amount of electricity. One of the residents uses this as example to show that they do not live in the past, but in a mix of the past with the present day technologies to get the best sustainable lifestyle. Their life in an ecoparadise involves trying out some new things, with the biomeiler as one of the experiments.

Living in a small alternative house asks for different facilities than living in a normal house. Some of my informants are self-sufficient, while others are not. According to Chitewere (2006, 18) living in an ecovillage involves a constant tension between living a comfortable lifestyle and protecting the environment. I suggest this could be seen in a broader context: the comfortable lifestyle is in tension with the desire to live simply and on a small scale. This desire could be motivated by an environmental perspective or ideology but it does not have to. The informants in this research are not all motivated (only) by the need to protect the environment. Some have other reasons, which will be discussed in the last chapter. Motivations aside, I did observe this seeking and compromising between the comfortable and luxurious life and the small living space with the simple life in almost all the places that I visited. For the informants, some aspects of life are not very luxurious at all, as I experienced at Frijlân;

During whole week of my stay at Frijlân it is cold and rainy. Today is the first sort of sunny day. Although it is still cold and windy, Ilse, one of the residents, and I are going to wash our hair. We ask Bente, another resident, for the shampoo. We may get

²² Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

*it from her sink in her yurt. We use a kind of natural shampoo which is biodegradable. With a towel and our shampoo we walk to the garden hose, the only water tap they have. I go first. I get my hair wet, bending forward to keep my clothes dry. The wind takes the water and despite my efforts my pants get a little wet. I turn the tap off to get the shampoo in my hair and wash it out again. The water is cold and towards the end the cold water starts to hurt. I finish quickly and am happy to start to dry my hair with the towel. It was cold but also felt nice and refreshing. Ilse is now washing her hair and she is definitely more experienced than I am. She is fast and calculates in the wind so she doesn't make her clothes wet. She says it isn't that bad. 'On cold days it is a bit harder, but still okay. It makes you tough.'*²³

The residents have showered using the garden hose since they started living there, which is about a year now. Sometimes they fill a black bag to heat the water from the sun before showering. Between showers, they use a bowl with water and a washcloth. Sometimes they 'cheat' and take an extra shower when visiting family or friends. They are still building a shower which is connected to the biomeiler. It will be ready to use in a month or so. The showering shows one of the ways life here differs from the mainstream. The less luxurious facilities influence the people that live here. Here, you only have a real shower when you are done building it yourself. It shows how the kind of facilities gives the experience of simplicity, or, as my informants call it, the 'campsite life'. It does not bother them as it is part of the life they chose to live. In the same way that materials are enabling to live your life in a certain way, as noted before, the lack of materials or to choose different, less luxurious materials also influences your life. My informants are very aware of the amount of stuff they use and how very few things you actually need. Marianne sees it as a game: she likes the satisfaction of being very efficient, for example by reusing her water multiple times.²⁴ She reuses the water from the shower for washing clothes, doing the dishes, cleaning the house and to water the plants. Although she admits it has a downside as well, if it does not rain enough and they are out of water. Marianne, her husband and child get jerry cans filled with water from friends or they ask people who come along to bring some water with them. They shower at work, at friends' houses or sneak into a campsite where they used to stay for some time to take a shower over there. Having a limited access to water and having to obtain water

²³ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

²⁴ Interview A 17 April 2019

from another place than their own house, which more of my informants need to do, gives them an acute awareness of how much water they use and need. The same goes for electricity from solar panels, which do not always provide enough energy, especially in winter times. When this happens they go to the library to charge their laptops and phones, or charge their devices at work, at a friend's place or any other place they visit during that time. As alternative to lights, they can use candles, sit outside with a campfire or just go to bed early.

Some of my informants say that they had to get used to their more basic life with less luxurious facilities, but others say it felt good and normal right from the start. They immediately adjusted to the life and its circumstances. Emma, living on the campsite, told me that she liked her life in her small house. She only dislikes the winters when the house is cold and feels small if you are inside a lot.²⁵ In the winter she does not like to be home much, she prefers to have a little more comfort then. Marianne, one of the tiny house owners, told me that she started living in her house in the winter and that she felt very tired from the building process.²⁶ She had to get used to it, especially since she spent a lot of time insight due to the season. Therefore, it felt very different to living in a mainstream house. While Daan, living on the sailboat, said that he always needed to get used to a new house when he moved, but not this time.²⁷ He immediately felt at home in his small house and the life outside which comes with it.

It probably depends on the type of person, on the conditions they come into and how it corresponds to what they expected. The step to a small alternative house is the easiest in the summertime, when one can be outside a lot. In the winter people spend more time inside and the step to a smaller house might be harder then. As noted in the previous chapter, you take your former houses with you to your new houses, especially the one from your childhood (Cieraad 2010, 93). Some informants have a longer history of living alternatively, so for them it was not that different to live in a small alternative house. Others grew up in quite some luxury or in a more mainstream home and for them it was a more difficult to get used to the new life. However, some still felt at home immediately, no matter what their history of houses was.

Some of my informants chose to have facilities with more certainty and more comfort. For them, the field of tensions between comfort and simplicity shifts more to comfort in comparison with the others. The ones who chose this uncertainty and choose to have less

²⁵ Interview 26 April 2019

²⁶ Interview A 17 April 2019

²⁷ Interview 9 May 2019

comfort, do not see it as a problem. It is a welcome challenge for them as it keeps them aware of their use of water and electricity. The lack of water or electricity also makes them creative, since they have to think of alternatives for water or electricity, to choose other activities or use the little resources available in creative and efficient ways. They adjust their life to the basic facilities and experiment with creative solutions in times of scarcity.

Process of throwing away

To fit the interior and someone's material possessions in the new small house, almost everyone has to reduce their amount of possessions. They have to rethink their relationships with materials and decide which materials are important to them and which are not as necessary as they thought. It is about materialism and which possessions are important for their identity, and which possessions can be thrown away without losing important aspects of who they are. This is not an easy task in this consumer society, knowing that never in the human history people had so many personal possessions (Arnold et al. 2012, 28). Still all of my informants have thrown stuff away before, during and after moving to a small house. It is a hard but rewarding process according to my informants.

'Every week I look at what kind of stuff I have and if there is something that I can throw away. In the beginning it was easy to throw things away, but it gets more difficult after a while. Sometimes I had to think on it for some weeks. Sometimes I regret throwing things away, but overall it is refreshing to do. It gives space. With stuff you always have the idea you have to do something with it. Having less stuff makes life clearer. It is easier to buy new things than to throw them away. It is trap. I'm happy I don't have much things and only own things I really need.' - Tijn²⁸

For everything in the house my informants think whether they really need it, if it is something special to them, something they need in their life or is part of who they are. In your life you buy a lot of things you do not actually need. In a larger house this is not very visible, but when you move to a small place you will discover how much you actually have. Some people threw away stuff according to a previously constructed plan. They read books or blogs about the different methods to do this, like the famous books of Marie Kondo or 'Stuffocation' from James Wallman. They systematically go through their stuff and only keep the things which

²⁸ Interview 22 March 2019

give them a spark of joy. Other people throw things away daily or weekly, selecting things that they can miss every time. There were also people who did it in a less structured manner, such as in an emotional mood.²⁹ Some said they sometimes felt annoyed by the things in their house and then they have a period in which they throw away many things. Laura came back home from a holiday feeling tired and with coping a jetlag.³⁰ Once she was in her room she got angry seeing all her stuff she did not need, she then filled five garbage bags before finally getting some rest. She continued the following weeks, filling more bags with stuff to throw away.

Not everything is easy to throw away. Some things are special to their owner because they carry a deeper meaning. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, a thing can be more than a thing for someone since it has memories and associations attached to it and it is a part of who someone is. This was also confirmed by my informants. I heard about some pottery made by a family member which has a symbolic meaning to that person, photo albums or someone's favourite chair which does not really fit in the house but that the owner is emotionally attached to. Some are so important or special to someone that they want to keep it even though it does not really fit in the house or they do not use it. However, some stuff that feels important could in the end be not that essential. Laura placed the things she thought she needed somewhere in a box before moving.³¹ After some time she forgot what was in there and it turned out that the objects were not as necessary or important as she thought they would be.

All my informants share a philosophy of seeing buying and having stuff as a 'trap' as it is called in the quote above. Patterson (2017, 11) acknowledges the attractive sides of buying things and how this can be difficult to resist. It is hard to find a balance between feeling the need for shopping and the negative impact of shopping on, for example, your own finance but also the pollution from making and shipping a product and bad working circumstances for the people working in the production process. Löfgren (2014, 85) has an addition to this constant battle of buying: he speaks about the constant battle of chaos and order in western homes and the material world which always takes over. He writes about people who are complaining about the materials and objects that take over the house and how they think their house is a permanent mess. People create all kind of storage places in their houses in order to create a degree of organisation for the materials that they own, so that they

²⁹ Interview B 17 April 2019; Interviews 26 April 2019

³⁰ Interview B17 April 2019

³¹ Interview B 17 April 2019

take back some control. Still, their houses are full of stuff. My informants acknowledge that it is easy to have much stuff. They continuously try to win the battle of resistance to buying new things, and try to win the battle of maintaining order in their house.

The many objects that create a mess in a house often feel quite bad to people (Arnold et al. 2012, 262). People feel like the things that surround them are accusing them in a way. They feel as if they are bad people when they see all the unused stuff that they have in their house. Löfgren (2014, 90) agrees on the existence of a feeling of being stuck with too much stuff, and proposes the idea of a constant dream or ideal objective of a cleaner or simpler house. He says people want to consume less and get rid of the many objects in the house to obtain a better organized household, in order to avoid the guilty feelings about the mess in their homes. My informants live according to that lifestyle. They agree that things are sometimes needed and that it is sometimes hard to resist buying things, but they also experience feelings of guilt when they do not use the opportunities that materials provide. According to my informants having less stuff creates a degree of freedom;

'That is also freedom, not to be stuck to products. You don't have to manage them and don't have to move them, because that is what you do with things.' - Milou³²

Löfgren (2014, 85) acknowledges that things in a house are always on the move, that this is indeed what we do with things. Milou does not want to move the things and she does not want to spend time on stuff she does not really need. She feels as if not being attached to or stuck to objects gives her freedom. She is not the only one that feels this way. Many of my informants felt more free by having less things around. They did not need to feel guilty about owning stuff they do not use and it is more difficult to make the house a mess with only a few possessions. It makes it easier to keep an overview of what you have. A less chaotic house, where you know what you have, can make someone's life feel less chaotic and can provide a feeling of control. In the house as well as in shopping places they have less of a choice overload to endure: they are not able to buy many things because it would not fit in the house. A small house with only a few things in it gives an overview of your possessions and creates awareness what you want and can have. It gives the opportunity to win the battle against stuff, to be in charge of your own home, to a good museum curator as Miller (2011, 89) calls it. It also allows one to know which possessions are important, which are part of your identity, to

³² Interview 5 April 2019

make you keep and maintain it, and which possessions are not necessary or do not have enough value to keep around.

The inside of a house says a lot of the people living there and influences the life of its residents. The materials themselves have a story, as does our relation with them. The facilities in and around the houses, their relation with stuff and the process of throwing things away are specific to the individual people in a small alternative house. They choose to live a less luxurious life than most, but their limited possessions provide them with the ability to be in charge of the things that they own and to maintain an overview over their possessions. Their house is easier to organise and to maintain in that state, and it reflects what they deem important and necessary to their lives.

Working together

Many of the people living in a small alternative house collaborate with others. They give each other advice or start a living group together. They work together and inspire each other to make their dream house come true. It is not always easy to obtain a small alternative house, but by working together you are stronger and capable of achieving more than you would individually. It can be easier to get a place with other small alternative houses than alone. However, once living in a community of small alternative houses can also provide challenges. There are different kinds of communities. Some are living closely together while others are more individualistic. In this chapter I first define what a community is. This is followed by an analysis of the community at Frijlân.

A community

There are many ideas about what a community is. A community can be based on a physical space, on common interests or social objectives (Chitwere 2006, 41). It could be a group of people in a same place or neighbourhood, but also a religious group of people or people with the same ideas or lifestyle. This could be online, like the tiny house Facebook group in which members interact a lot and share an ideology about a certain way of life, or offline through community where people meet or even live together. According to Cohen (1985, 12) only two aspects are important for a community. The group of people needs to have something in common and to be significantly distinguished from other groups of people. It is as much about inclusion and belonging to a group as it is about exclusion and being different from others. In the small alternative house communities people could form a group because of their shared interest in living smaller and simpler, or in their interests of living more environmental friendly. They distinguish themselves from others by not wanting to live or living in a 'normal' and bigger house.

The idea about a community is often that it is a unity, with similar people who work and live together easily. However, the reality is different. Stevenson (2002, 737-738) discusses there are in fact a lot of differences in personal interest, intentions and values. He therefore sees communities as the art of acting in cooperation: it is about tolerating and negotiating differences. Those differences come from bringing all sorts of people together. They have the same goal but are still different people with different social backgrounds. Working together is therefore not always easy. From the outside a community may seem united and homogenous, but in reality it is a lot more complex and often involves conflicts

and contradictions (Chitwere 2006, 51). The people in a community may share an idea or goal, but they often have different ideas about how to achieve that goal, and the precise goal can also differ. Being a community and working together therefore requires a lot of communication and compromises. How difficult it can become may depend on the kind of community, whether they need to work together a lot or live more separate lives, on the kind of people involved, and whether they have good chemistry or more conflicting relations.

Some researchers argue that a community could be understood in a broader environment of the society they are in, while other researchers think it is not realistic to say something about the society based on one community only (Kushner 1969). I believe the existence of a community says something about the society. The reason to start or be part of a community is mostly a reaction to a crisis, when something is lost or deficient (Chitwere 2006, 49). In the case of my informants it is often partly a reaction to the environmental crisis, or to the complex and demanding life within the contemporary consumer society. At the same time the individualistic society we currently have plays a role when people are more focussed on their own life and sometimes feeling a lack of belonging (Stevenson 2002, 736-737). It says something about the society, that people like my informants feel the need to form a community. They choose to live in a small alternative house, to start living more eco-friendly, to have a simpler life with likeminded people, out of dissatisfaction with their current life in the society.

This is also the idea in which ecovillages are rooted. According to Chitwere (2006, 6) the foundations of an ecovillage started in Denmark: a community living together with houses close to each other and sharing resources in order to care and repair the environment. It was presented to be a sort modern utopia where people and nature are living together, although in practice it is still a community with tensions between the residents (Chitwere 2006, 206). The idea of ecovillages is quite applicable to Frijlân. They call themselves an ecoparadise, which sounds like an ecological utopia, where they live and work together with each other and nature.³³ Their goal is to experiment with an ecological lifestyle and to inspire others, as well as to create awareness for ecological living and working (Frijlân 2019a). One of the residents called their place an ecovillage, but they never use the term officially. I think they share the ideology of an ecovillage. The only argument against this definition is their small number of residents. Other ecovillages tend to be bigger. Living with six people is different from living with more, but I think they have similar issues, which will be discussed below. Therefore,

³³ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

Frijlân is still an appropriate example of the challenges that are encountered in ecovillages and other alternative living communities.

Starting a community

As discussed above the idea of an ecovillage or community sounds like a harmonious lifestyle with a high sense of unity and collaboration, but in fact it is an art of balancing many different ideas. Starting such a community is therefore challenging. According to Diana Leafe Christians, a writer and speaker about ecovillages in the VS, only 10 percent of the aspiring ecovillages or communities make it (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 293). The numbers in the Netherlands are not clear, but this gives an indication how hard it is to start a new living community. It takes a lot of work and you need a similar vision in the group: everyone has to work towards the same goal. Marije from Frijlân compared the challenges to a train track;

'You have an idea together, only everyone sees it a little different. It is like a train track, when someone goes a different direction you have to bend with it and follow them, otherwise the train runs off the rails.' - Marije ³⁴

She says that everyone has to stick to a certain goal and that you have to compromise to work together. If you do not do that, you will crash just like the train. Marije is the founder of the permaculture garden right next to the Frijlân terrain. They started it with a group of people. Some people were there often while others came and worked in the garden only once in a while. Every decision about the garden had to be done in consultation with everyone involved. They spent more time talking than working on the garden. Marije told me she was kind of bullied by the others until she decided to stop her work on the garden. The others did not like her ideas and way of working. She left the group but stayed at the main board. At some point she took over and made the project hers again. The others who did not want to work with her went away and started a new initiative. She is now back in the lead and has all kind of plans to transform the garden following the ideas of permaculture, which is explained in the next chapter. Her plans include an educational centre for visitors where people can join to help and where people with a distance to the working community can work.

This example shows that different ideas can break a project and that people can make it impossible for you to work on a project if they do not like you. It is challenging to work

³⁴ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

together and sometimes it goes differently to what you had planned. This project failed for some people. For Marije it went well in the end: she is back in charge of the garden now. She is pleased to have this piece of ground back. She acknowledges that it is unfortunate for the people who worked there and are not involved anymore, but she is happy to finally work toward the place she had in mind all this time. This was not her first project: she also tried all kinds of other projects, which failed through disagreement in the group or a lack of money or other problems.

According to Lockyer and Veteto (2013, 296-297), it is not only the struggles with each other which make it hard. There are also influences from outside. There are every now and then internal disagreements about the road to follow or little irritations which can become a real issue if they are not addressed in time. When people have a personal problem or conflicts at Frijlân it definitely has effects on the group and the work. The personal problems can become part of communal problems. In that sense there is an influence from outside. If someone is not feeling well, their work and participation in the community will likely suffering because of that. The pressure and expectations from outside can also be a catalyser of internal problems. I know Marije feels the pressure from the municipality, as discussed in the first chapter, since they helped them a lot in creating their place. She feels like she cannot disappoint them because of what the municipality has invested in them. If the project fails it might have a negative influence on the future policy of the municipality in supporting alternative living projects. Marije feels like she needs to work hard to make their project a success. Since she is responsible for the communication with the municipality she feels the pressure the most, out of all Frijlân residents. This extra pressure that one person experiences more than the others, probably has an influence on the community. This is thus an external influence that has an effect on the community, as discussed by Lockyer and Veteto.

Doing it together

According to anthropologist Ted Baker (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 290) living in a community is usually rewarding but it is also always challenging. My informants would agree. The sub-chapter above made clear how difficult it can be to achieve something together, but it that it can also bring something nice. According to Mats, the tiny house builder, living in a community is one of the main reasons people want to live in a tiny house.³⁵

³⁵ Interview 14 April 2019

They miss the community feeling in the current individualistic society, where different people live next to each other without knowing each other well (Stevenson 2002, 736-737).

They search for some sense of belonging. Belonging is about an emotional attachment, about a feeling of being 'at home', and a safe feeling of being with and belonging to a specific group (Yural-Davis 2006, 197). They want to become part of something, to feel like they belong to a group. Many of my informants told me that they think the community living is one of the important motivations to choose this way of living, because they live with more like-minded people now, people who have the same values and share the same ideas. It does not mean everyone in their community is their friend, but living with like-minded people gives them a feeling of belonging to a group. They have more in common with the neighbours than they would have in a normal neighbourhood. It creates that feeling of being at home in their new house, at home because of their community.

Frijlân is a place where the idea of being part of the community is very strong and that is one of the aspects that attracts people.³⁶ At Frijlân they have one day every month on which people can help to build and improve the place. This always attracts people who enjoy helping with the project. These and other visitors always praise the sense of community. Many women are attracted to the idea of the sisterhood they perceive, with the four women living together, in charge of their own land. Meanwhile, men automatically tend to help with heavy tasks. One man came around to have a look and to see how everything was going. He told me that he and his brother built the roof of one of the buildings. He was impressed with how the women set up the place and he was happy to help to make it a better place, although he added that he would never want to live in such a community himself. According to him, there is always someone who starts to take over. He names Marije, one of the women of Frijlân, who has a lot of ideas and wants, but also strong preferences for the way in which things should be done. He respects her and is impressed by what she has achieved with Frijlân, but he could never live or work with someone like her in a community.

It is intensive to live together at Frijlân, because the work on the ecoparadise is never separated from the private life. Living in the community and working together to keep the place running does not leave much space for a private life. However, the residents still have different needs in this regard: some need more private time than others. This is reflected in the placing of the different houses on the terrain. There are houses placed close together for people that desire more interaction and there are more isolated houses for the residents with a

³⁶ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

preference for a more secluded life, which Holleman (2011, 7) also experienced in ecovillage Ithaca in America. At Frijlân one of the houses was quite isolated from the others at the terrain, standing behind the future classroom, out of sight for everyone. The owner of the house lived the most private life of all residents and did not join communal activities often. Two other houses stood quite close to each other, with the doors facing each other. Stepping out of their house was almost stepping into the other, said Marije. These residents share meals together every now and then, watch movies together, go out to eat, or help each other out quite often. They have a close relationship. Marije herself lived somewhere in between. Her house is close to the two houses that stand together but it faces the garden and the back of one of the houses. This reflects her personal lifestyle: sometimes joining the others, but also having her time alone.

The hard times

Having time alone can be important for the residents, because the life at Frijlân proves to be quite demanding. Living in a community requires a large amount of time and labour, which can drive people to a burnout (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 291). My other informants did not recognize this, but the residents at Frijlân did. They live together more intensely than the other informants and this is combined with their work together to improve the terrain and to spread their knowledge and lifestyle. At Frijlân almost all of the residents were close to a burnout at the end of the first summer period.

In that first summer they lived on the terrain with nine people: six residents, two summer guests, and one artist in residence. The summer guests could stay for the summer to find out if the life at Frijlân is something for them. They also asked an artist in residence to stay at their place for a period of time, which fitted with their permaculture philosophy, which emphasise the importance of creating and being artistic (Frijlân 2019b). The guests were staying there to come in contact with the ecological life. The care for the many temporary residents in addition to the activities they organized and the work on the terrain proved a little too much for the four residents. One of the summer guests was also dealing with mental health issues and needed even more attention. At the end of the summer season they were all exhausted. They spent too many time on others and did not have enough time and space for themselves. It was too demanding. If they wanted to keep people coming over, to reach people and spread their message, they would have to be very strong. Especially if they are people with problems in their life, which Frijlân seems to attract according to my informants. It asks a lot from them and they have to be physically and mentally strong to avoid getting

issues themselves. At the end of the first summer they could not handle it anymore and decided to take a step back. They decided to take the winter periods for themselves and adjust the summer period to what they can handle. It will still be hard work in the summer, a fulltime voluntary summer job as one of the residents called it, but it should stay manageable.

The long-term guests require attention, but there are also the visitors who come by to see their Frijlân. The issue of how to deal with the attention of visitors and guests is a common problem. The research about ecovillage Ithaca (Holleman 2011, 18) discusses the idea that residents feel as if they live in a fish-bowl, always looked at by visitors, answering questions from strangers and having an uncomfortable and violated feeling when visitors start getting too close or start taking pictures from the more private life. This is recognized by the residents at Frijlân. Similar to Ithaca, they have a mission of educating, which involves asking visitors to come by and learn about their way of life, with the similar consequences to what is described by Holleman. There are people who want to visit walking unexpectedly on the terrain, outside of the official visiting days which they started to regulate the visitors. Once there was a mother and daughter who came all the way from Utrecht. The daughter also wanted to live in an ecovillage and they walked around to see what it is like. They then went into one of the houses to see it from inside. So when the resident came home, she unexpectedly saw these two people in her house. This was one of the incidents that really crossed a line. The mission of Frijlân is to show their life to visitors, but visitors are not always aware of the privacy of the residents. Therefore the residents chose to have two official visiting days a week in order regulate the visitors. Despite this, people regularly just come by and walk around, which the residents experience as quite annoying. This is one of the things that make life at Frijlân a bit difficult.

The life in a community is both rewarding and challenging. It gives the residents a feeling of belonging which they miss in this individualistic society. It creates an opportunity for them to live with like-minded people. It can however be challenging as well because of different people having different expectations and ideas, which never correspond completely. They also have many visitors who ask for attention, which is sometimes too much. Those aspects are discussed with Frijlân as example, but every aspect above comes back at some other community I visited, although sometimes to a lesser degree. Frijlân requires a lot of cooperation, while some other communities are less about educating others and have a focus solely on their own life in a small alternative house. This could be the reason that Frijlân experiences the most struggles. However, despite these struggles, in the end the residents need

each other, without each other they would not have the opportunity to start the project and live this way.

Their message to the world

The people living in a small alternative house are often working together and even live together on a piece of ground. Their way of living is different from the average person's life. Whether their choice for a small alternative house could be seen as more than a way of living will be discussed in this chapter. As written earlier, Frijlân is not only a living project, but it also has a mission to educate. The question is whether this means that they are part of an environmental movement that strives for change in the society. Some of my other informants also show aspects of an environmental movement. In this chapter I discuss what made my informants want to live in a small alternative house, what it means for them to live there and what aspects of an environmental movement they show.

Environmental movement

An environmental movement promotes a sustainable life with nature. Based on environmental statements, the members of such a movement question the way we live now and our social and material practices. They confront others by stopping their use of existing material flows and start using alternatives (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 177). They form a group of people who start acting differently, in a way they think is better for them and the environment. By living differently they show others an alternative to their own ways of living. They show how they changed their lives in order to live more sustainably and by doing so inspire others to change, in order to initiate a broader change in society (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 174). Instead of telling how things do not work and what is not going well in the world, they show possibilities and try to change things with a positive, alternative example.

Environmental movements start with ecological values that are not supported by the political powers (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 167). The actions of governments or businesses are not in line with the ecological thinking of the members of the movement. They do not see their values reflected in the society that they see around them. They search for a lifestyle that fits them better and they take action in their own hands. Their own actions and their use of alternatives to the mainstream are a form of resistance to the current society (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 168; Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 286). This can be seen as a reaction to politicians that fail to meet the values of this group of people. They start to use other products or live a different life, a more sustainable and environmental friendly life. Motivated mostly by climate change, people become interested by changing the material relationship with nature (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 172). This might for example influence how they choose to

obtain electricity or water out of the natural world and to use it responsibly. People that are a member of an environmental movement carry out and act upon their sustainable ideas and motivations.

Many people in environmental movements are motivated by the climate change and the lack of (political) action to prevent it, but the precise motivations differ per person (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 163). Everyone has their own reason to join an environmental movement, just as is the case for becoming a member of communities, which is discussed in the previous chapter. Some are looking for a community of likeminded people, as a reaction to capitalism or to the lack of action against climate change. They feel responsible for human actions and their effects on mankind and nature (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 171). There is a broad range of reasons, but they find each other in solutions. The members are all committed to the same goal (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, xv). Although being part of a movement sometimes requires some dedication to stand for your ideas and way of life, they work for it because they believe what they do is good and because they think it is worth the effort. They get joy out living for the good cause, even if it is hard sometimes (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, xv).

Doing things as an individual is a step and shows what is important to you. People even construct their identities and social life through their activities and choices in life (Lockyer and Veteto 2013, 239). Shifting to a more sustainable lifestyle changes your identity. It is a part of you and shows what you stand for. To make a change and to really make a difference in society you have to be part of a group or a movement (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 165). This idea is in line with the famous words of Margaret Mead, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.' With a larger group showing alternatives you obtain a bigger response from an audience of citizens and politicians. A group together should participate and incorporate the new ideas in their daily life to have influence on the society. As a group they are able to have influence on others.

In this research the choice for a small alternative house could be a statement: a choice for a house, a way to look at materials with a motivation of needing less stuff. It is different from the mainstream and it is a conscious choice for a different life. This should be seen as a part of a movement, to make this statement together with the neighbours and other small house villages or small house owners. As a small alternative house village they can work together to promote a more sustainable lifestyle. For some the motivation will come from a concern about the environment, for others it is the longing for more freedom (Tiny House

Nederland 2018). The motivations might be different, but the solution is the same. They want to live in an alternative way, in a small alternative house. The next part will discuss in what sense the people in small alternative houses can be seen as an environmental movement.

Being critical

My informants show many characteristics of an environmental movement. One aspect is the need to live in a small alternative house as a reaction on the current environmental situation. This current century brought an increase in attention for the environment, with it the interests to conserve resources and energy (Dant 2010). People have become more aware of their consumption behaviour and way of living. Milou, the squatter, is aware of the influence of people on the environment and she does not want to be part of it.³⁷ She used to live in a student house but did not enjoy it: her housemates always kept the lights on after leaving a room or they wasted food. She wanted to fight to help the environment but could not bear to fight in her own house. At home she wanted to rest which she did not have with her housemates which did not live in an environmentally friendly way. This was one of the reasons she moved in with her squatting friends.

Marjolein Jonker, the tiny house pioneer, recognises this need to act (Hartog 2017, 165). Many people who want change are screaming, sitting on their chair and commenting on social media, but she thinks that this does not work. You have to actually do something. You have to think positively and see the opportunities that we have. Marjolein Jonker argues that taking action from a positive point of view always works better than from a negative point of view. So she started to live in a more environmentally friendly way by living in a tiny house with a smaller ecological footprint.

All of my informants worry about the environment, except for one. Laura, one of the tiny house owners does not believe that the climate crisis exists and she does not want to change her life for it until it is proven, which she has not heard yet.³⁸ However, she did not search for any evidence for climate change, so she admits she is not well informed. Although she does not believe in climate change, she does acknowledge that waste and plastic are not good for the world and that it is better to reduce the use of it. According to her, Marjolein Jonker is sponsored to promote sustainability. She does not believe that Marjolein could be so

³⁷ Interview 5 April 2019

³⁸ Interview B 17 April 2019

worried about climate change herself without a financial incentive. Laura's motivation to live in a tiny house is her belief in living simpler with less stuff which gives her more freedom.

One other aspect of an environmental movement is the disapproval of the current consumer society and the action they take to change it. Our consumer behaviour influences the environment through the amount of stuff we buy. According to Appadurai (1986, 38) all societies have some demand for luxury goods. Since the 1800s the demand in Europe is left to the market and trends. More goods have become available. Nowadays it is common to have a growing number of goods, as discussed in in the first chapter. The availability of all these goods has a downside as well. Appadurai (1986, 32) calls the modern consumers 'the victims of the velocity of fashion'. The fashion and available goods change continuously. Technology is improving regularly. People are constantly buying new things to keep up with the latest technology and with social expectations.

All of my informants are against the consumer society. They argue that people buy too many things, things they do not even need. Or that they buy something new when it is broken instead of trying to repair it. Nowadays people are influenced to buy more and to always have the best of the best: they live a life of luxury. However, having the newest and best products is not necessary and all the producing and shipping has a negative influence on the environment.

The squatters are very critical about the society and how it works now: they are anti-capitalists.³⁹ There is a banner in the trees on their property: 'Up with trees, down with capitalism'. Milou told me she would only work for a company that is in line with her values. There are not many of them, she only names Greenpeace and Milieudefensie. There are not many jobs at those companies. She did some voluntary work, but that does not give her an income. Nowadays she works in the summer for an electric boat rental and sometimes she helps building at creative and sustainable companies with the skills she learned from building her own house. She lives with only a little amount of money. She only earns about 2.000 euros in a year. Some of her neighbours have even less. When she is thinking of buying something, she reminds herself it is made with child labour, unfair labour and/or pesticides, and brought here with a polluting container ship. She does not want to support these activities with her money. When Milou needs something or just wants to go shopping she goes to the second hand store. The food she gets out of waste containers, which is illegal in the Netherlands. She thinks it is strange that throwing food away is allowed, but getting food out

³⁹ Interview 5 April 2019

of bins to use it instead of throwing it away is illegal, while the food restaurants or shops throw away is still good to consume.

Milou's life is about finding her own way of living in a system she does not support. She is trying to avoid any contribution to the consumer society. For her, living in a small alternative house is just one part of a sustainable lifestyle. She is not the only one: multiple times I heard my informants criticize the mentality to buy everything. They do not see this seemingly omnipresent need to buy. The residents of Frijlân also share this view. They live according to the rules of permaculture, which corresponds with the ideas above. Marije tells about it during a lecture for (former) students from an agricultural study of the local university of applied science.

'What is permaculture? It is a science from Tasmania, Australia. It is not new, but gives tangible steps, a handle to hold on, with the purpose to restore ecosystems. We, as humans, are in service of the earth. The way of thinking is relevant not only for the agriculture but also for the society or on your own life.' - Marije⁴⁰

A life in service of the earth is what they strive for. The ideas of permaculture are reflected in the way they use the terrain. They do not crop the grass and have a mixture of plants which interact and with each other and the animals in equilibrium. The idea of permaculture is what they give to visitors: they let them experience what it means. At Frijlân they see it as their task to spread the ideology of permaculture, a sustainable lifestyle with respect for the nature. One example of spreading their message is the activity they organised the day I arrived at Frijlân.

They celebrated the opening of their new season and the start of spring. Around 30 people came to Frijlân to visit this event, most of them were friends or family of the six residents, but some were interested people in the project and came here to have a look. We just finished a game about the ecosystem, in which we experienced that the elements of the ecosystem are all connected. By removing a tree, you do not only remove a tree, but you take a whole system down with it. The concluding message was that farmers kill the ecosystem by removing trees, and if we plant new trees the ecosystem will recover slowly. A web of ecosystems in nature can be compared with the society. Not everything lives around a tree, but around oil. We shouldn't depend so

⁴⁰ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

much on one source. Following these lessons, we were going to plant a tree. Someone carried a small tree, we all walked in a line behind her. We could take a musical instrument if we wanted. Singing and playing we walked behind the person with the tree. We followed the path through the herb garden, between the small houses to the other side of the terrain. Making music and noise to wake up the earth, the plants and the animals for the spring which just started. In the end of our walk, some people planted the tree in the ground, while the others were watching and making music.⁴¹

Although they do not regularly dance and sing to wake up the earth, the event was still representative for their ideas. It is an example of how they see the world and how we should connect with it. In a game they tell the visitors what we should do to help recover the earth. The spreading of these ideas is another characteristic of an environmental movement. They try to give some of their ideas to the visitors, through games, by showing their lifestyle, by letting them help in the garden or with other activities. Marije puts her life in service of education. She is taking action because the society does not work well, according to her. She sees it as her task to inform others about their way of living. She thinks that we need and can live differently and educates about the options of permaculture. Their sustainable lifestyle is in harmony with nature. Marije is together with the other residents fighting for their ideals by showing alternatives as a critique to the system.

In conclusion, my respondents who are living in a small alternative house have many characteristics of an environmental movement. Almost all of them are motivated by the environment and their worry about the climate and situation of the nature around them. In addition they are also critical of their own consumer behaviour and on the consumer society as a whole. Furthermore some of the informants spread those two ideas and present their lifestyle as a solution by showing how to live alternatively. As discussed in the third chapter they are also part of a community, which is as well an important characteristic of an environmental movement: a community where they work together to achieve their lifestyle and spread their message. This all taken together would be a reason to call people living in a small alternative house part of an environmental movement. However, there are also people who do not live in a small alternative house who spread the message of environmentalism.

⁴¹ Fieldnotes 1 till 8 May 2019

The freedom

It is not only the critique on the current system that brings people to their small alternative house, it are also the opportunities such a lifestyle creates. They see how life can be better by living in a different house and then they show others what makes it so attractive. According to Laura, one of the tiny house owners, freedom should be the umbrella term. For her, a small alternative house is a tool to be free.⁴² The life in a small alternative house creates freedom through different aspects; it symbolises a simpler life, a life with more time to spend freely and a life which is often spent outside.

For my informants, choosing for a life of more freedom is a choice for a life that fits them better. Laura told me about it;

'I used to adjust to others, to do what everyone does. However, I found out that taking your own path is the easiest path. Everyone says you need to study, that it is good for you. If everyone says so, it is probably true. I got it wrong. In the end you have to choose for yourself. That's one of the reasons I choose to live in a tiny house.' - Laura

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She did not want to live the life which society told her to live. She was not happy doing her study or looking for houses that were all very expensive. She decided to stop her study and later on built her own house. Both decisions were in her opinion the best decisions she could take. Her life became better, because she chose and created a life which fits her better. She felt free to choose for herself, and to live life in her own way.

The life Laura lives is about stripping away all unnecessary things in life to be able to focus on what is important (Mangold and Zschau 2019, 3). This includes stuff which you do not need to throw away like discussed in the second chapter, live smaller to get rid of unnecessary space, or work less because only a small income is needed. There are a lot of things to strip away in someone's life. My informants only choose to decrease the space in their house and their possessions, but some decided as well to work less or get another more inspiring but less paying job. This is all in order to be able to focus on what they think is important.

⁴² Interview B 17 April 2019

⁴³ Interview B 17 April 2019

With their choice for a simple life they can be seen as downshiffters. Downshiffters are people who choose to work less and spend less money on consumer goods, thereby reducing financial stress and having more free time to spend with friends and family (Mangold and Zschau 2019, 3). This is a typical description for my informants: all aspects apply to their life. We know already that they choose to spend less, which gives them a reason to be able to earn less or have less financial worries.

Living in a smaller house with fewer costs on the house, like having less energy or maintenance costs, together with reduced spending on stuff, results in needing less money in their life. For some of my informants this is the reason to live in a small alternative house. Daan, the sailor, lives in his sailboat with financial reasons as one of the main motivations.⁴⁴ He did not have real financial problems, but neither had a lot of money to spend. He has a job that he likes, but it is not a very well-paid job. He used to work hard and for a lot of hours, but he now lives more cheaply as a result he does not have to look at his expenses that critically anymore. This gives him the opportunity to work a comfortable amount of hours. While Daan already had a job he enjoyed, other informants got the opportunity to do the work they longed for because of the lower expenses.

Working less and needing less time for example for cleaning, moving and managing stuff, creates more free time for my informants. They get more time to focus on the things that matter to them. According to Weinstein (Mangold and Zschau 2019, 11) people in a tiny house are getting back in charge of their lives. They are able to focus on the important things in life and can decide for themselves how to spend their time. One of the things to spend time on is building and repairing stuff. One of the phrases I heard often is, 'You can spend money to repair or buy things, or you can spend time and do it yourself'. This applies to building your own house as described in the first chapter, but also to choosing to spend time to find and repair broken things. They could choose to work harder on their current job or look for a one that pays more one, but instead they look at their expenses and decide to reduce them even more by doing things themselves. Although they already live relatively cheaply, they are still trying to reduce their expenses. It is one of the things they decide to spend their time on. Another often heard activity is spending more time with friends and family. All the informants spoke about the increased time they could spend with the people who surround them. Those are the important moments in their life, which did not get the attention they deserved within their previous lifestyle.

⁴⁴ Interview 9 May 2019

Another part of the freedom my informants experience is the life outside. Living in a small alternative house means a life with more time outside the house. They spend time in their garden, in the area around the house, making a campfire, working in the garden or just sitting in front of the house. According to several studies spending time outside has a positive influence on people in many ways, such as reducing stress and a positive effect on the vitality, and people feel like they have more energy (Ryan et al. 2010, 167). My informants did not especially talk about an increased energy level, but they enjoy the positive feeling that they get from spending their time outside. They say that people should be outside more often and that it has a positive effect on them. They also felt immediately away from their work, it felt as being on holiday. The camping feeling of being away from everything, of being in nature, and the less luxurious facilities, as discussed in chapter two, contributes to this sentiment.

The life outside is a major part of their lives, as shown by Daan. He made a drawing, instead of a mind map, after I asked what living in his sailboat means for him.



Drawing 1: Mind map from interview 9 May 2019

He draws the sea, the wind, the clouds and the sun. In the middle he draws himself, comfortably in a small cottage, swinging between the elements. It shows how the life in a small house is influenced by the elements, by the nature. Daan tells me that when he arrived he thought the vastness was intimidating.⁴⁵ He felt intimidated by air and clouds around him and by always being in contact with the outside air. He now really enjoys it, but sometimes it gets too much. For him the wind is a big factor: when there are weeks of storm he gets tired and irritated. Until three or four Beaufort it is still fine, but if the wind goes above scale four it goes wild. You can hear the wind howling, which is nice for a while, but not for weeks at a time. At those times he is very happy to leave home, ‘when the elements get too much it isn’t fun anymore’.

Living in a small alternative house and being outside often feels good for my informants. Living between the elements makes them feel connected with nature and surroundings. Living outside is an improvement of their lives. It is another part of freedom, next to having a simpler life with more time for important things. Although this choice is a more individualistic choice about their own life, it could still be seen in the frame of an environmental movement. The fact that they long for freedom, can be a sign that they must have been missing it in their earlier life and says something about the society they live in. Their choice to live small is still showing others life can be better when choosing for an alternative living style. Even though it is not their intention to make a statement, they show others how life can be different and thereby spreading the message of a movement.

The life in an alternative house creates freedom for the residents: it creates time, reduces financial dependence and gives them time outside. My informants see this as an improvement of their lives, they were not happy with their lives in a ‘normal’ neighbourhood. They criticized the consumer society and the lack of action for the climate. Their choice for a small alternative house is a statement to show there is another life possible, but at the same time it is just a change to improve their personal lives. They still form an environmental movement, since they criticize the society by showing a positive alternative and work and live together with like-minded people. Although not everyone has the mission to spread their ideas or even believe in the environmental need of their small alternative life, their way of living can still be perceived as a statement.

⁴⁵ Interview 9 May 2019

Conclusion

Marjolein Jonker achieved her dream house, with all she longed for: ‘it was sustainable, back to basics, it was affordable and I could live with others in a community of tiny houses’.⁴⁶ She sums up quite well what a small alternative house can bring to people. In this thesis, I discussed the road to a small alternative house. The first chapter showed what it is like to build your own house and to be a builder and architect at the same time. It is hard work but once the goal is achieved it provides a lot of satisfaction and pride. I also showed how my informants had to manoeuvre through all the rules about and around housing in the Netherlands. They do not understand why the government makes it so hard to build and live in a small alternative house taking in consideration that they live a sustainable and harmless lifestyle. The sustainable and back to basics elements are coming back in the inside of a small alternative house. The inside shows that the facilities say something about the residents. The facilities show the less luxurious life in comparison to ‘normal’ Dutch lives and how the people that use them are often more aware of sustainability. The informants had to minimize their stuff to fit everything in their small house. Owning less stuff has a positive effect on their life, but it is also a conscious reaction on the current consumer society. They work together to achieve this life and later on often living together in a small community. They help each other out, but as discussed a community or collaboration is not always working together fluently: there are frequent challenges. Their choice for a small alternative house and the choice to have few possessions, working together to achieve this house and stay with like-minded people, are all factors that allow them to be seen as an environmental movement. They live in a way that stays close to their values of living sustainable and not joining the consumption behaviour of others. Their lifestyle serves as an example of a different and more sustainable life. At the same time my informants are looking for some freedom, a better life for themselves without any political intentions. However, even in this case their life could be an example for others and an unintended political message of how we could live differently and more sustainably.

The life in a small alternative house looks quite idyllic initially: the freedom and sustainable life is tempting, but the life in a small alternative house is not for everyone. It asks a lot of effort to achieve a house and live there in a community with other small alternative houses. It is also a decrease in comfort. A small house can feel really small in the winter and

⁴⁶ 26 March 2019. Lecture ‘Lezing: Tiny Houses’ in the library of Leusden.

also the facilities are sometimes quite basic. However, there are big differences between houses: smaller and bigger, basic or with a little more comfort, in a close community or more individual. You can search for the right place and house that fits your needs. Still, it is not a way of life for everyone. Like Mats, the tiny house builder, said, ‘The tiny houses are a hype now but in ten years only the people who really fit in the houses will still be living in them.’⁴⁷ It is really hard to say which people fit in a tiny house. Every informant I spoke is very pleased with their decision for the new house. They all have their reasons to live small, which can all be seen as a reaction of dissatisfaction with the current society. They were looking for a community of like-minded people as a reaction on the individualistic society, for a more environmentally friendly house as a reaction the need for climate action, or to live simpler with less products and costs as reaction on the consumer society. Those three aspects on the current society are criticized by my informants. The life in a small alternative house brings them the better life they are looking for. They live according to their values, they walk the talk of an alternative and better world. They show that when you are not satisfied with your current life and/or society, you can wait around and discuss it but you can also change your own life and create the circumstances that meet your values.

Reflection and further research

This research sheds some light on the daily life in a small alternative house and what it means for the residents to live there. The anthropological research is an addition to the limited existing literature. Tiny houses are a recent phenomenon in the Netherlands and there are only a few studies about it. The popularity of tiny houses has also generated more attention for living in small alternative houses in general, even if they have existed for some time already. I met people living in different small alternative houses in different living situations. The diversity of my informants brought me a wider perspective on small alternatives houses and I experienced that they have a lot in common. The sailor in his boat has ideas and experiences that are not existential different from those of the tiny house owners or squatters. They live a bit differently and might have different ideas or ideologies, but they have a lot in common and can therefore be discussed and compared as one group of small alternative house owners. It is interesting to see that there are many different possibilities in small alternative houses, with some different aspects but with often similar thoughts and experiences which brings them to the same desire for living small.

⁴⁷ Interview 14 April 2019

Doing research in your own country can be difficult, because you can overlook some aspects which you take for granted yourself. I share the same national culture with my informants and I am surrounded by people who care about the environment, including some people already working on their consumption behaviour. However, I did not directly know anyone in a small alternative house. I noticed sometimes that I took things for granted, when they perfectly fit within my own referential framework. For example, when informants talked about the feeling of living on a campsite, I immediately connected it to all my own camping experiences, not asking immediately what a camping feeling meant for them. During the research I tried to stay aware of my own referential framework, and stayed critical to myself and my assumptions.

Although this research covers some important aspects of the life in a small alternative house, there are still a lot of opportunities for further research. This research is broad, covering some different aspects: the road to small alternative house, the inside of the house, living in a community and the environmental movement could all be the topic of a research of their own. I focused on different aspects to discuss how the everyday is intertwined with the broader ideas, values and experiences all related to the life in a small alternative house. It shows that a decision for a small alternative house is more than just a change of houses. Some aspects I observed are not in here, like the internet community of the tiny house owners and interested people, which is a lively community treating all kind of different subjects. Additionally, there are the interior of the houses, the smart choices for multifunctional furniture and the efficient use of the space in the house with all the thoughts and stories that come with it. These topics could all have their own research, which would be equally as interesting.

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Picture on front page is a picture I made during my stay at Frijlân

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Appendix: Map of tiny houses

The map made by Tiny House Nederland shows the existing tiny house owners and bloggers in the Netherlands, the green dots, as well as potential living locations and initiative groups which are the orange ones. I heard from one of my informants that the map and all the information on the website is outdated, they are currently working on a new website. It is not clear when the map has last been updated.



Map of initiatives of tiny houses in the Netherlands. From: Tiny House Nederland 2019b