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“Not So Big” Thoughts for *Positive Change*

A candid and insightful conversation with nationally acclaimed Architect / Author, Sarah Susanka. Interview conducted by Kelli Wegscheid



BY KELLI WEGSCHEID & PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY RUSTIN COURTESY OF SARAH SUSANKA

KW: You have an interesting past — born in Kent, England and then living in Los Angeles, Oregon and Minneapolis. After spending 20 years in Minneapolis all of us in here are wondering what prompted your move to North Carolina?

SS: *The timing just happened to be right, with the release of my first book. I knew that if I didn't do it during this window of time, it wouldn't happen — and though I love almost everything about Minnesota, I'm not a huge fan of winter. I was ready for warmer climes.*

KW: So far, you've had such great success with the “Not So Big House” Series and the “Not So Big Life”. Now you've mentioned the “Not So Big Community”, with ideas including front porches to reconnect neighbors, and walk-able distances to services, ideas that move outside the typical walls of the home. What comes next?

SS: *First of all I'm going to work on some actual communities. This thing about community is something that I've been interested in since I was a teenager. I knew at some point I would get back*

← A strong connection to the environment is critical as demonstrated in this backyard patio space. A variety of seating and gathering spaces include a covered dining area close to the home. A more relaxed seating area is surrounded with tree and grass plantings to provide a relaxing urban retreat.

↳ Susanka demonstrates the Not So Big house design ideas with her Not So Big Showhouse at the SchoolStreet project in Libertyville, Illinois open for tours through May 2012. The home and development combine Not So Big house design with Not So Big Communities ideas — including a walkable community set within an existing neighborhood.

to creating what we call today a “more sustainable community.” But it feels as though there is some exploration needed into what community means and what it can be, because people tend to become disconnected from it — from the land and where things come from. At root, community has the opportunity to really connect people to the things and people that support them. And we can make much better decisions when we know that. That’s really a lot of my interest right now.

KW: I think in the Midwest we do have a bit more connection to our communities, because we are so agriculture related. There is that emerging group of people you mention in your first book as the “cultural creatives” who want to create and be self-sustaining. Your community concepts really foster that feeling.

SS: I think there is a great yearning in people all over the country to be reconnected, to be more aware and be more sustainable.

KW: Granite is one of materials I find to be the most beautiful, sustainable and exciting to use in interior design for a home. Do you have a favorite material?

SS: I think for me it would be wood. I love the grain and the color. I don’t stain wood if I can help it, unless my client is really determined. I like to use it in it’s natural coloring which allows the grain pattern to shine through. Being able to see where a material comes from is inspiring to me.

KW: Is there upcoming specific technology for homes that you think is so revolutionary that it could be compared to say, the introduction of electricity into homes?



Sarah Susanka
Architect

Sarah Susanka’s “Not So Big” message has become a cultural phenomenon, redefining how we inhabit our homes and perceive living space. The focus is on “better, not bigger” design. Susanka is the acclaimed author of nine best-selling books, all starting with *The Not So Big House* (Tauton, 1998). Her books have sold well over 1.2 million copies. Through her books and presentation series, Susanka has helped readers understand that the sense of “home” they’re seeking has almost nothing to do with quantity and everything to do with quality.

SS: I think that Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs) are actually that. And I've been working at it for 20 years, but it's amazing how slowly it catches on — it's a vastly superior construction system for the building envelope. (Kelly, I've added this in case readers don't know what SIPs are.)

The way we build houses right now is a lot like this analogy: You decide to buy a car, so you call up the car company and they deliver all the parts to your driveway and assemble the car there. You can imagine the reduction in quality control compared to what we've used to! That is basically the process we use with house construction and it is nuts! There is no reason to build that way any more. We can create a much higher quality house with parts that fit together perfectly because they're made in more of a factory crafted setting. The quality control is so much higher. We're not there yet by any stretch of the imagination, but I do think within the next 20 years we'll get there.

KW: Any thoughts on politics or legislation on codes, etc. for greener building across the United States?

SS: The thing that I have tended to do is try to inspire people to make the changes themselves, and I think the codes result from enough people asking for something. In trying to legislate change, there is often a really big backlash. But, when you inspire people to act, that's how change really occurs. Talk to the people who can effect the changes and bring to their awareness the people who really want these things to happen. So, it almost has to come from the bottom up and that's been far more successful in my experience.

KW: Do you take on new clients now and if so, how has that process changed for you now compared to your past client process?

SS: I actually do very little personal client work these days. People often ask me, "How is your life different than before your books

→ A lowered ceiling over the library alcove creates a cozy space within a space, while still allowing connecting views to the rest of the home. Coloring the wall behind the shelves a different color adds character. The Marvin Dream Window that Susanka designed adds a focal point to the alcove, drawing your eye to the landscape beyond.

↓ Ceiling height variety differentiates one room from the next without the use of walls. The living room has a raised ceiling with cove lighting to make it clear that this is the most important space in the home.

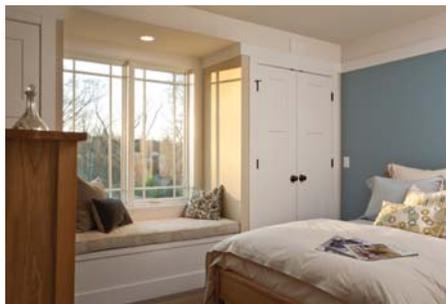


came out?" Back then I would often have as many as 20 clients at a time — many of them small-scale remodelings, and some complete houses. Our firm survived on having a lot of small projects rather than 1 or 2 large ones. Most of the projects I take on today are selected because they can be walked through by many people, like showhouses for example. My most recent showhouse opened in November, and is located in Libertyville, Illinois. It is open to the public every weekend until May 20th, 2012, which I'm really thrilled about because it gives so many people the opportunity to experience a Not So Big house for themselves. (You can go to www.notsobigshowhouse.com for more information). (Kelli, we might also want to say here that all the photographs in this article are of this showhouse.) But of course, after reading my books, lots of people want to hire architects and interior designers that understand the principles I write about to help them make their own houses Not So Big. This is why I set up the Home Professionals Directory on the Not So Big website. Now, I can pass those projects on through the Home Professionals Directory to local professionals who can help them. To watch that process work has been very exciting for me. Everyone benefits.

KW: Do you meet people who are unaware of who you are?



↑ Here, the principle of ceiling height variety is illustrated with a wooden trellis placed strategically over the kitchen island and a perimeter soffit containing task lighting for the work surfaces. The patio door provides a strong connection to the activity at the street, as well as encouraging use of the front porch. A unique tile pattern above the cooktop provides a point of focus.



↑ Window seats create spaces that are intimate yet practical, and proportioned for the way we really live. Window seats have a way of drawing people of all ages to them, and connect the inside with outside.

SS: *I do sometimes speak to audiences that haven't heard of me. Just a few weeks ago, I was talking to a large group of builders, many of whom didn't know me. But, as I was speaking they were just on fire, they were so excited that there was this Not So Big message out there. I think if I had spoken to that audience 5 years ago they probably wouldn't have been that interested. But right now, they're all trying to figure out how to make their homes smaller and better designed.*

KW: Do you have a signature home that people identify with?

SS: *The one that is probably the best known is the one that I designed for myself when I lived in St. Paul, Minnesota. In terms of what I write about, that is probably the one that illustrates all the ideas the most thoroughly — at least until this most recent showhouse venture. Several of the houses that I have done have been well publicized and that's why they are recognizable.*

KW: What architects have inspired you in the past or present?

SS: *There are a lot of architects whose work I love. The ones that I most commonly cite are Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn. Early on in my career I admired the work of a little known Massachusetts architect named Richard Tremaglio. Thirty years ago he was designing these somewhat idiosyncratic but beautiful and spatially intricate houses. His work really influenced me. There are several architects whose work I publish in my books that I also admire greatly, such as James Estes and Peter Twombly, from Rhode Island. What I love about their houses is the extraordinarily simple vernacular forms they use. They embody so much of what I describe in my books. Their houses are beautiful and elegant, with the least amount of fanfare.*

KW: Have you ever made a pilgrimage to visit a specific structure that inspired you?

SS: *Yes, several. When I was 19, I went to visit Christopher Alexander before his book "A Pattern Language" had come out. I was really inspired, and I actually call it a pilgrimage, because I was so eager to meet him. He gave me a tour of the Center for Environmental Structure. He had a little house in the back yard of his house in Berkeley that was entirely generated using the concepts from A Pattern Language. Right down to the little door you had to duck through in order to enter. It was wonderful. Another building I have always loved is by Le Corbusier — his famous chapel at Ronchamp. And that was an immensely powerful experience for me too. I knew I loved this building from the photos I'd seen, but the actual experience — it was just incredible. I've also been fortunate to visit many Frank Lloyd Wright houses that are not open to the public. That's one of the advantages of being an author and declaring your admiration*

for someone's work. You get invitations to see more of that work first hand. I feel incredibly lucky.

KW: Have you followed any other passions besides writing and architecture? You have mentioned learning another language — have you taken time to do that?

SS: *I've wanted to, but I haven't. (Sarah Laughs) I'm very interested in Sanskrit, the ancient language that many of the eastern spiritual traditions grew out of, because I know that the language actually contains a much deeper meaning than we can translate into English. The other passion that I have been exploring in my spare time is something called sacred geometry. It's what Plato, Vitruvius and Leonardo Da Vinci were all fascinated by too. It has really captured my imagination over the past decade, so who knows, maybe someday there will be a book series about this subject too! I'd love to do that.*

KW: You started your own architecture firm at a young age. Do you have any advice for young people just starting out on their own, especially in this economy?

SS: *Go for it! Our training as architects allows us to see problems facing the culture in ways that others don't see, and right now that's really needed. Put your fears aside, and leap. I began my own firm in a recession back in the 1980s, and it turned out to be the very best of moments to do so. If you pursue what you are passionate about, and dare to tell the stories of your successes, people will seek you out. You don't have to figure out how to sell "you" — that will happen automatically. **



For more information visit:

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www.notsobighouse.com



Kelli Wegscheid
Architect, AIA

Kelli specializes in designing custom lake homes that reflect the quality in detail and overall concepts discussed in Sarah Susanka's "Not So Big" book series.
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