

LESS SPACE, MORE STYLE - TINY HOUSE LIVING MAGAZINE!

# TINY LIVING



Tiny House  
Hub

NOVEMBER 2025 | ISSUE 33



**Financing your tiny house dream:** Unconventional houses call for unconventional methods

**FEATURED LAND FOR LEASE**

NEW SITE FOR LEASE  
IN WAIHI, WAIKATO

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# WHAT I WOULD TELL MY YOUNGER SELF TO WARN HER ABOUT THE REALITIES OF TINY HOUSE LIVING

By Sharla May

If I could go back and sit down with the younger version of me, the one who was watching tiny house tours on YouTube and thinking I could totally do that, I wouldn't stop her. I'd let her sell the house and buy the truck trailer and turn her whole life upside down. But I would hand her a stiff drink and a very long checklist titled: "Things You're About to Learn the Hard Way."

Because I did all of it. Converted a reefer unit into a tiny house. Lived in a bus. Leased land. Sold up. Did it again. And honestly? I don't regret it. But if I could offer my younger self (or you, if you're about to head down the same glittery Pinterest rabbit hole I did) a few pointers well, buckle up.

Let's start with the trailer. My first build was a secondhand refrigerated truck trailer, known in transport circles as a "reefer unit," which sounds a bit edgier than it deserves. It came with a trailer, walls, insulation, and a roof, basically the

bones of a tiny house for eight grand. At the time I thought, what a bargain. And actually, in many ways, it was. It sat nice and high off the ground, which gave it a bit of a treehouse vibe where I was parked. And because it was already insulated, I skipped a big chunk of the work most people have to do.

But what I didn't skip was the ongoing maintenance, because here's what I didn't fully clock at the time: it was still a heavy rigid vehicle. And that meant road rules, inspections, and a COF every six months. A Certificate of Fitness is not your friendly neighbourhood WOF. It's more expensive, more intense, and absolutely not forgiving of rust, seized brakes, or inspectors who've had a bad morning. And I didn't have a truck. So every time it needed a COF? I had to hire someone to move it. Even just to take it in for inspection. I couldn't tow it. I couldn't sneak it down the road. I had to pay a company, cross my

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fingers that it wouldn't fail, and then pay again if it did. And before you say, "Well why bother keeping it road legal?" I get it. Trust me, I get it. But here's the catch because it was on wheels, I couldn't get normal house insurance. The only option was caravan insurance, and the fine print on those policies? Often says it must be road legal. So if you skip the COF, skip the rego, and think you'll just sit there quietly on some farmland forever, you might also be skipping any chance of having your home insured if it burns down, floods, or gets yeeted by a storm.

I kept the rego on hold most of the time (because I wasn't a millionaire), but there's a sneaky clause most people don't know: you can only put it on hold if it has a current COF. Let that expire before you hit the "hold" button and you're locked out. You'll need to get it roadworthy again before you can even pause the rego. Oh and you have to renew the rego hold before it lapses or the whole process resets. Miss the deadline and you're back to square one. Do it more than once and you'll want to scream.

And then there's the big one, the one that would've caused me a full meltdown if I hadn't known about it (thankfully my dad used to be a vehicle inspector) if a heavy vehicle is unregistered for 12 months, NZTA will automatically deregister it. Not suspend it, deregister. From there, you're facing brake certs, VIN checks, a heavy vehicle inspection, and possibly blood sacrifice. Just don't let it happen. And all of that? That's before we even get to rust. Reefer units weren't built to sit still forever. Mine was parked up, not moving, not doing any long-haul cooling runs, and that meant rust. I was constantly under it with converter and paint, trying to stay one step ahead of the COF inspector.

Also, flat fiberglass roofs? No thank you. Solar panels? Leaked. Fireplace flue? Leaked. Breathe too hard near it? Leaked. It turns out even a slight roof pitch makes all the difference. But did I learn that the easy way? Of course not.





Aesthetically, I gave it a fresh coat of paint, but no matter how many plants I put outside, it still looked like a truck. And not the cute, converted kind. The *"what's that parked up on our land?"* kind. That definitely affected how easy it was to lease land, and I don't blame the landowners, it wasn't exactly giving boutique eco retreat.

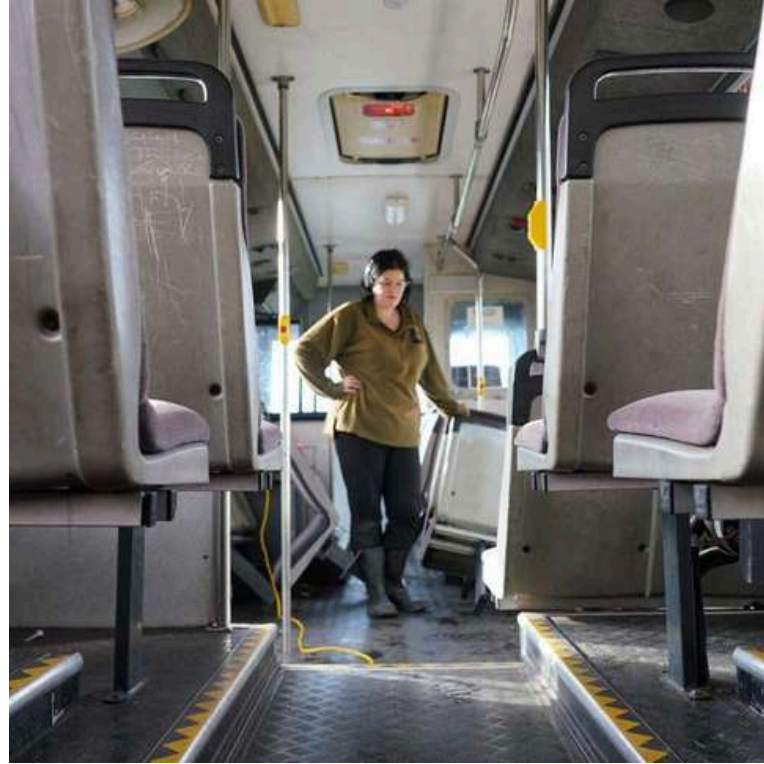
And look, leasing land is a whole story in itself. A lot of people don't realise that if you're living in a tiny house on someone else's land, the Residential Tenancies Act doesn't apply, especially if your home is moveable. So unless you've got a really solid contract, you're not protected by tenancy law. It's a private agreement, not a rental situation in the legal sense. Which means if things go south, there's no Tenancy Tribunal to call.

I had a pretty awful situation with a landowner, and I just wanted out, fast. But I couldn't move the trailer myself. It was expensive, stressful, and an absolute mission to line up access and a transporter. That was the moment I knew: never again. From then on, I swore I'd only live in something I could move myself, even if I didn't have a dollar to my name.

So I sold it. And bought a bus. It was a 2001 Dennis Dart with a Cummins engine (which is pretty standard here in NZ). The bus itself? Not so standard. Every time I took it for a COF, the inspectors had no idea how to turn on the wipers or indicators and failed it for things that worked perfectly. Every. Single. Time. So I'd stand there like a school kid, demonstrating how to use the dashboard. Humbling.

It needed a Class 2 licence to drive, if I could go back and do it again? I'd go for something I could drive on a Class 1. At the time, it didn't matter, I was healthy and confident. But I've seen friends who've had heart problems or strokes lose their Class 2, even though they were still fit enough to keep their Class 1. In one case, they had to sell the bus and start again. That could've been me. One medical letter and I'd have been locked out of my own home on wheels.

Financially, the bus was cheaper to run than you'd think, because it was registered under Road User Type 2. Two axles, single tyres up front, twins in the back, under 12,000kg. That meant I was paying \$172



per 1,000km in road user charges. If I'd gone over the weight limit or had a triple axle, it would've shot up to \$336. For context: that's the difference between *"let's go for a drive"* and *"we're not going anywhere unless it's an emergency."*

I used to be the person stuck behind slow motorhomes thinking *why don't they just pull over*. Then I became one. Full water tanks slowed me down by up to 10km/h. So I started driving empty and filling up close to my destination, to save fuel, and to stop annoying people like my former self. The bus had its perks. It was mine. I could leave a bad land situation *immediately*. But it came with the usual tiny-living trade-offs. No underfloor lockers, because it had a low floor. Beautiful head height, minimal storage. Two doors were great for airflow in summer, but not in winter. I ran a dehumidifier constantly. Went away for a week and came back to mould on everything. Goodbye, cushions. duvet, sheets, clothes, mattress, goodbye, sanity.

Oh, and rats. One time I pulled out an Oodie I hadn't worn in a while from the overhead cupboard and found a dead rat curled up inside it like it was in a luxury sleeping bag. I didn't scream. I just bagged the whole thing, threw it out, and reassessed my life choices.

I also built the bed sideways to save space. Brilliant if you're single. Not so great for resale when potential buyers are couples who don't want to climb over each other at 3am. Next time bed goes lengthwise.

**Eventually, I bought land and built again**, this time for good. And once I was settled, I started noticing something: other people in the area were trying to sell land with tiny houses on wheels... and they weren't moving. Turns out, buyers can often only get financing for the land itself, not the house

on wheels sitting on it. And if the house isn't consented? Good luck. So now that I own land, I'd 100% build something fixed. Consent it properly. Get insurance. Sleep easier.

Speaking of which, insurance is another thing people forget about until the end. If it's a vehicle, most caravan insurers want it to be road legal, with wheels on and ready to roll. If it's a dwelling, most insurers won't touch it unless it's fully consented and on land you own. If it's on skids, unconsented, and on someone else's paddock, you might be uninsurable. Not ideal when it's your one and only home.

So. Would I do it all again? Yes. But I'd do it differently. I'd still sell the house. I'd still go tiny. But I'd do it with more planning, less panic, and a better understanding of what happens *after* the build. Because building tiny isn't just about being clever with your space. It's about being clever with your exit plan, your backup plan, your can-I-legally-drive-this-in-five-years plan.

***"I used to be the person stuck behind slow motorhomes thinking why don't they just pull over. Then I became one."***

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# LOCKED-IN WEALTH OR FINANCIAL FREEDOM?

## WHAT DOWNSIZING REALLY LOOKS LIKE FOR RETIRING NEW ZEALANDERS

For thousands of older New Zealanders entering retirement, home ownership is both a blessing and a burden.

After decades of paying off a mortgage, couples like Mark and Helen, both 65, find themselves in the same position as many others in Auckland, they own a home worth more than a million dollars, but rely almost entirely on New Zealand Superannuation for their living costs.

"We're not struggling," Helen says. "But it doesn't leave much room for anything unexpected."

Their home, a modest three-bedroom in a west Auckland suburb, is currently valued at around \$1.04 million, slightly above the regional median. They've lived there for 23 years. It's where they raised their children, built their lives, and poured most of their financial security, security that now sits locked in a property that costs more money and energy to maintain every year.

With the full married NZ Super paying them around \$47,000 per year after tax, they say they meet their essential costs, but there's very little left over.

Their annual expenses include:

- \$3,500 in council rates
- \$3,000 in electricity
- \$2,000 in house insurance
- \$4,000 in home maintenance
- \$4,000 in vehicle costs
- \$20,000–\$22,000 in general living expenses (food, medical, petrol, phone, internet)

**Total: around \$36,500–\$38,500 per year**

"We're okay until something goes wrong," says Mark. "A major plumbing issue or medical cost, that's when it gets tight."

Mark and Helen also have a relatively modest KiwiSaver balance, around \$30,000, which they keep aside as an emergency fund. Their low balance isn't unusual for older New Zealanders who spent large parts of their working lives outside traditional PAYE employment structures.

For years, Mark ran a small business while Helen stayed home raising their children. As the kids got older, Helen helped with the admin side of the business, but because she wasn't formally employed, she wasn't contributing to KiwiSaver.

Mark didn't contribute either. Like many self-employed people, KiwiSaver contributions weren't automatic, and the business finances were tight. When the business eventually shut down, they were left with a small tax bill and had to rebuild financially. By the time Mark moved into full-time employment later in life and finally joined KiwiSaver, there simply weren't enough working years left to build a substantial retirement fund.

It's a situation thousands of New Zealanders in their retirement now face, decades of hard work, but not decades of KiwiSaver contributions.

With encouragement from their adult children, Mark and Helen explored what their finances would look like if they sold the family home and relocated into a tiny house on family land. The numbers were impossible to ignore. After selling their home for \$1.04 million and covering agent fees and legal costs, they would retain around \$1.005 million.

A fully self-contained tiny home with solar, modern fittings, and excellent insulation would cost around \$160,000.

They planned to lease a small patch of land on their daughter's property in Franklin at \$100 per week, or \$5,200 per year.

With no mortgage, no rates, and a fraction of their previous maintenance costs, their living expenses would shrink dramatically. Electricity costs would drop significantly (likely \$300–\$500 per year for backup grid use), tiny-house insurance is around \$1,100, and maintenance is typically under \$1,000 per year.

Their general living and transport costs remain around \$29,000 per year.

After purchasing the tiny home, Mark and Helen would be able to invest roughly \$845,000. Placed into a conservative-balanced portfolio, a realistic long-term return is around 4% on average, generating approximately \$33,800 per year in passive income. Combined with NZ Super, their new annual income becomes: Total income: around \$80,500 per year More than \$40,000 higher than what they effectively lived on before.

"We realised we were sitting on our retirement, it was just tied up in the house," Helen says. "Once we looked at the numbers, it made sense."



# What the Numbers Show

Scenario	Stay in the Home	Downsize & Invest
Annual Income	\$47,000 (Super only)	\$80,500 (Super + investment income)
Annual Costs	\$36,500–\$38,500	\$40,000–\$41,000
Liquid Assets	\$30,000 KiwiSaver	\$845,000 invested + \$30,000 KiwiSaver
Home Ownership	Yes (high maintenance)	Yes (new tiny home, low maintenance)
Flexibility	Low	High
Emergency Buffer	Minimal - Kiwisaver	Significant, investment returns + principal + Kiwisaver



The contrast is unmistakable.

Under the traditional model, their wealth is preserved but inaccessible, leaving them vulnerable to unexpected costs and rising living expenses. Under the tiny-house model, the same wealth is freed up to generate income, reduce stress, and create room for enjoyment and choice.

Rising living costs, longer retirements, and decades without KiwiSaver contributions are all pushing older New Zealanders to rethink what secure retirement looks like. For many, the family home no longer aligns with their financial reality. Downsizing isn't for everyone. Legalities, land access, relationships, and emotional attachment to the home all play a part. But for those who can navigate the practicalities, the benefits are real and significant.

"This is about having options," says a retirement adviser. "People don't want to be house-rich and cash-poor. They want their retirement income to support the lifestyle they've earned."

For Mark and Helen, downsizing isn't about giving up their home, it's about gaining security, freedom, and the ability to enjoy the next chapter without financial stress.

"We're not doing this because we have to," Helen says. "We're doing it because we want to enjoy the time we've earned."



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# TINY LIVING, BIG PRESSURES: WHAT THE 2025 EXPO UNCOVERED ABOUT AGEING KIWIS AND A BROKEN HOUSING SYSTEM

By Sharla May

Running the 2025 Tiny House Expo at Mystery Creek felt like opening a new chapter in a story I have been telling for ten events. It was not ten years, but the tenth expo, and reaching that milestone made me reflect on how far things have come since the first gathering of seventy people in what was essentially a small conference-style room. Back then, the questions were simple and the houses even more so. Today the industry is larger, older, more complex and moving in directions that reflect the social and economic pressures shaping life in NZ.

This was our first time stepping the expo away from Auckland, and the difference was immediate. Mystery Creek changed the feel of the entire event. It was calmer, more spacious and noticeably happier. Exhibitors felt it, attendees felt it and my team felt it. Free parking removed one of the biggest points of frustration we faced in Auckland.

Instead of people arriving irritated about spending twenty dollars on parking before even stepping inside the event, they entered relaxed and ready to explore. For us as organisers, the venue also offered practical advantages. With several wide entry points and generous turning circles, moving tiny houses in and out was significantly easier than navigating tight urban spaces and time-restricted transport windows. The rural setting made logistics smoother and the overall atmosphere more laid back.

The numbers reflected the shift. Our survey showed that 83 per cent of attendees loved the venue. Only 42.6 per cent were from Waikato. The rest travelled from further afield, including Auckland at 23.9 per cent and Bay of Plenty at 15.9 per cent. Friday became our busiest day for the first time, with 41 per cent of all ticket holders arriving then. Historically, Saturday has always been the peak. This year, afternoons tapered off earlier, likely because so many attendees had travelled in from out of town that morning.



One of the clearest trends at this year's expo was who is now driving the movement. The largest demographic was aged 56 and over, making up 57 per cent of attendees. Almost seventy per cent were women. The motivations of this group are very different from those of early tiny house adopters. Many are releasing equity from selling traditional homes to fund retirement, reduce living costs or create flexible arrangements with family. Others are actively avoiding retirement villages because of the complex financial models and exit fees that can leave people with far less than they expected. Increasingly, families are choosing to keep parents out of institutional care by placing a tiny home on their property. If circumstances change, the home can be moved or sold. That freedom is appealing.

These demographic changes have flowed directly into design trends. Builders are now producing larger homes, often between 12 and 14 metres long and up to 4 metres wide. They still fall within the broad tiny house category, but they are built for long-term comfort rather than mobility. Lofts have sharply declined in popularity. The three and a half tonne weight limit is no longer a priority. Instead, buyers want single-level living with better head height and a functional footprint suited to ageing in place.

Many builders have also begun designing for the new seventy square metre granny flat rules. That is where demand is strongest now, and the industry is adjusting accordingly.

There was one unintended theme this year. As the homes arrived, we quickly realised a large number were dressed in dark grey or black cladding with timber accents. We joked that it looked like the Fifty Shades of Grey Expo. Dark cladding is fashionable, but I would caution anyone building off-grid or in a warm region to consider its heat absorption. One end of my own home is dark, and I cannot place my hand on it during warm days. Lighter colours make a clear difference.



The shift to Mystery Creek had another important effect. It filtered the audience. Exhibitors consistently told me that attendees were significantly more prepared. They had done their research, followed specific builders online and arrived with detailed questions. Because Mystery Creek is not a venue you casually wander into, the typical one just having a nosy were filtered out. People came with intent. Friday in particular was extremely busy, and many exhibitors reported some of the strongest leads they have ever generated at any event. In a building sector where costs are high and margins tight, genuine leads matter more than ever, and exhibitors left with confidence.

After ten expos, you recognise familiar faces. There are attendees who have been to every single event since the beginning. It is surprisingly touching to see them each year and know the expo has become part of their annual ritual. We also welcomed several new builders into the tiny house expo family. I deliberately encourage a culture of collaboration rather than competition. Even though many exhibitors technically compete with one another, I believe good business is about doing your work well rather than tearing others down.

The Saturday night exhibitor catch-up is one of my highlights. It is informal, friendly and full of the behind-the-scenes camaraderie that never appears on social media. This year some builders engaged in a few harmless pranks, leaving jokes on each other's signage after hours and waiting to see if I would accidentally film it for TikTok. Others had a running challenge to weave inappropriate words into conversations with visitors so smoothly no one would notice. Watching these moments between long stretches of hard work reminds me why this industry is such a pleasure to be part of. Reaching the tenth expo has made the trajectory of the tiny house sector far clearer. Tiny houses are no longer driven by minimalism or adventurous living.

The shift in demographics tells a different story. New Zealand's population is ageing and ageing fast, and the housing market has not kept pace with that reality.

For decades, developers have prioritised large three and four-bedroom homes and high-density townhouses. What they have not been building are the one and two-bedroom standalone homes that older New Zealanders actually want. In many regions there is simply no supply. People wanting to downsize within their communities have no modern options. They face a choice between older homes requiring maintenance or retirement villages with contracts that can erode financial security.

This gap has pushed people to look elsewhere, and that elsewhere is increasingly tiny homes, granny flats and small secondary dwellings. These options allow older New Zealanders to remain independent, stay close to family, reduce their living costs and avoid the financial strain of retirement village fees. They also allow families more flexible ways to support ageing parents without committing to permanent property changes. If circumstances shift, the dwelling can be moved or sold. This is why we are seeing such rapid growth in larger tiny homes and seventy square metre



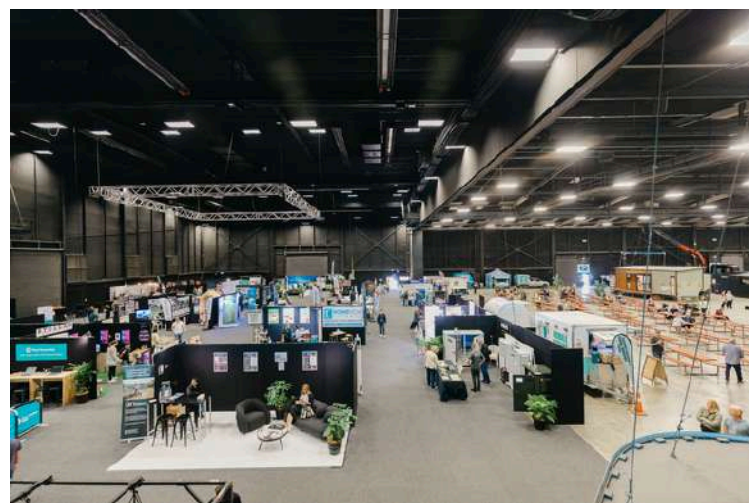


secondary dwellings. The demand is driven by Boomers and Gen X seeking modern, functional, low maintenance homes that fit the realities of retirement in New Zealand.

The future of tiny homes will be shaped far more by demographic pressure than by design trends. As long as the market fails to provide small, independent, retirement-friendly housing at scale, the demand for well-built tiny homes and secondary dwellings will continue to rise. What we are witnessing is not a fad. It is a direct response to decades of under-supplied downsizing options for older New Zealanders.

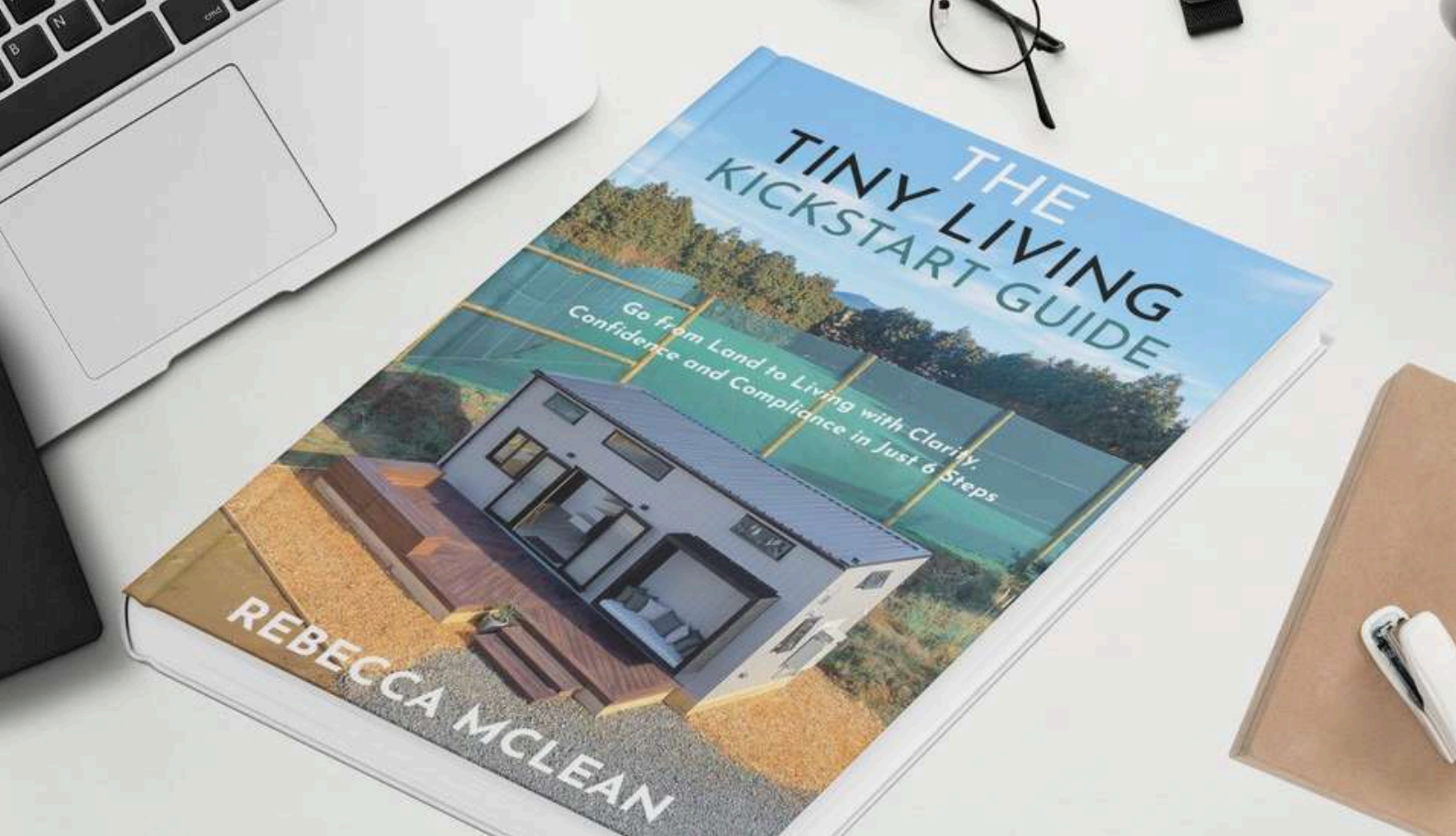
This expo felt like a turning point. Not just because it was the tenth, but because the move to Mystery Creek clarified the industry's direction. The demographic shift, the seriousness of buyers, the evolution in design and the growing focus on ageing all became more pronounced in a calm, rural venue that allowed us to see the sector with fresh eyes. It showed me that the tiny house movement has matured into something far bigger than small homes. It has become a housing solution for people seeking dignity, autonomy and security in a market that is not designed for them.

If this expo revealed anything, it is that tiny homes are no longer a fringe idea. They are a realistic, flexible response to the pressures facing everyday New Zealanders. And as those pressures continue, the movement will keep growing, adapting and evolving, just as it has over the last ten expos.



Check out all the photos  
from this years expo.

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# Financing Your Tiny Dream:

## Unconventional Houses Call for Unconventional Methods

Tiny homes, with their minimalistic allure and promise of a simpler life, are capturing imaginations worldwide. While they're often more affordable than their full-sized counterparts, these quaint abodes aren't exactly pocket change. So, how do you gather the funds to start living large in a small space?

Dive in with us as we unpack the financing options for these unique homes. And for an even deeper dive, head to the [Tiny House Hub](#) for their comprehensive guide on the subject!



### 1. Personal Loans: The Trusty Go-To

For many, a personal loan is the first port of call. Ideal for those who've already squirrelled away a chunk of change, these loans can bridge the financial gap. Secured loans generally have lower interest rates since they're backed by an asset. But even unsecured loans, with their higher rates, can be a fitting choice if you've budgeted well. Just remember, shopping around is key! It might be a tad tedious, but comparing loan offers ensures you snag the best deal.

### 2. Caravans & Motorhomes: An Unexpected Path

Here's a twist: some lenders in New Zealand cater to caravan and motorhome buyers, and given that many tiny homes are mobile, they qualify! A quick online search will point you to these niche lenders. As always, comparing offers will serve you well.

### 3. Tapping into Home Equity

Already own a home? Consider refinancing. By adding the cost of your tiny house to your existing home loan, you might benefit from the generally lower interest rates of home mortgages. Check in with your bank to see if this route is viable for you.

### 4. Land Equity: A Solid Foundation

If you've procured a patch of land for your tiny dream home, assess the equity you have in that property. It might be your ticket to securing that much-needed loan.

### 5. Group Savings Pool: Community Strength

Embody the spirit of tiny living by joining a savings pool. These community-led initiatives are all about mutual benefit. Members contribute to a pool and can borrow from it interest-free. Such schemes foster trust and often lead to a culture of mutual aid – be it sharing meals, tools, or even helping hands.

### 6. KiwiSaver First Home Loan Withdrawal

A potential but tricky option. Generally, KiwiSaver isn't available for tiny house purchases. But there are exceptions. If this is your maiden voyage into homeownership, it's worth investigating further. [The Tiny House Hub](#) has an excellent resource to guide you through the KiwiSaver maze.

### 7. Family & Friends: The Original Crowdfunding

In New Zealand, family often plays a pivotal role in property acquisition. This tradition needn't change just because the house is tinier. From informal loans to formal guarantor arrangements, the possibilities are as vast as your family's willingness.

### 8. Financial Advisors: Navigating the Tiny Waters

Wading through financing can feel like a maze. Enlisting the expertise of a financial advisor, especially one acquainted with the tiny house movement, can make all the difference. While some advisors might steer you towards certain products due to affiliations, it's worth noting that unbiased advice can sometimes come at a fee.

While the world of tiny house financing might seem like uncharted territory, with a mix of traditional and innovative methods, you're sure to find a pathway that fits. Remember, it's not just about the destination (a lovely new home), but also the journey. Embrace the learning curve, and before long, you'll be basking in the joy of your tiny haven.

**For more insights and details, be sure to check out the [Tiny House Hub's free guide on financing options for tiny houses](#).**



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- **Smokers:** Yes
- **WiFi connection:** No
- **Private location:** No

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- **Water connection:** Yes
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- **Pet Friendly:** Yes
- **Child Friendly:** Yes
- **Smokers:** No
- **WiFi Connection:** No
- **Private Location:** No



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