

The Tiniest of Tiny Homes: An Austin Man is Living Inside a Dumpster

by MICHELLE BURWELL

How much stuff do we really need to live happy, healthy lives? “What this is, is an experiment to test to the absolute limit, if you can be happy and healthy in a very small space,” said Jeff Wilson, Environmental Science professor and Dean of Huston-Tillotson University in Austin, Texas. As people continue to scale down, living more simplistic, minimalist lives, many report feeling happier. To determine just how little a person could live happily and comfortable on, Wilson is conducting an experiment to see how small he can go; and he’s doing it in a repurposed dumpster.

For one year Wilson will live in a 33 square ft dumpster, transforming the “home” from its bare bones to a high-tech., sustainable living quarter along the way, all while monitoring the minimum needed to survive and thrive. For the first few months of The Dumpster Project, Wilson was sleeping inside the dumpster on cardboard boxes. He has since upgraded to a bed, minimal storage and even air conditioning. He still fetches water but will soon be connecting a shower and toilet to the dumpster through the outside.

Wilson poses these thought-provoking questions to his class: What does home look like in a world of 10 billion people? How do we equip current and future generations with the tools they need for sustainable living practices? Can the world’s finite resources actually sustain the swelling population?

Wilson will enter the project’s third phase in a few months, the phase he calls the “uber dumpster home.” That’s where the dumpster will be retrofitted with solar panels, go completely off the electric grid and obtain that coveted curb appeal- by making it look less like a dumpster.

Professor Wilson told The Atlantic, “The big hypothesis we’re trying to test here is, can you have a pretty darn good life on much, much less?” He paused. “This is obviously an outlier experiment. But so far, I have, I’d say. A better life than I had before.”

On October 6-8 The Dumpster Project will be on display at SXSWECO.

Photos: Sarah Natsumi