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INDIGENOUS SMALL HOME LIVING

What makes small homes FAAB (functional, accessible, affordable, buildable) for Māori?

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Abstract

This study explored whether functional, accessible, affordable, buildable (FAAB) small homes (45–70 m²) can meet the needs and aspirations of whānau Māori. Seventeen participants shared their experiences and design preferences through interviews and interactive activities. Analysis was informed by Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985), a Māori model of wellbeing that recognises the interconnectedness of spiritual, emotional, physical, and whānau dimensions. Participants emphasised the importance of whānau-centred design, connection to whenua, cultural expression, and accessibility across life stages. Small homes were seen as offering affordable, flexible solutions, particularly within papakāinga contexts. While not a universal solution, small homes can contribute to Māori housing aspirations when led by Māori design processes and grounded in Māori values such as manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and rangatiratanga. This research underscores the potential of Indigenous-led housing innovation to enhance wellbeing, belonging, and intergenerational resilience for Māori communities.

Keywords

accessible, affordable, functional, housing, small homes

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Introduction

For Māori, the concept of home can go beyond a single, physical dwelling typically described as a house, as a notion of home carries cultural and relational meanings that extend well beyond the material structure of a dwelling (R. A. Kearns, 2006). Home may encompass spaces of cultural gathering or whenua tūpuna within a tribal rohe (Rewi & Higgins, 2015). In many cases, home may also refer to more than one location—such as an urban residence and an ancestral home connected to tribal identity (Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2015). Māori aspirations for housing and home are not only cultural preferences; they are underpinned by te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and Indigenous rights frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirm the right of Māori to live on our lands and in accordance with our values (Arbury & Cram, 2023; United Nations, 2007).

In this study, we asked whether a small home could suit whānau Māori. If it could, then what design considerations are needed to ensure the best possible fit to enable a small dwelling to be culturally responsive and, most of all, a home? This introduction explores culturally responsive housing and whether smaller houses offer a solution for whānau Māori, particularly given their growing popularity in a housing system that marginalises low- and middle-income Māori households (Mitchell et al., 2025). We then ask what makes these small homes accessible and functional for Māori, before describing the present study.

Culturally responsive housing

Understanding Māori housing needs, priorities, and aspirations requires an appreciation of the cultural meaning and significance of home. In te ao Māori, all things possess a wairua and a mauri (Barlow, 1991). Whānau homes are therefore both physical dwellings and spiritual spaces. Housing is often also genealogically and culturally connected with the land (Waldegrave et al., 2006), with this relationship reflected in many whakataukī that speak of land as a tūrangawaewae and of Māori as kaitiaki of the land for future generations (Dignan, 2017; Edwards, 2010). In his research on positive ageing among Māori, Will Edwards (2010) concluded that the concept of a "home place" is "less about the provision of physical shelter and comfort, and more about cultural links to a physical domain that reinforces cultural identity and a sense of security" (p. 266).

Manaakitanga—expressed through generosity, hospitality, and care for others—also shapes identity and belonging. Māori housing decisions are often influenced by a desire to care for and accommodate extended whānau, including kaumātua, in ways that reflect respect and responsibility (Boulton et al., 2022; Cram & Munro, 2020). As a participant in Waldegrave et al.'s (2006) research explained, an ideal home is one designed to include and support children, grandchildren, and elders, particularly as they age and require additional care (p. 101). Culturally responsive housing is therefore inherently intergenerational, designed to meet present whānau needs and safeguard whakapapa and wellbeing across generations. For many Māori, fulfilling these cultural and relational obligations can take precedence over the condition of the house itself, with some choosing to remain in or return to substandard housing so they can maintain whānau ties and connection to whenua tūpuna (Cram et al., 2024).

In this way, housing for Māori is a source of ontological security—that is, a place where people are able to "feel in control of their environment [and are] free from surveillance, free to be themselves and at ease in the deepest psychological sense" (Saunders, 1990, p. 361). This is housing that supports and facilitates wellbeing (Hadjiyanni et al., 2012) rather than detracting from it (Campbell et al., 2022). For example, Māori informants in a study by Cram (2020) described home as defined by the love, comfort, and sense of security fostered by their whānau. While common values underpin many Māori housing preferences, there is also diversity in how these are expressed across whānau, hapū, and iwi, and between urban and rural settings (Boulton et al., 2022).

Māori access to quality housing

Unfortunately, housing that nurtures the sense of belonging and security described above is often out of reach for whānau. Māori face a unique and compounding set of challenges in accessing affordable housing that are rooted in colonisation, historical dispossession, collective land tenure, systemic financial exclusion, and persistent socioeconomic inequities (Arbury & Cram, 2023; Boulton et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2025). In the mid-1970s, the proportion of Māori households living in owner-occupied homes outweighed the proportion who lived in rented accommodation. By the 2023 Census, just 27.5% of Māori owned or partly owned a house ("Waitangi Day 2025", 2025).

While ontological security can be found in rental accommodation (A. Kearns et al., 2000), there are not enough legislative guardrails in

Aotearoa New Zealand to ensure this (Berry et al., 2017; Stats NZ, 2021). Māori are also more likely to live in housing that is overcrowded, poorly insulated, or in disrepair, which contributes to negative health outcomes and further entrenches inequity (Howden-Chapman et al., 2022). What Helena Barwick said in 1991 is still relevant today: Māori cannot count on their rental accommodation being a "protection from physical adversity … a place of safety and comfort" (p. 40). Economists Shamubeel and Selena Eaqub have argued that the housing market needs to be rebalanced if renters are to have access to secure and quality housing (Eaqub & Eaqub, 2016). In addition, the cost of rental accommodation increases year on year, cutting into household budgets. For example, in the 12 months to the June 2024 quarter, average rents for Māori households increased 5.2% (Stats NZ, 2024), with many households spending more than 40% of their income on housing (Stats NZ, 2025b) and reporting that their household disposable income is "only just enough" or "not enough" (Stats NZ, 2025a).

Rising housing costs and land prices have made smaller homes a more affordable home ownership option as they can enable whānau to live close together and potentially on whānau land, establishing an intergenerational living context (see Box 1). The coalition government has recently made it easier to build small standalone dwellings of up to 70 square metres without resource consent. Associate Finance Minister Shane Jones stated in 2025, "In the Far North I saw how extended family often live together at the same property. Changing the rules to make it easier to build more family accommodation allows generational living at an affordable price" (Bishop et al., 2025). This change is likely to be welcomed by iwi, hapū, and Māori organisations that are leading housing initiatives grounded in cultural values—strengthening rangatiratanga in the housing space (Potter, 2022; Reddy et al., 2022).

Accessible and functional homes

While smaller dwellings must meet the Building Code (Bishop et al., 2025), the legislation that sets out the performance requirements of new builds excludes accessibility and functionality (James et al., 2018). In other words, the Universal Design and accessibility requirements introduced by Lifemark (n.d.), a local not-for-profit organisation, in 2012 exceed the current Building Code requirements. This is, however, changing as the criticality of accessibility and functionality, particularly for older people, has been more widely recognised by government agencies (Office for Seniors, 2019).

New builds by Manaaki Tairāwhiti, an iwi-led partnership in the Tairāwhiti region focused on improving social services, have a Lifemark 3-star rating (Campbell et al., 2022). These dwellings are therefore usable, adaptable, accessible, and safe for disabled and elderly residents (Lifemark, n.d.). Manaaki Tairāwhiti also "adopts kaupapa Māori urban design principles in planning our urban areas and where our people want to live ... Māori architectural principles are a core part of housing design, enabling Māori to live well in and be proud of their homes" (Campbell et al., 2022, p. 13). Small dwellings built by the Tāmaki Regeneration Company for emergency housing have a Lifemark 3- or 4-star rating. The dwellings, which are managed by Island Child Charitable Trust, are viewed as successful by residents (Hancock, 2022).

Having housing that supports good living for tangata whaikaha Māori and their whānau is essential. One in four Māori experience disability, compared with fewer than one in six non-Māori

BOX 1. Whānau tiny home

Dr Truely Harding and Mahue Dewes embraced the tiny home lifestyle to stay close to whānau while securing an affordable, functional space of their own. After struggling to find a traditional home that fit their needs, they opted to place a custom-built 12-metre-by-3-metre whare on Harding's parents' land in Northland. Designed for their growing whānau, the home balances practicality and comfort, featuring smart storage solutions and a covered deck that serves as an outdoor living area. The move has not only strengthened their connection to te ao Māori and sustainable living but has also fostered a more mindful, whānau-centred lifestyle (Klein Nixon, 2024). Their story illustrates how small homes can uphold whānau values, strengthen ties to whenua, and offer culturally grounded solutions for contemporary Māori housing needs.

(King, 2019). Among Māori aged 45–64, the prevalence rises to more than two in five, and for those over 65, the prevalence is three in five, with 63% of disabled Māori over 65 reporting multiple impairments (King, 2019). It is therefore important to know if smaller homes can potentially better support tangata whaikaha Māori by enabling growth and development of the young, the highest level of function in mid-life, and independence and connectedness in older life (Saville-Smith et al., 2007). While whānau are positive about small emergency housing they stay in for up to three months (Hancock, 2022), committing to a small home as a long-term or permanent option is a different scenario.

In summary, ensuring that small dwellings are not only affordable but also functional, accessible, and culturally grounded is vital to meeting the diverse needs of Māori, especially tangata whaikaha Māori. The challenge and opportunity lie in designing small homes that go beyond compliance to truly support wellbeing across the life course. This means listening to Māori voices, recognising the broader impacts of colonisation, and embedding cultural values and aspirations into design and policy. Given these national developments and design considerations, we set out to explore how whānau Māori view small homes that are FAAB—functional, accessible, affordable, and buildable.

The present study

This study explored whānau Māori views FAAB small homes, defined as being around 45–70 m² in size. The study was a qualitative Kaupapa Māori inquiry (by, with, for Māori), ensuring that Māori voices, experiences, and aspirations shaped every stage of the research. Three early career researchers were also supported to undertake interviews with whānau. In talking with whānau, we wanted to know whether FAAB small homes are acceptable and what design considerations are important. We asked participants to reflect on the potential of these homes to support wellbeing across the life course and to share their thoughts on what would make such a house feel like a home. Participants were also invited to engage in a hypothetical redesign of a small home's interior, offering insights into what they would prioritise or change to better align with their values, needs, and aspirations.

This Kaupapa Māori study reflected Māori ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological assumptions that privilege a Māori worldview that is relational (Cram & Adcock, 2022). This methodology was selected because of its alignment with the study's aim to centre whānau Māori perspectives, values, and aspirations in housing design. Kaupapa Māori research upholds Indigenous sovereignty and ensures research is accountable to whānau, hapū, and iwi (L. T. Smith, 2021). Kaupapa Māori research seeks to understand Māori worldviews and lived realities, as well as deconstruct historical, social, economic, political, and cultural determinants of Māori wellbeing (G. H. Smith, 2012; World Health Organization, 1997).

Method

Seventeen participants—many with lived experience of disability, housing stress, or community-based housing initiatives—shared their views through in-depth interviews that included both kōrero and hands-on design activities. These conversations, shaped by whakawhanaungatanga and supported by koha, aimed to surface not just opinions but aspirations. Participants were invited to reconfigure internal layouts, evaluate floorplans, and reflect on place, cultural meaning, and practical functionality. Through this process, the study captured both imagined possibilities and grounded realities to inform future housing design, policy, and practice.

In-depth interviews were conducted, either in-person or over Zoom depending on participants' preference, by three interviewers—two Māori and one non-Māori (whose connection to the kaupapa stemmed from having a Māori partner and children). Following rituals of encounter (e.g., whakawhanaungatanga, karakia), participants were invited to participate in the study, and their informed consent was obtained. The interviews ranged from 25 to 55 minutes in length, and were semistructured around five components:

1. Looking at two small, accessible home designs (50 m² and 73.7 m²) and discussing if and how they might work for whānau.
2. Watching five minutes of a clip showing an example of a small apartment conversion in Paris and discussing use of space and design (what is possible in small spaces) and what might work for whānau Māori.
3. Inviting participants to share their ideas of an internal layout for a small house, using a blank footprint and cutouts or screenshots of furniture/furnishings.
4. Discussion of the importance of place—where participants ideally wanted to be located and why, and whether a FAAB small home could work for them.

5. A final check-in to ensure participants' demographic details were collected and finishing-up the interview by asking if the participants had anything else they felt we should know about.

With participants' agreement, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and photographs/screenshots were taken of the completed activity. Participants each received a koha of a $100 grocery voucher in appreciation of their time and sharing. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee (AREC23_60).

Participants

Participants were recruited through the interviewers' networks, including contacts from previous studies. While the sample size was small and some interviews were conducted over Zoom, we are confident the study has generated valuable insights into Māori perspectives on small home living.

Two interviewers interviewed six participants each, while the third interviewer interviewed five participants. The 17 participants ranged in age from 15 to 63 years, with an average age of 36 years (*SD* = 13.1 years). Fourteen wāhine and three tāne were interviewed. This diversity of participants ensured a broad range of experiences, values, and needs were reflected in the findings.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically, drawing on inductive coding while guided by an established Māori wellbeing framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This entailed reading, rereading, and coding the transcripts for an emergent conceptual framework, themes, and subthemes. Following initial coding, we trialled Te Whare Tapa Whā as a coding framework. This Māori wellbeing model, first developed by Sir Mason Durie (1985), conceptualises health as an interdependent balance of four dimensions: te taha wairua, te taha hinengaro, te taha tinana, and te taha whānau. As participants described what made a small home feel functional, supportive, or aspirational, their insights consistently aligned with these four interconnected dimensions. This prompted us to structure our findings using Te Whare Tapa Whā, which illuminated how whānau Māori evaluate housing not merely for shelter but for its ability to sustain whānau relationships, spiritual grounding, emotional ease, and physical accessibility. Participants' kōrero enriches the results described below. The first letter of a participant's pseudonym indicates their age group (A = under 30, K = 30–45 years, M = 46 and over). The tāne were Anaru, Kātene and Mikaere.

Results

Whānau Māori participants' kōrero on the potential of FAAB small homes is shared through a Te Whare Tapa Whā lens, with their insights speaking to the holistic nature of home as a site of whānau wellbeing—not just shelter, but a space for connection, care, identity, and futureproofing.

1. Whānau: Collective living, manaakitanga, and whanaungatanga

For participants, a home was first and foremost a place for whānau. Small homes were therefore seen as needing to support whānau living collectively, caring for mokopuna, and gathering together. The ability of whānau to enact manaakitanga, offering hospitality to extended whānau and visitors, was central.

> I feel like it's definitely the people that make a space home. Like this to me, like does it make me feel any way because I'm just looking at a layout in a house. Whereas it wouldn't be the stuff inside the house that made me happy, it will be the people and the memories and the experiences and the things that the house is capable of creating, rather than the house itself. Because I don't actually need a house to be happy, rather that I needed just a place for people. (Anahera)

> It's really important … whānau—whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. That's like the coming together of family, of our whānau. That's what I was raised on as well as that's what I saw. Actually, we might just put the sliding door here. Wouldn't that be cool to have the sliding door here? Just out and it's open. Then there's trees—beautiful. (Kowhai)

Several participants expressed concern that small dwellings would struggle to accommodate these whānau ways of living. Some, like Aroha, said a small dwelling was best suited for just a single occupant or a couple, although others like Anaru thought they could make it work if they really had to: "This will be my dream room till I have kids or something, dream house until I have kids, and then it will be dumb." Others described the unsuitability of a small dwelling for their multigenerational whānau. Marika, who lived with her three tamariki and eight mokopuna, said:

> I don't believe that the structure of tiny homes can accommodate that, and therefore it doesn't suit me. … I don't like the idea of being boxed in. As I said before, there isn't enough room. We're Māori. We think of whānau whānui, and that doesn't work for me.

At the same time, others saw potential in small homes as starter homes or transitional living spaces, particularly for smaller nuclear whānau or as part of a larger papakāinga: "Back home, we're looking at papakāinga too, but a lot of people can't build the big whares, but a tiny home is a good place to start" (Mei). Overall, participants did not define a home solely by its physical size but by its capacity to nurture whānau wellbeing.

2. Tinana: Functionality, accessibility, and comfort

Physical functionality and accessibility were seen as non-negotiable because small homes needed to accommodate whānau across life stages and abilities. Participants emphasised that a small home needed to be physically functional for diverse whānau needs, including accessibility for kaumātua, larger whānau members, and disabled whānau. Key functional features mentioned included step-free access (ramps, wide doorways), spacious bathrooms, flexible storage solutions, and internal layouts that enabled flow and avoided congestion.

> That's another thing I'd have to look at is the space. Can I fit down the [hallway]? Because we're voluptuous maidens ... My age is [also] a big factor at the moment because as I've gotten older, I've noticed that things aren't working the same as they used to 20 or 30 years ago ... So, that's the biggest obstacle at the moment. (Mei)

> I dislike how small the bathroom is. I wish it was bigger … It's not really accessible, it's not as accessible for me … [It] might be a bit small for getting around in a wheelchair when it's needed. (Anaru)

Designing for adaptability and the creative use of space were recurring themes. Participants balanced the importance of providing tamariki with their own space with realities of co-sleeping, multigenerational living, and the practicalities of making small spaces work for large whānau. Anahera commented:

> I feel like for the smaller one, having the one bed is fine. I grew up co-sleeping. I think it's very beneficial to wellbeing. I think that she could sleep in my bed well into her adolescence, that wouldn't be a problem. And there's so much space in this communal space that she could do so much with, rather than doing it in the bedroom, like she'll have this half and I'd have that half.

Participants who adapted the space to retain bedrooms talked about floating beds and bunk beds, pocket doors, and reducing the size of bedrooms so they could have more living space. They also described how open-plan living could support whanaungatanga, with spaces that could shift between intimate whānau use and larger gatherings. Kaia described this as "the whole marae effect".

> Well, we'd probably make our living space a bit more smaller just so that we can have tamariki in each room, that's kind of around the same length and width of ia rūma. (Kiri)

> On our left we have an open space of our kitchen, a nice island. I love island tables, I just feel like it gives it more of a family feel and I always love that ... We all could be sitting … having kōreros, noho tahi and, ki ahau, ko te mea nui i roto i taku whare he whakauru mai i te ao Māori … te ao Māori e kōrerorero, he whakawhanaunga, he noho tahi, he kai tahi, wērā momo mea. (Areta)

Participants also discussed cleanability and clutter, seeing small spaces as both an opportunity and a challenge. Kaia shared:

> Having a smaller space is easier to keep ... Being a single mum with three toddlers, even though they have a hundred toys, it's easier to maintain their toys in a smaller space than it is in a bigger space.

Warmth, energy efficiency and natural light were also critical considerations:

> Warm yeah. Like double-glazed windows is a must now. We have double-glazed windows. When you go from this to anywhere else it's cold. (Ana)

> So my design is based around a northern facing area ... You want the sun to be in your kitchen and living area and to a degree some bedrooms if you can because those are the living areas where people are most of the day and you don't wanna be sitting in a lounge or a kitchen facing south in the dark when that's your living area. (Kiri)

Even with the opportunity to reorganise internal spaces, some participants still viewed small homes

as only good for very small whānau. For example, Aria said, "They would work for individuals, like sole people, but not for little families." Overall, participants valued homes that could evolve with their whānau, balancing simplicity with practicality and accessibility.

3. Wairua: Connection to place, tūrangawaewae, and the whenua

The spiritual dimension of home was deeply felt in participants' kōrero about place. For many, aspirations to return to ancestral lands and establish papakāinga were central, even if, as in Karena's case, they were put off by whānau disagreements about the whenua. This was about being able to live on their own whenua.

> I would love to move back to [name of place] one day where I had a bit of growing up there. I've moved around so much but I just want a place where I can settle down now with my family, it's growing. We would love a papakāinga or just somewhere where we can always stay and have no worries. Have our gardens, our kai growing and animals. Yeah, and just feeling safe in our own whare and own whenua. (Adriane)

Like those thinking about papakāinga, other participants emphasised that beyond the house itself, surroundings, environment and community were vital for their wellbeing. For both Kaia and Kahukura, this was about living in a place they loved.

> Being in [name of place] and surrounded by the moana brings peace. Being in [there] amongst all of that freshness brings serenity. (Kaia)

> I love living in [name of place] ... Just like the community. I grew up here as a child, and I love how my kids are growing up here as children. It's not too far from the city. (Kahukura)

For urban whānau, connection to the whenua was often balanced with practicalities of mahi, schooling, and amenities. If moving to a small home meant moving to another suburb or city, they were less enthusiastic about it as an option.

> [The ideal] place to have this whare would be in [name of place]. Mahi and it's accessible, it's near to my home. (Areta)

> I think it's different now because the children are settled. They haven't moved. That's a barrier. I would love to move. I don't think I could. The barrier is knowing that my children are settled and safe. They've got their father's family not far. Their school is here and everything is very familiar. To actually up and leave that I suppose would be a hard thing to do. (Kowhai)

Living in an urban environment could also be about retaining some privacy and distance from neighbours, although Aria also described being drawn to return back to her rural homeplace:

> Not too close to my neighbours. There's big gaps between me and my neighbours. I wouldn't want to open my curtain and see my neighbour in their house, especially in my backyard. Area wise, no, I'm not really fussed.

Overall, participants saw housing as a site of identity, belonging, and security, reinforcing the need for design approaches that honour whakapapa and wairua.

4. Hinengaro: Emotional wellbeing, simplicity, and privacy

Participants reflected on the emotional dimensions of small home living, including how space impacts mental wellbeing, privacy and stress. Downsizing to a smaller home was often viewed positively, as a way to simplify life and focus on what mattered. For some, downsizing meant living without their children, although they still felt obliged to provide housing for them.

> I think a lot of us need to downsize anyway. Some of the stuff that we accumulate. (Karena)

> We're pretty much, yeah, like just being real minimal. That's the cool realistic. Trying to use natural resources where we can. (Mikaere)

Other participants who owned their own homes, like Adriane, were wanting to retain them as futureproofing for the next generation: "I'm not going to be around all the time and I want somewhere stable for them where they can feel at home and not have to worry about what they're going to do when they're older."

Participants also noted the potential of not having privacy in a small home, particularly if it was crowded or spaces had to be shared. Ana talked about the importance of their current whare providing for separation and privacy:

> Living with another family you don't really want to be in each other's face all day every day. So we

> can be down here and they can be up there, or vice-versa. We can still have some kind of separatism.

Some participants valued having designated quiet spaces within small homes for retreat and relaxation: "My space is just my own little sanctuary" (Makere).

Safety was a common theme, including fencing for tamariki, concerns about neighbourhoods, and the importance of feeling secure at home. Aroha, for example, did not feel safe in her recently renovated Kāinga Ora house as it had been broken into. For some, like Anaru, safety also had a cultural aspect whereby facilities should be separated, with the bathroom and laundry located away from living areas. Others, like Kātene, could see the practical sense of them being co-located:

> I do actually like the way that the kitchen is well away from the bathroom area, I do like that. It's blocked off by the hallway. (Anaru)

> The laundry and the bathroom is shared, eh? So, the laundry and the bathroom are all in the same place, which I think makes sense. I think because all that stuff's wet-related, so it makes sense to put it all in the bathroom/laundry area. (Kātene)

Overall, small homes were not inherently problematic for participants; rather, their success depended on thoughtful, whānau-centred design that reflected Māori values and ways of living.

Discussion

This study examined whether FAAB small homes can support the diverse and intergenerational needs of whānau Māori. Participants' kōrero revealed that a home is not just a shelter, but a space where cultural values, spiritual grounding, emotional safety, and collective wellbeing must coexist. The four dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985)—wairua, hinengaro, tinana, and whānau—provided a holistic frame for understanding what makes a small home viable and meaningful for Māori.

While small homes offer potential pathways to affordable and flexible living, their design must centre Māori values and lived realities to be viable long-term options. Housing for Māori should therefore be more than simply a dwelling; it should be responsive to occupants' cultural values, needs, priorities, and aspirations (Hadjiyanni, 2005). In other words, housing should allow and support whānau Māori to "maintain connections with their own cultural and organisational forms" (Habibis et al., 2013, p. 16). This call for culturally responsive housing is inclusive of, but so much more than, housing being available, affordable, accessible, and quality/habitable (Human Rights Commission, 2010, 2021).

Participants reaffirmed that, for Māori, home is a relational concept, inseparable from whānau, whakapapa, and place (Cram, 2020; Rewi & Higgins, 2015). Small homes that neglect the collective nature of Māori living—such as whānau whānui gatherings, care for tamariki and kaumātua, and hosting manuhiri—risk undermining their cultural appropriateness. This finding aligns with those of Habibis et al. (2013), who argue that housing must enable Indigenous families to maintain their own cultural and organisational forms.

At the same time, participants recognised small homes as potential stepping stones for rangatahi and single parents, or as components within larger papakāinga developments. This reflects emerging papakāinga models that integrate small dwellings with shared communal facilities, balancing affordability with cultural imperatives of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga (Campbell et al., 2022). Further research is needed about if and how small homes can be integrated effectively within papakāinga developments. This includes understanding governance models, shared communal infrastructure (kitchens, ablutions, gathering spaces), and how multiple small dwellings can collectively fulfil whānau living aspirations while addressing affordability and land use complexities.

Physical functionality and accessibility were non-negotiable for participants. Features like wide doorways, step-free entries, adaptable layouts, and spacious bathrooms were essential—particularly given the higher rates of disability among Māori across all life stages (King, 2019). These design elements, consistent with Lifemark Universal Design standards (James et al., 2018), are not luxury upgrades but core enablers of hauora. Participants also highlighted the importance of warmth, dry air, and energy efficiency—features fundamental to whānau wellbeing and equity yet too often treated as optional extras in mainstream housing (Howden-Chapman et al., 2022).

Wairua and connection to whenua were also recurring themes. For many participants, aspirations to return to ancestral lands were tempered by barriers such as fragmented land ownership, financing challenges, and bureaucratic processes. These challenges are well documented (Arbury & Cram, 2023) and reflect the enduring impacts of colonisation on Māori housing aspirations. Urban design that weaves te taiao, communal areas,

and Māori aesthetics into infill housing can also serve as a form of cultural reconnection. Whether rural or urban, the tūrangawaewae potential of small homes depends on their ability to uphold whakapapa, wairua, and collective identity. This aligns with Edwards's (2010) concept of the "home place" as less about shelter and more about cultural and genealogical ties that nurture identity and belonging. Papakāinga developments and urban infill projects that integrate green space, communal areas, and cultural design principles offer promising pathways for whānau to reconnect with their tūrangawaewae.

Participants' reflections on downsizing and minimalistic living were nuanced. While many embraced the opportunity to live simply and reduce material clutter, concerns about privacy, crowding, and emotional wellbeing were also voiced. The design of small homes must therefore balance open, communal spaces with areas that allow for solitude and retreat. Saunders's (1990) concept of ontological security is useful here—a home must provide more than shelter; it must be a site of psychological ease, where whānau can feel safe, in control, and at peace. For Māori, this includes being able to uphold manaakitanga, protect privacy, and maintain autonomy in everyday living. Participants' desire for flexibility—fold-out beds, modular storage, dual-use rooms—demonstrates the active shaping of space to sustain wellbeing. In this way, small homes must be understood not just as built forms but as living environments shaped by Māori values and lived experience. When homes allow whānau to feel secure, connected, and in control, they become vessels of mana motuhake.

Methodological considerations

The use of a Kaupapa Māori methodology was well aligned with the study's aims of centring Māori responses to small home living. Our whakawhanaungatanga approach built trust and allowed participants to talk about domestic and intimate living spaces and share their lived experiences. The hands-on design activities (floorplan puzzles, space planning, and reflection on video prompts) engaged participants in envisioning their own solutions.

Conclusion

Participants' kōrero, framed through Te Whare Tapa Whā, highlighted that a house is more than a shelter: it is a space that supports whānau connections, sustains wellbeing, and embodies whakapapa and wairua. The Kaupapa Māori methodology not only elicited these insights but demonstrated that whānau are experts in defining what home needs to be. Our conclusion from this study is that to transform small homes into meaningful, sustainable housing solutions for Māori, policy and design must move from consulting Māori to working alongside Māori as leaders in housing design.

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Glossary

hapū	subtribe
hauora	health, wellbeing
ia rūma	each room
iwi	tribe
kai	food
Kāinga Ora	Homes and Communities (government community housing provider)
kai tahi	eating together
kaitiaki	custodian, steward
karakia	prayer
kaumātua	elders
kaupapa	topic
Kaupapa Māori	a "by Māori, for Māori, with Māori" approach to research
koha	gift/s
kōrero	talk
kōreros, noho tahi and, ki ahau,	talking, sitting together, and, to me,
ko te mea nui i roto i taku whare	the most important thing in my home
he whakauru mai i te ao Māori …	is bringing the Māori world in …
te ao Māori e kōrerorero, he	the world of conversation,
whakawhanaunga, he noho tahi,	connection, being together,
he kai tahi, wērā momo mea	sharing food, and those kinds of things
mahi	work
mana	status, prestige
mana motuhake	self-determination
manaakitanga	hospitality, generosity
manuhiri	guests

Māori	Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa
marae	open area in front of a meeting house
mauri	life force
moana	ocean
mokopuna	grandchildren
papakāinga	village, home base
rangatahi	youth
rangatiratanga	self-determination, sovereignty
rohe	area, region
rūma	room (within a house)
taiao	natural environment
Tairāwhiti	region comprising the north-eastern corner of the North Island
tamariki	children
tāne	men
tangata whaikaha Māori	disabled Māori
te ao Māori	the Māori world
te taha hinengaro	the mental and emotional dimension
te taha tinana	the physical dimension
te taha wairua	the spiritual dimension
te taha whānau	the relational/family dimension
te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Treaty of Waitangi
tūpuna	ancestors
tūrangawaewae	place to stand
wāhine	women
wairua	spiritual essence
whakapapa	genealogy
whakataukī	traditional saying/s
whakawhanaungatanga	process of establishing relationships
whānau	extended family
whānau whānui	relations
whanaungatanga	relationship, kinship
whare	house
whenua	land
whenua tūpuna	ancestral land

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