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Finding the soul of a house in something more than square footage

THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE
A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live
by Sarah Susanka with Kira Obolensky

As we approach the close of the second millennium, we recognize that we don't live as we did in the post-World War II era of the 1950s and 60s. Today, most American families have two breadwinners, and many homes have become the site of working, as well as domestic, life. But contemporary home design has not kept pace with these dramatic changes. Sarah Susanka, a leading architect based in Minneapolis, has answered many of the challenges brought about by such transformations, and she shares her philosophy for a new residential architecture in ***THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live***.

Susanka, who is principal in the firm chosen by *LIFE* magazine to design its 1999 Dream House, does not advocate a small house for its own sake, but a Not So Big House for a variety of purposes—at bottom, to create a sanctuary that simplifies our lives rather than taxing our energies in maintaining it and to spend our money on beautifying our home rather than simply making it bigger. With more than 200 color photographs from actual homes in which these strategies are implemented, Susanka has filled ***THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE*** with practical suggestions for making less square footage feel more comfortable, look more beautiful, and function more efficiently. Susanka gives us the tools to identify those aspects of “home” that supersede mere quantity of space and numbers of rooms. And these principles apply across the spectrum of budgetary considerations—she gives advice for building small affordable houses as well as small *luxury* houses.

Most Americans live in a house with a formal living room and dining room, yet these rooms are rarely used. And many homeowners have added “specialty rooms” as their lives take on new technologies and activities, such as the exercise room or the media room. Susanka suggests that, with some careful decision making, we can easily move away from single use rooms and designate separate places for more personal needs, such as public versus private spaces (see interview with the author in this packet). She lays out ways to make rooms do double duty, creatively packing in abundant storage space and designing smaller areas that feel spacious, and *gracious*, for living. Not So Big strategies include lowering ceiling height in part of a larger room for a cozy reading spot (see illustration on page 65) or using controlled lighting to set the ambiance for different occasions (for example, making an eat-in kitchen into a dramatic dining area one night or a brightly lit place to do homework the next). She demonstrates creative ways to handle contemporary quandaries that traditional home designs simply don't accommodate: sorting and stashing mail, storing recycling out of the way, and making more than a “makeshift” place for a computer that the whole family uses.

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Susanka advises homeowners to consider what she calls the quality-quantity-cost triangle to help reconcile dreams with reality when planning a new house or remodeling an old one. Cost is almost never a variable factor, money being a limited commodity for most of us. "The basic problem seems to be that there's almost nothing in home design books and magazines that communicates to the public the facts about the costs of building a house. If the quality and character of a house are paramount, then there must be an understanding of the impact on cost," she writes. Many homeowners come to the equation certain of the square footage required, limiting the amount of personalization that can be introduced into the design. But if size can be reconsidered by going through the process outlined in ***THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE***, one may find a way to reallocate dollars into higher-quality materials or detailing that enhance the *character* of a home. Her website, www.notsobighouse.com, is designed to give visitors a way to reach the multiplicity of resources available as they start to plan their own Not So Big House.

Susanka's vision of the house of the present *and* the future is reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's: human scale, natural materials, with emphasis on interior detail and livability, rather than the technology of the moment. In our current era of home design, she adds consideration of ecological sustainability and allowing the design to integrate and update to new technologies without compromising aesthetics and, again, *livability*. And quite naturally, fewer square feet requires fewer building materials to construct.

Our culture in the 1990s has taken a decided shift to looking for authenticity in simpler lifestyles. So it is fitting that Sarah Susanka should now present her philosophy for designing a home: "Houses are very special things to us. They're the still point in the crazy world that we live in. We're surrounded with so much change, so much busy-ness, and our homes are the repository of all that we hold sacred, all that we really care about. The more we can make them beautiful and make them really fit our image of what our dream is of coming home, the better off we'll be."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sarah Susanka is an award-winning architect and principal in the Minneapolis firm Mulfinger, Susanka, Mahady & Partners, which specializes in residential architecture and is the firm chosen by *LIFE* magazine to design its *Dream House* for 1999. In addition to having worked with over 1,000 clients, she has lectured extensively on design issues as they relate to the home owner. Her articles have appeared in numerous publications including *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Remodeling* and *Architecture Minnesota*, as well as a regular column for *Fine Homebuilding*.

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