





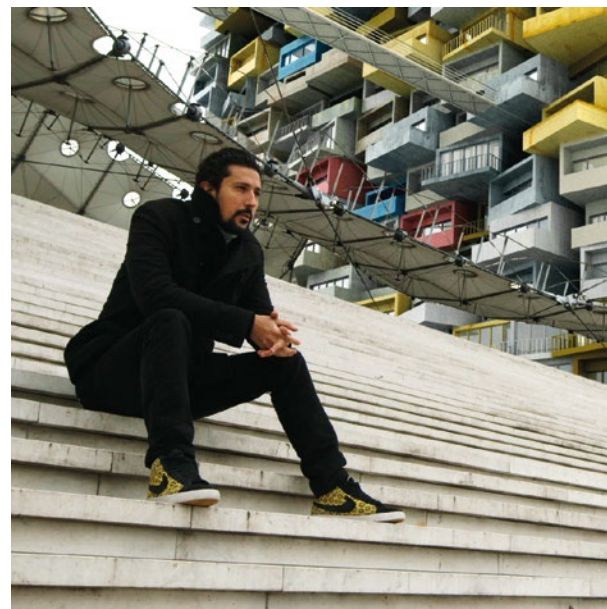
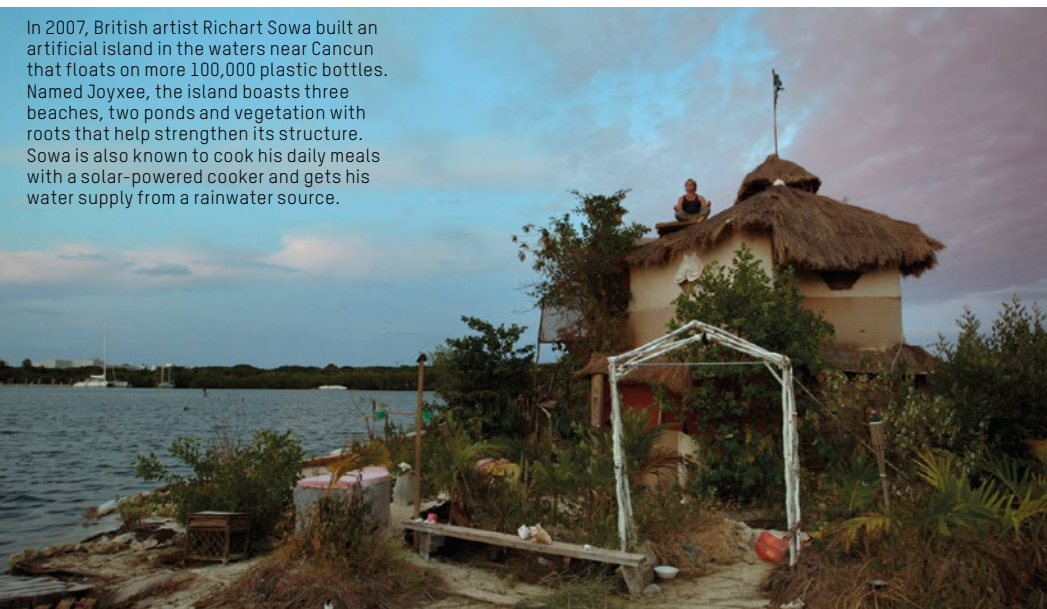
REPORT

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Small in space, big on ideas. Is living downsized the new cool?

By KENNY LOH

In 2007, British artist Richard Sowa built an artificial island in the waters near Cancun that floats on more 100,000 plastic bottles. Named Joyxee, the island boasts three beaches, two ponds and vegetation with roots that help strengthen its structure. Sowa is also known to cook his daily meals with a solar-powered cooker and gets his water supply from a rainwater source.



REDEFINING THE WAY WE LIVE

I was homebound on a Singapore Airlines flight from Hong Kong and was thumbing through the pages of Krisworld when the poster of *Microtopia*, a film in the documentary section caught my attention. On it was a quote that read, “to be able to figure out what you really need and scale it back makes all the rest of life easier”. I was intrigued, hitting the play button on my in-flight handset.

Now, let me summarise the 55-minute flick. One: It is about living in spaces so small, they are referred to as micro. Two: These tiny homes are not the best-looking around, though some score points for bordering between sci-fi and futuristic. Three: It explores how nine architects, artists and ordinary problem solvers around the world are redefining the way we live by building homes that stray from the traditional. Four: Above all, these nine minds have created a concept that benefits both the environment and its people.

Take John Wells for example. The eco-minded American who collects rainwater for drinking had built himself a sustainable home out in the West Texan desert that’s powered by four wind turbines and 15 solar panels. He even has his own greenhouse that’s made out of shipping containers and cinder blocks. Then there’s French architect Stephane Malka, who is the man behind Pocket of Active Resistance – an idea that uses free space in between buildings to create more housing for people. “There are a lot of architects today who are pushing the envelope,” says Californian architect Cate Leger, who dubs her husband and herself as “green builders”. They had recently designed a residence in Berkeley made out of car windows and 100 salvaged car roofs. “I believe tiny homes are the future, or they should be,” she adds. “It’s hard to tell people you have to live small, but building ecologically responsible housing is essential to our survival as a species.”

MAXIMISING ON MICRO

Ironically, Hong Kong boasts some of the tightest living spaces in the world. Its condominiums resemble pigeon holes that are densely packed on top of each other, and

can house a family of four or more in a bedroom-sized apartment. However, Hong Kong is also home to a wave of architects with the same creative and innovative sensibilities as the nine in the film, like Gary Chang, whose 344-square-foot apartment in the city’s bustling San Wai Ho district can be transformed 24 ways by just sliding panels and walls. “It’s all about transformation, flexibility and maximising space,” he says.

Even hotels are dreaming up ways to battle Hong Kong’s property crunch, one of them being Mini Hotel, which has managed to comfortably fit a bathroom and a double bed into an average 80 to 120 square feet of space in the city’s prime Central and Causeway Bay districts. There are many reasons, countless in fact, why a person would give up a large living space in favour of one that’s a whole lot smaller. It may be an eco-conscious ethos that will not build at the expense of a better environment, or simply a desire to cut costs in today’s booming economy.

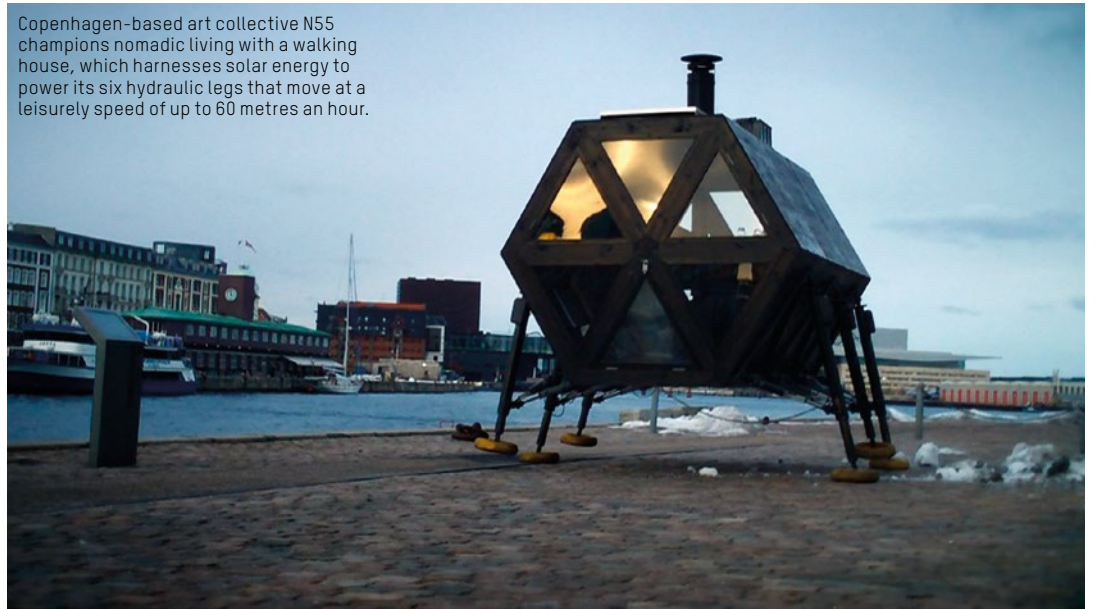
But there are also a crop of forward-thinking Samaritans like American social entrepreneur Veronika Scott, who in 2011 started The Empowerment Plan. A Detroit-based non-profit organisation, it hires previously homeless women from local area shelters to sew innovative coats that double as nomadic sleeping bags, which are then distributed to the homeless locally and internationally. “I started to understand that it wasn’t just about people trying to meet physical needs,” says Scott. “There are a lot of places that provide the physical needs of shelter, food and warmth, but they don’t meet the emotional needs of independence and self-reliance,” she adds. “People want to be able to take care of themselves and that was what first inspired the coat.”

Microtopia is more than just a documentary on micro homes. It’s proof, through the work of nine great minds, that one can indeed live big in a small space without sacrificing comfort or design, even in Singapore today where apartments are becoming increasingly smaller, no thanks to the lack of land for property development. Says American architect Jennifer Siegal, “It’s less about bigger is better, but smaller is smarter.”

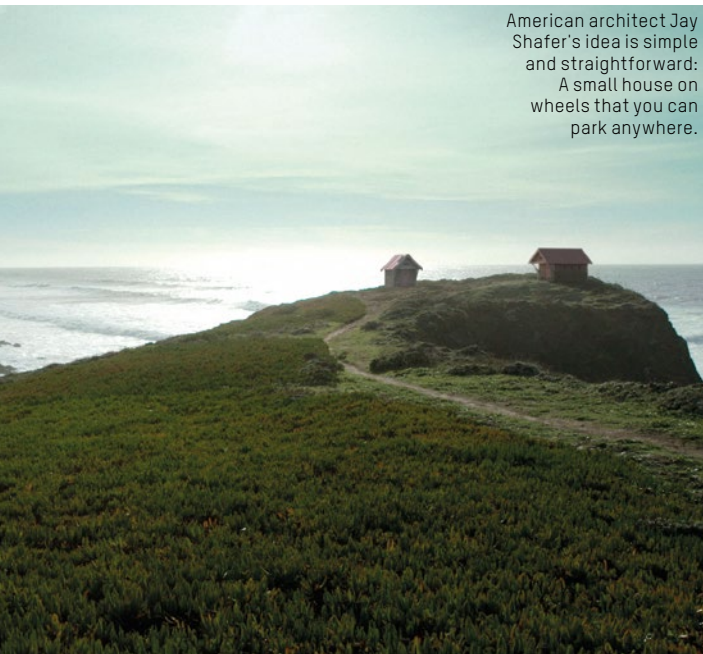




French architect Stephane Malka is the visionary behind the concept of utilising space in between buildings that might have been wasted to create more homes for people.



Copenhagen-based art collective N55 champions nomadic living with a walking house, which harnesses solar energy to power its six hydraulic legs that move at a leisurely speed of up to 60 metres an hour.



American architect Jay Shafer's idea is simple and straightforward: A small house on wheels that you can park anywhere.



Greek architects Aristide Antonas and Katerina Koutsogianni have dreamed up sci-fi movie-worthy bedrooms that elevate into the sky.



When inflated, the Sleeping Bag Dress by Polish artist Ana Rewakowicz transforms, from a dress into a cylindrical sleeping bag with a small computer fan powered by solar energy.



Former American photographer John Wells built himself a sustainable home far out in the West Texan desert, using his entire environment in his everyday living such as collecting rainwater for drinking.