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SEPTEMBER 2011

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The American Dream gets a Not So Big makeover

Sarah Susanka advocates homes with space balanced for how their inhabitants actually use it, a departure from the 'bigger is better' notion of recent decades

TEXT: NICHOLE REBER
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SETH PRICE LEWIS (P201) / DOUG SMITH (P207)

"A place belongs forever to whoever shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image" — Joan Didion

That's the notion behind North Carolina-based Sarah Susanka's Not So Big House design philosophy. The drivers behind its growing popularity in America are a slate of natural US and international disasters, the lingering recession, and a shift from alienating ostentation to inviting, personalised confines, Susanka says.

In the US, a recent survey by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) echoes that point: the American Dream has received a major renovation. Builders and architects

responding to the NAHB's The New Home in 2015 survey say that clients are asking for less size, more green. *Eco-Home*, a magazine of the American Institute of Architects, forecasts that the average new home will continue to shrink to about 2,152 sq-ft by mid-decade. Houses will have fewer single-purpose or special-function rooms (media and hobby rooms, formal dining rooms). They will feature more great room plans, combining the main living, entertaining, and cooking/eating spaces.

"It started with September 11 in 2001," says Susanka, who followed her 1998 book *The Not So Big House* with *The Not So Big House Expanded Edition* a decade later, co-authored with Kira

Obolensky and published by Taunton Press. "I started hearing people talk about making their home their place of sanctuary as opposed to knocking the socks off the neighbours. Now they're treated more like homes were treated 60 or 70 years ago, (before) the house became primarily an investment vehicle."

As US real estate continues to show slow yet identifiable signs of recovery, more homeowners are remodelling. The remodelling market raked in US\$280 million in 2008 compared with US\$150 million in 1998. "Now all the people who thought they'd buy a new house are staying, but so are their problems, so they're remodelling," Susanka says.

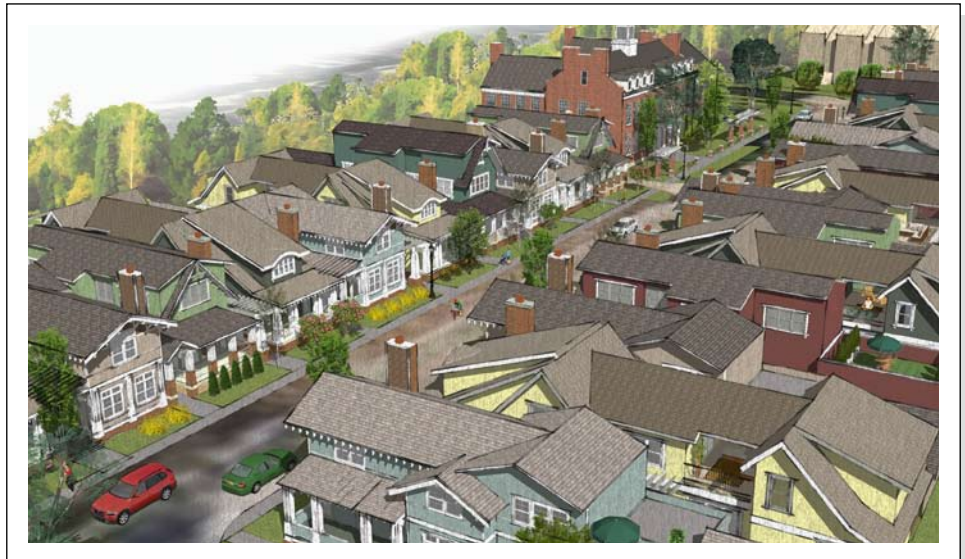
In this sense, the Not So Big notion lends itself to sustainability in ways most builders and developers aren't talking about: keeping people in their houses for longer periods rather than periodically building or buying a newer, bigger model.

Those who subscribe to the Not So Big concept aren't going for formality any more when entertaining; they choose inviting warmth and personality rather than displaying ostentation. For instance, a double height foyer has become a simpler entrance that leads immediately into the warmth of the great room. "Building in proportion to our human scale is incredibly important and it's something we've all but forgotten," says Susanka. "Enormous volumes may look good in a photograph. A tall ceiling is wonderful in a state capitol where you want to inspire a sense of awe, but in your living room where you try to watch TV, it's probably not a good idea."



In lieu of large voids of walls, the Not So Big house uses trellises, floating shelves, and gentler yet defined variations of ceiling height. A well deliberated lighting plan subtly dims or lightens the kitchen, the dining area, or the living area, reflect off unique architectural elements and enhance the spaces shaped by different shades of a colour scheme.

The Not So Big design philosophy isn't a code for maximising resale value; it reflects a family's lifestyle and personality and is inherently sustainable as more people are staying in their homes. Its fundamentals make the difference between a house and a home, bringing people closer together rather than alienating them in ostentation.



The Not So Big Neighbourhood 「Not So Big」社區

In Libertyville, Illinois, a forthcoming development will blend the tenets of New Urbanism with those popularised in Sarah Susanka's Not So Big design philosophy. SchoolStreet, a four-acre development, will emphasise a more social approach to residential life, with front porches and walkability to yield neighbourly interaction amongst 26 single-family houses and 15 lofts.

Susanka and StreetScape Development builder/developer John McLinden collaborated on the architectural plans, establishing a style McLinden calls 'Front Porch Revival' homes based on American Craftsman and bungalow designs. Susanka will also display the fundamentals of her Not So Big design philosophy in her own 2,450 sq-ft showhouse, marking the first time she's designed a house for a major developer.

"Our philosophies are very aligned," says McLinden. "We wanted (the house plans) to be about the buyers, not the developers, so we did eight preliminary plans and let customers pick the front room of this plan, the kitchen of that, and the front porch of the other."

The loft residences form a second important element to the project. McLinden used architectural preservation to transform a 20,000 sq-ft school, built in 1939, into 15 lofts. "Other developers looked at it and said, 'we've got to tear that thing down'," says McLinden, who's been involved in many preservation projects of famous Chicago planner Daniel Burnham. "It's a two-storey school with great attic space. It adds to the character of the project and lends the project more diversity."

美國伊利諾利州利柏蒂維爾將有全新發展項目，揉合新都市主義的原則及Sarah Susanka「Not So Big」設計哲學所推崇的理念。佔地四英畝的SchoolStreet著重居民的社交生活，區內設有26間單一家庭房屋與15間閣樓住宅，全都有陽台。另外，每間房屋都設於可步行範圍內，促進鄰居間的溝通交流。

Sarah與StreetScape Development建築商兼發展商John McLinden共同計劃建築平面圖，依美國工匠風格與平房小屋為本，創建一種John稱之為「陽台再現」的住宅。Sarah亦會在其主理的2,450平方呎示範單位中，展現其「Not So Big」設計哲學的基本元素。這次是Sarah首次為大型發展商設計房屋。

John說：「我們的理念很一致，都希望房子佈局能以買家為本，而非發展商。所以我們設計了八款草圖，讓買家可以選擇某一佈局的客廳，然後揀選另一佈局的廚房，再配合另一陽台。」

閣樓住宅是項目的另一重要元素。John透過建築活化，把一間建於1939年、二萬平方呎的學校，改建成15間閣樓住宅。John曾參與過許多芝加哥知名規劃師Daniel Burnham的活化保育項目，說：「其他發展商到學校視察，就說要拆毀整間學校。這是間樓高兩層的學校，擁有極佳的閣樓空間。這為項目添上個性，亦使項目更多元化。」





「美國夢」不「大」

數十年來美國一直鼓吹住屋「越大越好」，Sarah Susanka 卻唱反調倡議家居空間大小要配合實際生活需要

撰文：NICHOLE REBER
攝影：MITAUNTON PRESS / SETH PRICE LEWIS (2014) / DOUG SMITH (2021)提供



「一個地方永遠都屬於那位塑造它、描繪它、愛它的人；那人甚至會依自己的願景期望來改造空間。」——Joan Didion

美國北卡羅來納州 Sarah Susanka 的「Not So Big House」（房子不用大）設計哲學正是建基於此見解。據她所言，這個主張在美國越來越受歡迎，只因美國與全球災禍連連，經濟持續不景氣，加上人們從喜歡天花亂墜的家居轉為偏向個性十足的親切空間。

在美國，全美房屋建造協會（NAHB）最近的一份調查便正好道出同一結論：「美國夢」已來了個大翻身。NAHB 的「2015 未來家居調查」訪問了一些建築商與建築師，受訪者均指現在的客戶都要求房子要小一點、綠一點。美國建築師協會出版的雜誌 Eco-Home，亦預測新建房屋的平均面積會持續下降，至二零一五年便會減少到二千一百五十二平方呎。房屋將來會越來越少有單一或特定用途的空間，如康樂室和正式聚餐用的飯廳；反之，房屋的格局會偏向設多用途大廳，把客廳、娛樂室和烹調/進餐的空間合而為一。

Sarank 在一九九八年推出《The Not So Big House》，而十年後則與 Kira Obolensky 共同編撰推出了續集《The Not So Big House Expanded Edition》，由 Taunton Press 出版。她說：「這個現象始於零一年的三事件。我開始聽到人們想把住所改成避難的安全所，不再是一個用來向鄰居炫耀的地方。現在人們對房屋的看法回復到如六七十年前的情況，之前的房屋基本上變成投資工具。」

美國房地產市場繼續展現緩慢但可見的復甦徵兆，因而有更多屋主想要改建房屋。相比一九九八年的二億五千萬美元，房屋改建市場在二零零八年已達到二億八千萬美元。Sarah 說：「現在所有打算買新屋的人士都暫時卻步，但房屋的問題仍在，所以他們便轉而改建房子。」

因此，「Not So Big」主張的可持續發展，是大多建築商與發展商都沒想過的形式：讓人們在同一居所住得更久，不會過一段時間便要興建或購買更大的新房子。

那些深信「Not So Big」概念的人在屋內款待客人時不再追求所謂的形式；他們選擇了親切窩心、具個性的空間，而不再是炫耀豪華的家居。例如，以前雙倍高樓底的門廳，都改成了更簡單的門口，直接通往親切迎人的多用途大廳。Sarah 說：「依人體尺度的比例去建屋非常重要，但我們卻都遺忘了這個原則。相片中的廣闊空間可能很好看。高樓底最適合州議會大廈，有助營造懾人效果；但對於一個用來觀看電視的客廳，就可能不是太好了。」

在空洞的偌大空間之中，「Not So Big」房子會採用格子屏、懸浮架子，以及高度不一的天花溫和清晰。燈光佈局嚴謹細膩，微妙地調較廚房、飯廳或客廳的燈光光度，突出獨特的建築元素；而不同的色調則加強空間感。

「Not So Big」設計哲學不是個用來增加轉售價值的法規，而是反映家庭的生活風格及個性，而本質上是個環保永續設計，因為可以使更多人放棄搬屋。「Not So Big」概念的基礎顯示了「房屋」與「家居」的大不同，拉近人與人之間的距離，而非在炫耀房子中迷失離群。☺