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Not So Big . . . Better

* A Midwestern architect turns a simple notion into a bestseller--build smaller, quality homes.

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So many big houses, so little soul, laments Sarah Susanka in the opening of her hot-selling book "The Not So Big House." But if readers buy into her concepts as readily as they're buying her book, that may change.

For Angela Glover of Camarillo, Susanka's message--which asks architects and home builders to think better not bigger--definitely hits home.

Glover first heard Susanka on a talk show, then bought her book. Susanka's concepts are helping Glover and her husband, Julius, rethink a home they bought in Ventura to remodel for themselves and their three sons.

"Her ideas just make sense," said Glover, who has had trouble finding an architect who understands what she wants. "They all want to put in a big living room, a big dining room and lots of other rooms we'd never use."

What makes the "Not So Big" concept work, Susanka said, "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."

"It's easy to get caught up in the big house because that's what the neighbors or your colleagues are doing," Susanka said in an interview from her home in St. Paul, Minn. "But you should stop and ask: Is this what you really want?"

While swapping footage for quality, Susanka suggests that those designing their own homes forgo formal spaces such as living rooms and dining rooms and make the rooms they use every day accommodate several

activities. (Don't all parties end up in the kitchen anyway?)

Vary ceiling heights, she says, making them lower in places you always sit, and create alcoves where the house can embrace you.

In short, make the scale of your home human.

Apparently her message has struck a chord. Since its release in October, "The Not So BigHouse" (Taunton Press, 1998), has scaled unlikely heights for a \$30 niche book on home design: It is in its eighth printing with 175,000 copies in circulation. Though it entered the market late last year, it finished the year as Amazon.com's leading home design book for 1998.

Its author, a low-key architect and principal of Mulfinger, Susanka, Mahady & Partners, an architectural firm in Minneapolis, is pleased but not altogether surprised by the book's success.

"I had a feeling a lot of people would see themselves in this book," said Susanka, who was on her way to tape a May 3 segment of "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Catapulting her notions still further, the May issue of Life magazine features two 1999 dream houses that her firm designed. (The two houses actually use the same floor plan, but one house is called Back to Basics and costs about \$250,000 to build, while the other, called the Whole Nine Yards, costs twice as much.)

One reason for the book's hot reception is that it taps into two trends while possibly starting one of its own. One trend is the simplicity movement. Susanka's book offers a new take on the popular notion that consumers are maxed out and want to pare down. It also taps into the trend of homeowners paying more attention to the comforts of home.

Futurist Faith Popcorn suggests two reasons why people are opting for smaller houses: First, they're cashing out, she says, quitting the corporate rat race, choosing simpler lives and scaling down.

In a second more spiritual trend she calls "anchoring," people are simplifying their lives to concentrate on things that really matter.

"What's important to them is a dwelling place that's warm and centered," Popcorn said. "Huge, cold spaces are much harder to humanize or infuse with meaning."

Though written primarily for architects and custom home builders, the book is also being purchased by remodelers.

Also fueling sales are the 78 million aging baby boomers, who, as their children get older, realize they don't need such big houses, though they still want nice ones.

Taunton publisher Jim Childs believes the book's success is a reaction to the excesses of the 1980s and early 1990s.

But the reality is Susanka's ideas are not about less but about a different more. Her homes are still expensive, but the dollars go toward better materials, better construction, more detail, more built-ins and more customization. In short, it's an architect's dream.

As an example, the book cites one couple who, after building a 4,000-square-foot "starter castle," as Susanka calls the too-big house, weren't happy. The place wasn't them. So they contacted Susanka's firm, which, for almost the same cost, helped them create their 2,300-square-foot dream house.

Sounds good, but try explaining this to real estate appraisers.

Regardless of what Popcorn and Susanka think, the fact remains that the numbers people--Realtors, appraisers and mortgage lenders among them--look at cost per square foot and room count when determining a home's value. Thus, not so big may be not so bright in terms of resale.

"That is the core of the problem," Susanka said. "[Those in the mortgage business] basically want to know how many square feet at what cost. There's no place for quality construction in that equation, so quality can only go down."

She hopes her book will help more people recognize the problem and ultimately change the way homes are valued. Her talks have influenced some appraiser groups to add a question to their appraisal forms: How long will this home last?

She also wants to spread the message that building smaller, better and longer-lasting is good not only for our souls but also for the planet.

But though more people may be thinking about smaller, better-appointed homes, they're still buying bigger ones.

The size of new homes has increased steadily since 1971. That year, the average new home was 1,520 square feet. In 1998 it was 2,195,

according to the National Assn. of Home Builders.

"People love to blame the builders for this [growing home size], but it's entirely consumer driven," said Gopal Ahluwalia, director of research for the association.

"In the past 20 years the size of new homes has increased by 50%, while the size of the average family has decreased 20%. The reality is most people still buy about as much house as they can afford and figure they'll fix up the inside later."

He does, however, believe that the average home size will stabilize in the next few years at about 2,250 square feet, and then consumers will look to add amenities, especially new technologies, rather than square footage to their homes.

As they do, he says, appraisers will have to adjust.

Meanwhile, most architects applaud what Susanka's doing. "She's a very good architect," said Don West, a Morro Bay architect with 35 years' experience who has heard Susanka speak and has read her book.

"Her homes reflect an intellectually honest approach to a living environment. The scale is intimate and the detail is personal and unassuming. It's a nice change from the Taco Bell-style architecture you see all over California."

Critics say that while the idea is nice, all the houses in the 200-page book look alike. The Prairie-style home definitely prevails. Susanka admits that for budget reasons, only homes that her firm did, which are mostly in the Minneapolis area, were included. Thus, they do share a resemblance.

But her next book, "The Not So Big House Design Book," due out from Taunton in the fall, promises to fix that. The next book will execute her ideas using a variety of design styles. Until then, she hopes "people can look beyond the photos and see that this is a new way to think about how we live."

Which is what the Glovers did. "My husband and I both grew up in big houses and learned you don't need a huge entry and a velvet living room the kids can't go in," Angela Glover said. "We don't want a house that echoes but want it to be inch by inch something we love."

After reading the book, the Glovers visited the Not So Big House Web site (<http://www.ntsobighouse.com>), where they looked up a list of

architects who have registered interest in building Not So Big houses. There they found an Oxnard architect, Michael Faulconer, who says he's devoted most of his 20 years in practice to smaller custom homes and finds Susanka to be a kindred spirit.

The Glovers house-to-be will still have a formal space off the entry, but it will be small, a place for just two nice chairs, so one person can sit or two can have a conversation.

They won't have a formal dining room but will have a breakfast bar for quick bites and a kitchen table that can be formal or informal depending on the lighting and how it's set.

Then they hope to make "every space unique" by adding stained glass and refined moldings and by converting part of an oversized walk-in closet into a home office.

"I see the house ultimately being about 3,000 square feet, but I don't have a clue what it's going to cost yet," Glover said.

"If the builder comes back and says you can only afford all the detail you want if we build 2,500 square feet, we'd go with the detail and sacrifice the space. The kids won't be with us forever."

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Marnell Jameson is an Orange County freelance writer.

PHOTO: Space under the stairs of a compact studio has been turned into a small kitchen.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Photos Copyright 1998 by the Taunton Press Inc.

PHOTO: An office is created from an alcove carved out of unused space under the eaves of a low roof.

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PHOTO: An inviting window seat can create the feeling of being embraced by a house.

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PHOTO: Architect Michael Faulconer, who has devoted most of his 20 years in practice to smaller custom homes and finds Susanka to be a kindred spirit, will redesign the Ventura home of Julius and Angela

Glover.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: BRYAN CHAN / Los Angeles Times