



*“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”—Albert Einstein*

So many houses, so big with so little soul. Our suburbs are filled with houses that are bigger than ever. But are bigger houses really better? Are the dreams that build them bigger, or is it simply that there seems to be no alternative? Americans are searching for home in unprecedented numbers. Yet when we look, the only tools we seem to have are those we find in the real estate listings. But a house is more than square footage and the number of beds and baths. In one of the wealthiest societies ever, many people are deeply dissatisfied with their most expensive purchase. Which is where Paul and Laura come in.

I had just completed a lecture at our local Home and Garden Show. As I stepped from the podium, I was greeted by several members of the audience who wanted to thank me for saying something they hadn't heard before—that we need to value quality over quantity in house design. There was a couple in the crowd with a story about their own experience, a story that gave me the impetus



A Not So Big House exchanges space for soul, so that the quality of the space is more important than the sheer square footage.



Rather than spend their budget on spaces they never use, people who build Not So Big tailor their houses to fit their lives.



to write this book. As they approached me, I saw tears in the woman's eyes.

"We want you to come to our new house and tell us what you think," she said. "We just built it. We spent over \$500,000 on it and we hate it. It's just not us at all. After listening to you, we think..." She paused and looked at her husband, who nodded. "We know that we have to start over. All we've got is square footage with no soul. We want the type of house that you describe. Can you help us?"

The next week, I drove out to the suburbs to see the house, past row after row of enormous structures covering the newly developed hillsides. These houses loomed in their treeless sites,

staring blankly out toward vistas of more of the same. I felt as though I was driving through a collection of massive storage containers for people.

Paul and Laura's house was fairly typical of new, large subdivision homes. It had the required arched window topping off a soaring front entrance scaled more for an office building than a home. Inside the house, I was greeted by an enormous space, all white, with a cold marble floor. There was no separation between this vaulting foyer and the next room, which I assumed must be the family room, although there was no furniture in it (see the photo on p. 10). Laura ushered me into the kitchen, which was also oversized and made up of all hard surfaces that gave it the acoustics of a parking garage.

She and Paul explained to me that until a year before, they had lived in the city, in a small, older home. Although they liked the house, their three boys were growing up quickly, and they were starting to feel cramped for space. The house had no family room, so the kids didn't have a place to be rambunctious. The couple found a piece of property they loved. The lot was owned by a builder, who made it clear as part of the terms of sale that he would be the one to build the home. They thought this would be fine—they didn't know any other builders and this one had a good reputation.



American suburbs are filled with big, expensive houses, but a bigger house isn't necessarily a better home.

The builder showed them his portfolio of plans and explained that they could choose any one of them. Although they weren't particularly enamored with any of the plans, they picked the one that seemed to have the rooms they needed in the right relationships to one another: kitchen opening into family room, formal living room separated from family room to allow kids some space to play away from mom and dad.

It wasn't until the house was actually under construction that the feeling of uneasiness began to set in. As the framing proceeded, the heights of the spaces became clear, as did the proportions of each room. "All the rooms just seemed huge," said Laura. They asked to make some changes, such as lowering

some ceiling heights and dividing a room in two to make each a more manageable scale. But such changes would be very expensive at this stage in the process, the builder explained, promising that, "When the house is done, you'll love it." However, the house didn't get better, and when it was finished, it was clear to both of them that they felt no affinity for it. It seemed ostentatious to them. The scale of each room was overwhelming.

Laura took me upstairs to show me the master bathroom. "Look at this," she exclaimed, "our previous bedroom wasn't even this size!" Although the couple now faulted themselves



This soaring living room was designed to impress, not to be a comfortable space for the activities of daily life.

for being naive, they were simply following the process that is standard to working with a builder and selecting from a stock set of plans. They were not offered an opportunity for input into the design. And they didn't know how to ask for or give the feedback necessary to make it an expression of their lifestyle and their values. Like many people building a new house, Paul and Laura didn't have the words to describe what they wanted, nor did they realize how important it was to have input into the "feel" of the house. If a builder hears that a home buyer wants a spacious family room, he reasonably assumes that they are asking for a BIG family room. To Paul and Laura,

almost anything would have seemed spacious compared to their previous home.

The outcome was that Paul and Laura had built a \$500,000 house that was nowhere close to their dream of home. After spending almost three times the value of their previous house, they were deeply unhappy. They told me they felt no desire to make the house their own by furnishing it or personalizing it in any way. Their story was horrifying to me. And even more alarming is the fact that Paul and Laura are not alone. Over the last couple of years, more and more people who have lived in these impersonal, oversized houses have come to our office and asked, "Is there an alternative? Can you design us a house that is more beautiful and more reflective of our personalities—a house we will enjoy living in?"

The answer is, of course, yes. And the key lies in building Not So Big, in spending more money on the quality of the space and less on the sheer quantity of it. So this book is for Paul and Laura and for everyone like them, whether building from scratch or remodeling, who wants a special home that expresses something significant about their lives and values but who doesn't know how to get it.

## The Case for Comfort

After designing homes for 15 years, I have come to an inevitable conclusion: We are all searching for home, but we are trying to find it by building more rooms and more space. Instead of thinking about the quality of the spaces we live in, we tend to focus on quantity. But a house is so much more than its size and volume, neither of which has anything to do with comfort.



Instead of quantity,  
think quality.  
Comfort is born of  
smaller scale and  
beautiful details.



Everything in this kitchen conspires to create a classic statement, from custom cabinetry to antique light fixtures.

When most people contemplate building a new house or remodeling an existing one, they tend to spend time focusing on floorplan options and square footage. But in a completed home, these are only a very small part of what makes an impression. What also defines the character of a house are the details, such as a beautiful stair railing, well-crafted moldings around windows and doors, and useful, finely tailored built-ins.

These details are what attract us to older homes. New homes should be no different. However, such details cost money. And unless people are working with an architect, it is unusual to spend much time thinking about these aspects of the design. Because most people start with a desire for more space than their budgets allow, anything more than basic space, minimally detailed, will exceed the budget.



It's the details that delight: An Arts and Crafts–inspired light fixture can make a bigger impression than a vaulted ceiling.

People who are attracted to architecturally designed houses also tend to seek a higher level of detail. So a good architect will suggest reducing square footage to allow for more detail. It isn't unusual for an architect's estimate of square-foot cost to be half again as much as a builder's. The architect is simply aware that, given the client's desire for detail, a house without detail is not going to be satisfactory. We're already familiar with this design concept in automobiles. The quality and detail of a Mercedes, Lexus, or Jaguar are far more important than the size of the car. More space does not equal more comfort. In fact, size has nothing to do with the appeal of these cars. If you want nothing but space, you buy an equally expensive diesel truck.

I do not advocate that everyone live in small houses. What I do suggest is that when building a new home or remodeling an existing one, you evaluate what really makes you feel at home. In other words, concentrate on, and put more of your money toward, what you like rather than settling for sheer size and volume. This concept is just as applicable to someone building a very expensive home as it is to someone on a tight



Natural light and a stained-glass window beautify a stair landing. In a Not So Big House, every space is considered to be an expression of the lives lived within.



## The Not So Big House of the Past

sembled. (In 1926, a two-bedroom bungalow was listed in the Sears catalogue for the affordable price of \$626.)

Smaller houses still seem connected to a simpler time. Many of the older houses in our neighborhoods were built to offer solace in a changing world. Now, nearly 100 years later, we seem to have forgotten the ideas Ruskin and Morris were so passionate about. Houses are getting bigger and bigger, and, because square footage is all that is required, they are being built without the level of detail so important to humanizing life.

Around the turn of the last century, two Englishmen warned that the machine age could very well destroy the quality of life. John Ruskin and William Morris believed that life needed to be rehumanized, and the first place to begin such an undertaking was in the home. Ruskin and Morris founded a movement that was called Arts and Crafts, and it encompassed everything from the design of textiles to the design of houses.

*Our neighborhoods are filled with examples of Not So Big Houses from the past, like the Craftsman bungalow above.*

*An Arts and Crafts interior designed by Greene and Greene (right).*

The Arts and Crafts home was custom-crafted and featured large fireplaces and built-in bookshelves and cabinets. In North America, the style was embraced by such architects and designers as Greene and Greene and Gustav Stickley. Other American architects, among them Frank Lloyd Wright, created styles that were also based on notions of craft and beauty. For those Americans who couldn't afford an architect-designed home, Sears sold a prebuilt bungalow—complete with built-in shelves, wood trim, and a front porch—which arrived in panels and was easily as-





This room was designed to be a total expression of comfort, exemplified by the cozy scale, built-ins, and arched ceiling.

budget. While you might be able to afford a 6,000-sq.-ft. house, you may find that building a 3,000-sq.-ft. house that fits your lifestyle actually gives you more space to *live* in. In most very large homes, a substantial percentage of space is rarely used. And if you have a limited budget, this book will give you ideas on how to pare down the quantity of space you need so that you can put more of your money into giving the house some character.

## Creating Comfort

The current pattern of building big to allow for quantities of furniture with still more room to spare is more akin to wearing a sack than a tailored suit. It may offer capacity, but at the cost of comfort and charm. Spaciousness, although it can look appealing in a photograph, just isn't conducive to comfort. Many of the huge rooms we see in magazines today are really only comfortable to be in when they are filled with people. For



No other space in a house says “comfort” quite like a window seat. Sitting here feels like an embrace from the house.

one or two, or for a family, they can be overwhelming. And when rooms feel overwhelming, they don’t get used.

The Not So Big House, no matter its style, aims to be comfortable. Look up the word “comfortable” in any dictionary and you’ll see a range of entries attempting to describe it. Webster’s offers a wide variety of definitions, from “fitted to give tranquil enjoyment” to “free from pain and trouble.” So how do we create comfort in the Not So Big House?

One of the tools that can help you determine what feels comfortable is to gain a better understanding of the proportions of space. Like most people, Paul and Laura were not able to understand from the blueprints what the space would feel like. Proportion literally refers to the relationship of the vertical to the horizontal dimension. It also includes the relationship to the third dimension, depth. Because we are human beings and come in sizes typically ranging from just under 5 ft.

to mid-6 ft., those three dimensions also need to relate to our human height. Some people can just tell when a space is pleasingly proportioned, while other people cannot. The ability to read a space this way is similar to an “ear” for music.

But not everyone agrees on what is well-proportioned space. Many people find Frank Lloyd Wright’s much-acclaimed work to be oppressive, either because they consider it to be too ordered or because it’s too constrictive for head height in some places. Wright used low ceilings to accentuate transitions between various significant places in the house, as well as at entryways, to give one the sense of needing to stoop, which is a gesture of reverence. On the other hand, the Prairie Style (the name his architectural style has come to be known by) liberated a new way of thinking about space and proportion in



Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was a master of proportion. He used variations in ceiling height to enhance character and comfort in his homes.

architectural design. For many people, the variations in ceiling height typical of his work greatly enhance the character and comfort of a home (see the bottom photo on the facing page).

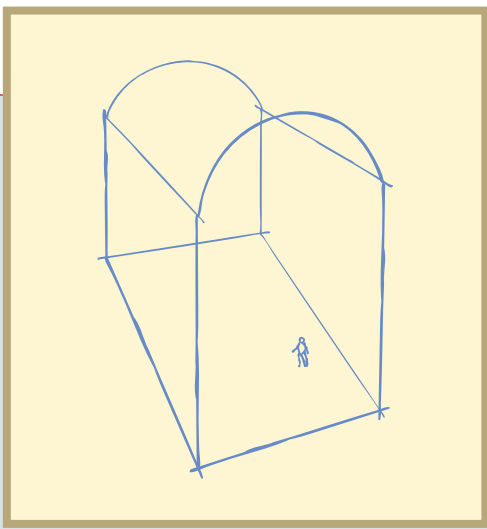
Consider the foyer in Paul and Laura's suburban house. Why was it so unwelcoming? Well, with its tall ceilings and marble floors, it was designed to overwhelm and impress visitors, not to welcome. The proportions of their foyer were more suitable for a public building than for a house. When a space is overscaled, in relation to our own size, more often than not it doesn't feel comfortable.

The book *A Pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977) has been a very useful tool in our office. Written by Christopher Alexander and a group of colleagues, the book consists of a collection of concepts, or patterns, that range from issues of city planning to those of individual room configuration. We use the book to help clients think about and describe how they want to tailor their house to their lifestyle and how to make it comfortable. One of my favorite patterns described in the book is entitled "Alcoves." It states that, "No homogeneous room, of homogeneous height, can serve a group of people well. To give a group a chance to be together, as a group, a room must also give them the chance to be alone, in ones and twos in the same space." It concludes, "Therefore...make small places at the edge of any common room usually no more than 6 feet wide and 3 to 6 feet deep and possibly much smaller. These alcoves should be large enough for two people to sit, chat or plan and sometimes large enough to contain a desk or a table."

What the pattern describes perfectly is how to make a space comfortable. By dividing a room into smaller spaces, it can be



A window seat is tucked into the second floor, allowing a cozy place for one within a house designed for entertaining.



## Finding Comfort

When I teach design, I ask first-year architecture students to collect data about places that make them feel particularly comfortable or uncomfortable. This is also a useful exercise for non-architects who want to understand better how the places that surround us affect us.

*A big space, however inspiring, can be too tall for comfort.*

Here's how it works. Equip yourself with a tape measure and a pad of paper. As you go about your daily routine, notice how you respond to different places—whether the place is as splendid as the rotunda in the State Capitol or as mundane as the copy room at the office. In each place you visit, notice how you respond. When I walk through the magnificent doorway at the State Capitol here in Minnesota, I feel awe and wonder. Physically, though, I feel very small, almost insignificant in this towering space, despite the beauty of the surroundings.

In smaller spaces, it's useful to measure the proportions of the room—and don't forget the ceiling height. As you measure, notice what constitutes the spaces that feel good to you. Try to determine if they appeal on an emotional level or in a physical way. And try to articulate why. Such spaces are the shapes that make you feel most comfortable and are worth incorporating in your own home.

used for a variety of functions while offering human-scaled spaces that are actually connected to things that go on in the house. I call this idea “shelter around activity,” and one of the best examples of it is the window seat. The floor is raised, the ceiling is lowered and the walls are brought in to define a place for one or two people, from which they can observe the world. Sitting in a window seat feels like an embrace from the house. It is the epitome of comfort.

I designed a house for a single woman who loved to entertain. While many of the spaces in her house were suitable for large numbers of people, I wanted to make sure that the house had some places that would be comfortable when she was alone. Her window seat on the second floor is tucked into the geometry of the roofline (see the photo on p. 17), which offers shelter around activity and a bird's-eye view of the nearby lake.

One of my partners, Michaela Mahady, designed the living room shown in the photo on p. 15 to be a total expression of comfort. Not only does the fieldstone hearth bespeak comfort, but the small scale of the room also ensures coziness. The arch above the fireplace, the lowered soffits at the edge of the room, the soft lighting, the abundance of natural woodwork, even the overstuffed furniture—everything conspires to make this room one you want to spend time in.

## Tailoring to Fit

Paul and Laura had embarked on a new house project because they needed a place for their boys to play indoors during the winter. But despite its size and cost, the house they had built still didn't offer this space. The would-be living room projected such a formality, because of its scale, that the whole family



In a house where every detail expresses the personality of its owners, a rope and a tree trunk become a stair railing and a load-bearing column.



The wooden railing features cut-out fish and trees, which express the family's favorite pastime and the house's North Woods location.

shared one main living space—the kitchen/family room. If their needs had been given more careful analysis before construction, a very different solution would have evolved.

As my meeting with Paul and Laura continued they told me that their lack of desire to personalize their new home came from the fact that it communicated nothing at all about who

they were—to themselves or to the community. In fact, the house projected an image that they found fundamentally offensive. To them the house said “generic house of wealthy people,” which wasn’t at all how they saw themselves.

Clearly, what should happen before a house is planned or built is an analysis of the lives—the likes, dislikes, needs, and wishes—of the people who will live in it. Just as a tailor takes measurements before sewing a new suit, we should take measurements before building a new house. There are few things in life as personal as our homes. Personalizing a home, though, goes beyond decoration. Because it takes considerable thought and planning to make a house into a home, I advocate far greater participation in the design process by the people who will live in the house. Your house should be an expression of who you are, not something that’s impersonal and generic.

A stair railing can be just a safety barrier, but if it’s designed with the homeowner in mind, it can become a centerpiece for the house. In the examples shown here and on the previous page, the railings were custom-crafted to express something about the people who live there. The rope railing in the photo on p. 19, designed by an architect couple, came as a solution only after 10 other ideas had been abandoned. The husband, an avid sailor, loved the idea of the rope, which also works in a similar way to the organic form of the tree-trunk column. Both rope and tree serve a function, as well as imbue the house with personality. The photo at left shows a cabin on a North Woods island that was built as a weekend retreat for a family that loves to fish. The stair railing, inspired by the work of the Scandinavian artist Carl Larsson, illustrates both the woody location of the cabin and the family’s favorite hobby.



In this remodeled house, a favorite window was saved and reused in an addition, where it is now flanked with glass block and double-hung windows.

Windows can be custom-tailored to frame a special view or to make a striking interior statement. In the remodeled house shown in the photo above, the couple's favorite window was saved from the original house and moved out 8 ft. to the new face of the home. A glass-block transom and flanking double-hung windows were added to let in more of the south light. Circular windows are expensive, but they can also become a

focal point for the entire house. In the house shown on p. 22, an 8-ft.-diameter circular window frames a spectacular view while also creating an equally splendid interior focal point that's visible from many parts of the house. A circular effect can be achieved less expensively, but with equal drama, by hanging a metal hoop inside a perfectly square picture window (see the photo on p. 23).



A circular window can frame spectacular views and become the focal point of an interior space.

## How to Talk about Quality of Space

The language of quality is so much more hazy than the language for quantity. Without the language to describe what you want in terms of quality, there is no way to be sure that a house will be what you want, until it is completed. Unfortunately, at that point, it's too late to remedy mistakes. Here are some words that help identify the quality of space:

*cozy, elegant, introverted, light-filled, spare, exciting, dramatic, sumptuous, homey, classic, masculine, welcoming, private, modest, impressive, delicate, friendly.*



A circular effect can be achieved inexpensively by inserting a metal hoop into a square window.

Often a work of art or a special piece of furniture has particular meaning, and a house can be designed to accommodate such objects. The carved wooden owl shown in the top photo on p. 24 became a symbol of the owners' land, which was frequently visited by an owl, and of their first house, which had burned to the ground. When they designed their new home, the wooden owl, a survivor of the fire, was offered a special place by the front entrance, where it greets all who enter.

Another couple, who had collected art and furniture for most of their adult lives, wanted a retirement house that would be a backdrop for their collection (see the bottom photo on p. 24). So the wall in the dining area was recessed to create a niche just the right size for a special Japanese *tansu*, or storage chest. The painting over the buffet has its own display area, which was anticipated in the design process. White walls throughout the house provide a dramatic setting for the collection.

Houses are repositories of the things that have meaning to us. In this Prairie-influenced home, a carved wooden owl greets visitors from its built-in niche.

This contemporary interior was designed to showcase a collection of paintings and furniture, with a niche designed specifically for a Japanese *tansu*.



The garden shed shown in the photo on the facing page is modeled after a Wendy house, or an English child's playhouse inspired by the Peter Pan stories. In the process of remodeling a couple's Cape Cod home, Dale Mulfinger, one of my partners, discovered that the woman, an avid gardener, wanted a place to house her tools that would fit in stylistically with the house. Because gardening was her passion, Dale determined in the planning process to design for her a special place, rather than simply expanding the garage.

Tailoring is a basic ingredient of the Not So Big House. If you just make a house smaller, but still generic, it won't have any more appeal than its larger cousins. What makes the Not So



A tool shed designed for an avid gardener becomes a charming little house that matches the Cape Cod styling of the owner's home.

Big concept work is that superfluous square footage is traded for less tangible but more meaningful aspects of design that are about beauty, self-expression, and the enhancement of life.

Working with Paul and Laura, we started to identify what features they wanted in a home. These included window seats, a place for the adults to retreat to after dinner while the kids play in the family room, lots of built-ins and bookshelves, and a large amount of natural woodwork. In contrast to the 4,000-sq.-ft. house they are currently living in, their new house will be around 2,300 sq. ft. Despite its smaller size, it will cost only slightly less to build. This is because for this couple, quality and personality are important. And now they understand



## Keeping a Place Journal

In a three-ring binder, start to assemble data about the places in your life that make you feel comfortable and those that make you feel uncomfortable. Document their size, take photos, or make diagrams illustrating what it is within the space that evokes the response. Images of other spaces can supplement your notes—magazines are a great resource for this. Some current favorites for gathering images are: *Architectural Digest*, *Better Homes and Gardens Building Ideas*, *Better Homes and Gardens Home Plan Ideas*, *Better Homes and Gardens Remodeling Ideas*, *Elle Decor*, *Fine Homebuilding*, *Fine Homebuilding's* annual *Houses* issue, *Home Magazine*, *House and Garden*, *House Beautiful Home Building*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Traditional Home*.

that that is where their money needs to go. No matter how big or how small you make it, a house will not be a home unless you, your architect, and your builder really craft it into a place that is tailored to the way you live, filled with the spaces and things that have meaning to you.

Cotswold cottages in England built from stone have lasted hundreds of years.

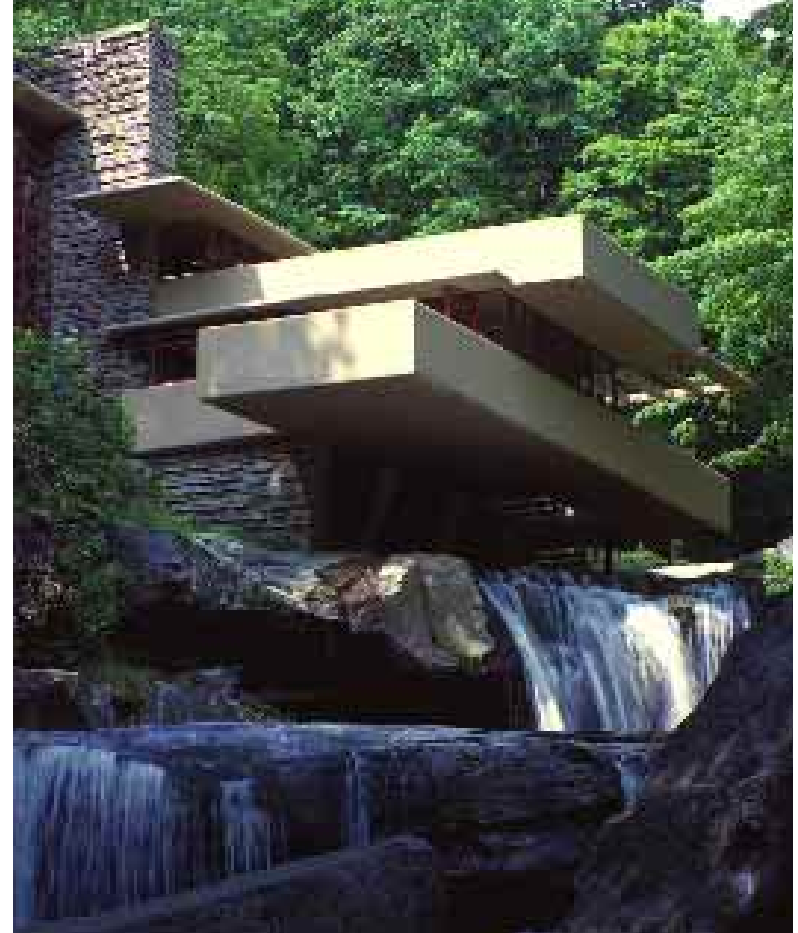


## Built to Last

When I first started designing houses in the early 1980s, many of our clients were asking for help in making their homes energy efficient. When the tax credit for such strategies disappeared, most of the interest in energy efficiency left with it. At that point, my partners and I realized that if the homes we designed were to be energy efficient, it would be because we wanted them to be, not because our clients were requesting it. Like many other architects and builders, we continued to design houses that would minimize a reliance on fossil fuels. We also insist upon good construction practices, even though it is a rare client who asks for a house that will last for generations.

America is a country of pioneers. And, as Americans, we assume that the way to embody our dreams in a house is to build it new for ourselves. It's the exception rather than the rule for people to stay where they are planted. People don't assume that they will pass their home on to the next generation, so building for permanence has never held much appeal or value. But, gradually, this attitude is changing. Why do we love Europe so much? Because of a sense of history, which is told best by buildings built centuries ago and made to last.

Along with this dawning appreciation for building for the long term comes the recognition that we will take care of things that are beautiful. Beauty, more often than not, comes from careful crafting. And when a well-crafted object ages, no matter what it is, society almost always helps it to age well. Just look at the buildings our culture has chosen to preserve—all of them were well designed. Owner after owner of such homes has recognized the treasure inherited and cared for them lovingly.



Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece, is an important part of America's cultural heritage. Its beauty inspires us to take care of the building, ensuring that it will stand for future generations.

The Not So Big House is built for the future by taking care of the present. Anyone who has driven past a construction site and seen the dumpsters filled with perfectly good building materials understands that there must be a better way. By building the Not So Big House with materials that are renewable and by limiting the expenditure to what will really make a difference to the quality of life, we can have an enormous impact on our lives today as well as on the future.

What I am proposing in this book is that our houses can express our personalities, that they can be designed to accommodate our changing lifestyles, and that they can be built for future generations.