

From Smaller Houses to Smaller Neighborhoods



©Net So Big Showhouse



Cheryl Muir

This not-so-big house was featured at the International Builders Show in Orlando in 2005. The cozy breakfast nook is a typical Susanka feature. Above: the architect on the front porch of her Raleigh home.

For over a decade, architect Sarah Susanka has promoted the value of building smaller, but better designed, houses. In nine books and numerous public appearances (including a segment last May on CBS News Sunday Morning), she has shown how people can live comfortably in modest-sized dwellings, an idea that she absorbed in England, where she grew up. Susanka worked as an architect in Minneapolis-St. Paul until 1999, when, after the success of her first book, *The Not So Big House*, she decided to concentrate on writing and speaking. Today she works from her home office in Raleigh, North Carolina. Planning's executive editor Ruth Knack, AICP, interviewed Susanka by phone in late July. Find out more at www.ntsobig.com.

Q You said recently that you're looking beyond the individual house to the "not-so-big community." What did you mean by that?

A I was talking about a neighborhood with the qualities of European towns and villages where houses are designed for the way people live rather than to impress their neighbors. They're arranged in a pleasant and organic way, with common space and footpaths that encourage people to walk rather than to drive everywhere. I've been looking for existing examples in this country and talking to developers about extending the not-so-big brand to community design.

Q Are you talking about new urbanism?

A The communities I'm proposing will certainly learn from new urbanism, and I believe we're on the same track. But there are other ingredients as well that are important to creating a vibrant neighborhood. I would incorporate aspects of Christopher Alexander's classic 1977 book, *A Pattern Language*, which sets forth basic principles for making livable neighborhoods and buildings. And I would include features that respond to some of the major issues facing us today: the need to build sustainably, for instance, and ways to make aging in place easier.

Q How do planners fit in?

A I hope to identify a team of people with experience in community building to take all this knowledge to the next level—to apply it in a new way.

Q What models have you found for new communities?

A One is the "pocket neighborhoods" created by architect Ross Chapin and his colleagues in Washington State. These are compact communities that organize small houses around a central green space or community garden. Most are built on infill sites, although some are in new developments.

Some new urbanist communities also have what it takes—Habersham, outside Beaufort, South Carolina, for instance, and the village of Cheshire in Black Mountain, North Carolina. What I'm looking for is the quality of authenticity and a sense that a place has grown organically over time.

Q Are you finding a lot of interest in smaller houses?

A Yes. People are beginning to realize that a house that's a third smaller than what you thought you needed actually works better than a McMansion—so long as it's designed for the way we really live today. If you rarely entertain formally, why spend so much of your budget on spaces you'll only use once in a blue moon? It just

doesn't make sense anymore. And in these challenging economic times, people are more aware that a house that's right-sized for their needs is less expensive to heat and cool, easier to maintain, and simply a better custodian of their resources.

Many suburbanites say they're looking for something different but have had trouble finding it. Eventually, I hope to be able to convince the production builders that the time is right for change.

Q At this point, you're mostly associated with individually designed, custom-built single-family houses. How well would your ideas translate to multifamily developments or to affordable housing?

A I haven't worked on multifamily housing myself, but I have thought a lot about it. In many cases, the designs of multifamily projects are better than those of single-family houses because an architect is required to be involved.

The design principles I write about are translatable to all sorts of uses and building types, and certainly to affordable housing as well. So many of these ideas are really simple—varying ceiling heights, for instance, or putting a window at the end of a hallway—and they don't have to be expensive if they're applied creatively and intelligently.