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Sensing HOME



with Sarah Susanka



IN *NEW LIFE JOURNAL*'S INTERVIEW WITH THE ACCLAIMED AUTHOR AND ARCHITECT, SHE SHARES WHAT MAKES HER FEEL MOST AT HOME AND HOW WE CAN ALL CREATE "NOT SO BIG" SPACES THAT APPEAL TO THOSE BIG FIVE.

INTERVIEW BY MAGGIE CRAMER

Don't let the title of her books fool you: Sarah Susanka, author of *The Not So Big House* series and *The Not So Big Life* is a BIG name. Since the release of her first book in 1998, her "build better, not bigger" approach to residential design has been warmly embraced. This approach has even evolved into a method of living, which she addresses in *The Not So Big Life*. But whether she's referencing where we live or how we live in one of her seven books to date, her message is the same: attaining that feeling we want from our homes and lives comes when we focus on quality, not quantity. She has shown and shared that a space can be small and comfortable if well designed and tailored to our needs, and that life can be fulfilling if we engage meaningfully with what we do, whatever we do.

Sarah's message is also one of sustainability, in that choosing to go "Not So Big" is a healthier route for our planet (less materials, less labor) and for ourselves (more enjoyable and maintainable). She was the keynote speaker at Warren Wilson College's Mountain Green Sustainability Conference held earlier this summer, and she shared some of her *Not So Big House* and *Not So Big Life* basics with attendees. *New Life Journal* had the pleasure of talking with her about the role our senses play in how we experience our living spaces and that feeling of home.

NLJ: How do you most experience your sense of home?

SS: I think I'm very visual. You can tell from peoples' language what their strongest sense is, and when you read my writing, you know instantly that I'm a looker and a feeler. I talk a lot about looking and feeling and watching. In fact, one of the editors I was working with is obviously much more auditory, because he kept inserting things that were about sound, and I kept editing them out. Then I grasped that it wasn't about just looking, that's me. But for him, it was much more about sound.

NLJ: Do you find that your clients are predominately visual as well?

SS: People are very different. And of course, like attracts like, so I tend to attract people who really enjoy visual beauty. But I've had clients, for example, for whom the sound of rain is really important. They've actually focused their whole house design on places to listen to the rain. I think that's a wonderful kind of inspiration for architecture, because it's something that creates a kind of focus. I have a little fountain in my office, and that's a point of focus—audible focus. If you aren't used to having the sound of a fountain and you hear it, it makes you take note.

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is appealing to the senses.*

— Sarah Susanka



Designing for the Senses

WANT TO HEIGHTEN YOUR SENSORY EXPERIENCE WITH HOME? SARAH SUSANKA SHARES HER DESIGN TIPS FOR EACH SENSE.

SIGHT In each room, give a point of focus; it can be as simple as a painting with a light over it or a vase of flowers. I started this practice a few years ago of just always having flowers in the house. It seemed like a luxury at first. Then, I gradually realized I only need one rose, I don't need a dozen roses—\$2.49. I can handle that! It had a marked effect on how I experienced my home. In *Not So Big Life*, I talk about this: I loved that I built into my office space. Just something that inspires you. So, it can be transitory or it can be something that's there permanently.

SOUND I love sounds, although I think you can overdo them. Take fountains. There are plenty of places to go listen to fountains, so try them out first. Pump noise can be an issue, as my first fountain had too noisy of a pump. So, experiment. They're a marvelous tool, but make yourself comfortable. I have a lot of long chimes that give a very deep note, and it's wonderful; it's almost like you're living close to some magical place. As another example, I'm working with some people who have a huge collection of docks, so sound is a big part of their design.

TOUCH You can design spaces that are very textural. I had one client who collected textiles from all over the world. He had an Afghan saddlebag as a piece of art on the wall and a shirt made out of coconut fronds. Incredible stuff that gave every wall surface a completely different texture and color, too. It can also be built in. One of the architects I'm working with now loves concrete and the patterns you can get into concrete; the light patterns and the concrete patterns themselves that create texture and shadow patterns. Tiles do that, too. Sometimes you can get tiles that have a relief to them so that they give a texture to a wall. In general, natural materials give all sorts of texture.

SMELL There's a whole way that you can design using woods that have a strong scent. It's not just cedar; there are lots and lots of scents of wood. You can also design a library that's got leather furniture, for example, which has a very distinct smell to it.

TASTE We have daily rituals all over the place. One of the most common for people is coffee or a cup of tea in the morning. With that sense of taste, you're usually sitting in a particular place, and there's a state of mind that you're in. You can make that ritual into something where you're much more aware of the taste. This is what the Japanese tea ceremony is all about. As you practice the tea ceremony, you discover that it actually has very little to do with the tea. But the tea and the taste and the smell and the engagement with the senses is what brings you to awareness. And it's the awareness that's the point, not the tea.

NLJ: Do you think a small house, just by its nature, allows its inhabitants to engage more?

SS: Very definitely. Although I talk about "Not So Big," what I'm really saying is not that we should all live in small houses, but the best way of putting it is "right-sizing" it, or so that you're not making it bigger than it needs to be. Always looking, first of all, at what spaces could do double-duty. Asking, "Do I really need rooms that I very rarely use?" The answer is almost always "no." If you have a formal living room that never gets used, you can make it into something that you do want, like a place of your own. So, it's just thinking creatively about what we already have in some cases. Then the household, in a way, gets to know each other a lot more. There are places of intersection more frequently.

NLJ: How do you think the process of downsizing, or "right-sizing," helps people connect with their senses and experience their space in a new way?

SS: When you're shaping your house to fit you, what you're really doing is making the house more of a reflection of who you are on the inside. As you do that, then you end up feeling more grounded and more centered. So, there's a sense of well-being that actually comes from what appears to be an outward act. You've done something to your house, but in fact it's happening simultaneously: as you're finding that center, your house is changing simultaneously. So they become these wonderful reflections of each other. That's in large what *The Not So Big Life* is about. Just to let us see how much the inner world and the outer world are perfect reflections of one another.

At the root of what I'm talking about is not the idea so much of "less is more," but that there is a different kind of moreness that's possible when the space that you surround yourself with is appealing to the senses. So, it's absolutely related to sensory perception. We have a hard time labeling it [moreness] because it's not a quantity. This is why I say "Not So Big," because it's not really about quantities. It's about a quality of home, and only you can describe or define what that feeling comes from. When it satisfies your senses, you'll feel more comfortable in less space but it will seem like more. And that's really the key. That when something is well designed, it gives you an experience of expansiveness. So, it's an illusion in a certain way, if we're just looking at quantities, but it's not illusionary at all at this other level of quality where you just feel very, very at home. There's no other way to put it!

NLJ: Do you think people feel and engage with a "green" living space and sustainable materials differently?

SS: When a material has a natural beauty to it and it's tactile, or it's got an interesting look or feel, then you're likely to like it more. We automatically gravitate towards [natural materials]. There was a period when I found it difficult to answer the question about materials, because at the time we hadn't started doing sustainable forestry, and I used

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Tuning In

SARAH SHARES ONE OF HER EXERCISES FOR TUNING INTO THE SENSES TO CREATE A "NOT SO BIG" LIFE.

We talk about being present. A lot of people are pretty confused by that. They say, "Where else would I be? I'm here." But we're not really here. We're thinking and worrying about having to do this and that, so our heads are taking us out of this moment. The exercise that I talk about to bring you right to this moment is to ask yourself, "What is now? What is happening right now?"

I actually encourage people to get themselves a timer, or if their digital watch has a timer, and set it to go off every fifteen minutes. Hopefully not loudly so you don't drive your neighbors crazy! Then just stop for 10 seconds and ask yourself, "What is happening right now?" And what happens is it starts to perforate your day with these moments of being completely present. And it's the senses that allow us to do that.



a lot of wood in my houses. I started to realize that although there were certainly people who would be offended by my using as much of a natural resource that at the time we weren't thinking was really sustainable, although now we know that it can be, that those houses, just because of the natural wood, were going to be looked after for centuries because they were beautiful. I began to realize that making something that is beautiful is one of the most sustainable things you can do—because we care for things that are beautiful. So, it shifted how I started speaking about sustainability.



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The point I try to make is that sustainability at the highest level of its interpretation is that as we really come to understand ourselves more, the world gets more beautiful. It sounds crazy, but that inner peace gets reflected in our outer world. So, what I tell people is that the most sustainable thing you can do is listen to what your heart is really longing to do and find a way to work that into your everyday life. Because as you start to engage with the things you love, you're 100 percent engaged. And that 100 percent engagement means that you're totally present in it. The stimulation of the senses instantly brings you to more awareness, so those kinds of things are sustainable acts, even though we don't realize it. We can't label it like it's FSC certified, but it's the same. It has at least an equivalent power; more so, really.

This month, *The Not So Big House* is being re-released as a special 10th anniversary edition with a new cover, introduction and a new chapter. Keep an eye out, too, in early 2009 for Sarah Susanka's new book, written with home design writer Marc Vanzullo, *Not So Big Remodeling: A Better House for the Way You Really Live*. You can join her online community at www.NotSoBig.com.