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“Not So Big” Looking Back and Looking Forward Question & Answer with Author Sarah Susanka

Q: What have you noticed about attitudes toward home design since the release of *The Not So Big House* in 1998?

SUSANKA: It used to be that reporters and other people I’d meet would ask me, “Why would someone choose to downsize?” Now they are asking me, “When did people begin to downsize?” It’s no longer something weird or outrageous. It’s seen as the only sensible thing to do, and there’s a perception of increased value with a smaller, better designed, more sustainably-made house—something that was not the case when the book was first released.

As soon as *The Not So Big House* was released, I realized that what I’d written had struck a chord. I received literally hundreds of letters and emails from people thanking me for writing a book that put into words something they knew they wanted but couldn’t articulate. And of course, the book sales stand as testament to the importance of the message and its resonance with our collective longing for home. There has never been another series of books about architecture that has sold so many copies—well over one million at this point.

Q: What changes have you seen in house design since the book’s launch?

SUSANKA: People are building for the way they really live. They’re eliminating the rooms they rarely, if ever, use. As a result of *The Not So Big House*, the formal living room has all but disappeared in many parts of the country. I’ve seen statistics indicating that as many as 40 percent of new homes are being built without a formal living room. And they are building sustainably, using energy efficient building practices and non-toxic, sustainably harvested materials.

But perhaps most importantly of all, they are building places that are inherently beautiful. This is one of the most sustainable things one can do, because when a place is beautiful, it is not only well looked after by its present owners, but by all the owners to come. This helps to create truly livable houses and communities with a sense of soul to them—because they are able to age gracefully rather than be torn down and thrown away—and it means that all of the raw materials that have gone into the making of each home are used in the most effective way possible. They will continue to serve their function not just for decades, but for centuries.

Q: Why do you think that “Not So Big” is such an enduring message?

SUSANKA: I think Paul Hawken said it best in his endorsement of the first edition of *The Not So Big House* when he said:

‘The Not So Big House is a transformative journey and re-examination of how we live. Configuring smaller, exquisitely designed homes not only respects our not so big planet, it honors our habitats, families, and spirit.’

Ten years ago we had just become aware of a significant segment of the population that is looking for something different than simply size and status. This segment, about one quarter of the population of the United States, was initially identified by Dr. Paul Ray, who dubbed the group Cultural Creatives. In recent years they've also been given the designation LOHAS—Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability.

One of the primary reasons the phrase “Not So Big” is such a valuable brand is that it instantly encapsulates what this group is looking for—less flash, less quantity and more quality. They rallied around the topic ten years ago and haven't slowed down since. *The Not So Big House* continues to hold #1 positioning in several Home and Garden categories on Amazon.com.

It's rare for a topic to remain timely for over a decade, and yet from my perspective it seems that the continuation of interest has been one long warm-up to the present moment. People today seem far more excited about the topic because now they've come to appreciate both its value in improving their lives and its importance in securing the well being of the country and the planet for future generations. So my sense is that with the release of the 10th Anniversary edition, we are likely to see a ground swell of enthusiastic responses from those who had never previously heard about “Not So Big,” along with a rallying of existing fans whose lives have been deeply affected by their adopting “Not So Big” design, building and lifestyle practices.

Q: What are you seeing now in housing?

SUSANKA: “Not So Big” is once again a hot topic. In the last two years there has been a huge shift in the attitudes of homeowners toward sustainability, conservation and energy efficiency. With the recent increases in oil and gas prices, with the surprising frequency of catastrophic events, from September 11th to Hurricane Katrina, and with the growing awareness about global warming, people have become more cautious and savvy about how they spend their money. Everyone seems to want to do their bit to help minimize their carbon footprint.

Q: What do you think we will see in home design in the next ten years? What is the evolution of “Not So Big”?

SUSANKA: I believe that the growing awareness of the importance of “Not So Big” as a sensibility, an attitude towards life, will only continue to grow over the next few decades. Houses are likely to become better tailored to the way we actually live. They will grow to be more personal expressions—as our families grow and change and as we ourselves age—that fully support both who we are today and who we are becoming. They will also be more beautiful places in which to live, made so through greater involvement by architects and designers, and through the craftsmanship of builders and artisans who really appreciate the potential inherent in the materials they work with.

I see communities being built that are designed with the same care and attention to detail as the houses I've described in my books. I see a quality of public space that is rarely seen in this country today. The delightfully intimate characteristics of the small towns and neighborhoods of Europe will become the new features of these Not So Big communities, so that not only the houses, but the neighborhood and the community will support our highest aspirations.

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Before long, it will be unthinkable to build rarely-used space that is leaky and poorly constructed. A new ethic is arising right now that will become common place—as common place as is recycling today, when just a few decades ago it was rarely, if ever, done. As more and more people build or remodel homes that satisfy in quality rather than quantity, there will be a huge shift in what we perceive as desirable. Just as the bungalows of a century ago supplanted the Victorian painted lady, “Not So Big” houses are likely to become the sought after alternative to the McMansion. We can see this movement beginning, but in years to come the movement will be more obvious—away from bigger and toward better. Better designed, better built, and better to be ourselves in.

That’s the Not So Big future as I envision it—one that’s filled with the things that are really important to us, and a lot less focused on impressing the neighbors. Today there are a lot more people ready to take that journey, perceiving themselves as an integral part of the solution to creating a sustainable future. And I believe that in decades to come that number will become the majority and not the exception.

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