

## Episode 29

# The Benefits of Scaling Down Your Build

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/29](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/29)

**Intro:** Let's get into today's interview with Sarah Susanka. She's got a really interesting story that has led her to embrace the Not So Big philosophy. I started by asking her for a little bit of background.

**Sarah:** Well I actually grew up in England. I lived in Kent in a little village called Knockholt not far from Sevenoaks or Bromley for people who know the area. I was a daughter of an inventor who got a job with Mattel toy company in Los Angeles, so at the age of fourteen in 1971 my whole family moved to Los Angeles.

It was quite an amazing journey in a way because I'd lived in this little village with a thousand people in it and I moved to an area of American sprawl and my high school was three times the size of my village so it was just incredible. I didn't know there were that many adolescents in the world let alone in one school but one of the things that really struck me as soon as I arrived in this suburban, quote unquote, paradise was that there was no place to walk to. You could walk around houses, suburban settings, but there were no shops so to get to the shops we had to walk for probably about two and a half miles.

My mother was terrified initially of driving on American roads with her huge car that my Dad had bought her, so we felt very isolated. It was quite an unusual experience and of course I got used to it and I lived here for the rest of my life but I have this interesting perspective on the American house and the American development habits, if you like, that would make me a commentator on how to do it differently.

My English upbringing has had a huge influence on what I talk about. I'm now an architect and an author and I try to help people see how to build smaller but better houses.

**Ben:** So when did this first develop? Was it really just coming across from England and then you thought I'm going to sit down and workout some plans or how did it move on?

Sarah: Well actually it was an outgrowth of an interest I had as a young child. I loved drawing floor plans even when I was in England and when I got to this country that just continued but I really didn't know what an architect was until I got to college and realised that was what I wanted to be. So the interest grew.

I certainly was motivated to do something at the age of fourteen. I thought there is something huge missing here and I can see what it is and I want to talk about it but it wasn't until I'd been in architecture school and come out the other side of it that I realised that I was perhaps perfectly trained both from my childhood and then from my architectural studies to be able to help people design better houses here.

Ben: So how has it impacted on your designs? What are we talking about here?

Sarah: Well the things that I describe I suspect a lot of your listeners will be familiar with the American mansion phenomenon but here people build bigger and bigger and bigger houses thinking that somehow that's going to get them the sense of home that they are looking for and the very simple observation I make is that the feeling of home has nothing to do with size. It's a quality not a quantity and having grown up in England and, you know, my friends had some wonderful houses many of them with lots of interesting nooks and crannies and a sense of history about them, a lot of American homes are devoid of those things that really make them feel like home and so I started to try to describe what makes a house feel like home.

A lot of what I talk about actually has to do with shaping the whole space not just the floor plan and I think in England because we are surrounded by history we have a sense of what, for example, a thick wall and being able to sit in a little window seat within that thick wall gives you an incredible experience. In this country we don't have that. We've got two by six or two by four walls that make it feel very paper thin and so I try to give people a sense of what it means to shape the whole space.

Ben: I must admit that I don't know a lot about the housing stock in America so this might be a good point, maybe you can give us an overview.

Sarah: Absolutely, well when I wrote The Not So Big House, which was the first in my book series that came out in 1998, the houses were just getting bigger and bigger and what I knew from working with my

architectural clients was that what people were really wanting was a well-designed house but they didn't know how to ask for it. They didn't have a sense of what energy efficiency was and so I was just doing that automatically and making every house that I designed energy efficient, well insulated with an eye to good indoor air quality, many of the things that I'm sure you cover in your programme but the American public at that time wasn't really thinking about that. So I started to, even actually describe what sustainability means in that first book because it wasn't really the buzzword that it has become since that time.

Ben: Do we all have a different meaning for sustainability?

Sarah: I would say that's fairly likely.

Ben: [Ben Laughs.] I just thought I would interject there!

Sarah: [Sarah laughs.] You know often times I feel as though people have used the term so much that it's lost some meaning but it's actually a very valuable term in understanding whatever we do it needs to look after you, the family, the community, the neighbourhood and the planet as a whole.

Every decision you are making is made not just on a self-serving basis but looking at the whole picture, understanding that you are part of one whole organism in a way. I think that a lot of the people who are attracted to my books and the attitude about house design are very interested in sustainability or some will call it green design or energy efficient design but the goal is to create a place that is going to last for a very long time and is going to support you in the best means that you can while using the minimum amount of resources to heat and cool that place and to decorate it, etc.

There's one key idea, Ben, that you may be interested in and that is I really believe that beauty has to be at the core of any really sustainable home because if something isn't beautiful we don't tend to look after it. I don't know in England what the parallel is but in this country about a hundred years ago there were a whole group of bungalows that were built. Very lovely simple designs based on the work of William Morris and Gustav Stickley, and they really embody a sense of beauty that's very simple but people have looked after those houses so that today the value of those homes far surpasses what you would imagine for a house of that scale. They are really well cared for. So we as human beings are a very important part of keeping something sustainable and we respond to beauty so I think that's a real key.

Ben: It's such a balance, isn't it? All these different components that you've got to get together that I can see why it's so difficult to design the perfect house, because it changes where you are, it changes who you are, all the different factors come together and as we try to move to a more sustainable and energy efficient future then that is leading the way. I know what you are saying. I think that does make a lot of sense to create something that you are proud of, that you want to look after. It makes sense to me.

Sarah: Exactly, in fact much of what I am speaking about in a way is a re-visiting of the Arts and Crafts movement but not particularly with that style of architecture but more the sensibility, the attitude that sometimes less can be more and that the qualities of home are really what make us feel inspired.

So in many ways, although you can get very complex in the world of energy efficiency, I like to keep it as simple as I can because I think often times when something appears very complex people don't do it because they're afraid they are not going to do it right and it doesn't have to be that complicated.

Obviously at the root of my message is, why don't you just build the square footage that you need rather than all kinds of spaces that get used very rarely where you have, for example, in this country people build formal living rooms and dining rooms that nobody ever uses. I mean, that's crazy and so I encourage people to instead build informal spaces that they use every day and understand that when your friends come over with just a little bit of changing of the lighting you can make it into a delightful room that's going to be very gracious for your guests. They actually want to be where you are. They are not interested in having their socks blown off. [Sarah laughs.] They just want to in a comfortable place.

Ben: How much space then is too much space or does it depend on the individual who's building the house?

Sarah: I believe that it depends on the individual. I've tried very hard to stay away from judging people for having too much space. What might be too much for me may be just right for somebody else, so I leave it to the individual to make those decisions, but what I try to do is give people the tools to make those decisions in a way that really benefits their lifestyle, that allows them to make those choices.

So I have in my fan club people who ascribe to very very tiny houses at one end of the spectrum and people who at the other end might think that 3000 square feet was a small house. So it's really a very wide range and I just let them make their own choices on that matter.

Ben: Are you always thinking about open plan spaces or when you create a room - I was watching some of your videos earlier - that you have more than one purpose for those rooms?

Sarah: I tend to do double duty with the rooms that I design so, for example, we just talked about the living area that can serve both formal and informal functions or a dining area that is your everyday space but then also can be a formal space on those occasions that you need it. I tend to take that attitude with a lot of other rooms as well, for example, in many American houses there is a guest bedroom or even a guest bedroom suite that sits empty ninety nine percent of the time if not one hundred percent of the time, often filled with boxes and things because nobody is using the room.

So I encourage people to think of that room, for example, as perhaps an in-home office that, on those few occasions when you do have somebody stay, you can hide the office function a little bit so that that room can do double duty. It's in a way a very practical way of thinking but I'm just trying to help people to see how they can use every square foot of their house every day.

Ben: I notice when I was reading a little bit about you that the book A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander came up. Now I've heard this mentioned before but is that a very influential book to all architects and why for people that haven't read it?

Sarah: It is a very influential book and the reason is that it's something that I think a lot of people, they don't realise that they have inside them an understanding of building and architecture. What A Pattern Language did was to allow people to really grasp that they can choose how they want their environment to be using principles that are very simple to apply. So, for example, Christopher Alexander talks about one pattern is what he would call alcoves and it simply says that human beings like to hangout in smaller spaces looking into a larger room so that alcove becomes, in a way, an archetype for designing and building.

When people who are not trained in design look through this book it tends to make them feel as though they now have a set of tools by which to think about space. So I actually was introduced to this

book when I was in college but I realised it was still written in a way that made it difficult for homeowners to really absorb and then apply. So my fourth book Home by Design, which I actually dedicated to Christopher Alexander, takes a lot of the principles that I've used in my own work and that I see in architects work in residential architecture and helps explain with pictures that people are more familiar with, photographs of houses that are from the present day and helps them to see how they can apply these ideas in their own homes.

Ben: So where are you going with your work now? What is your focus on as each day goes by?

Sarah: Well I'm doing a lot of public speaking these days and I am starting also to talk about community design as well as individual house design.

Actually some of your listeners may know that I have also written a book called The Not So Big Life where I'm really trying to help people to see how just as we have more space than we need, at least in this country, I know it's not always true in England, we also fill our lives with too much activity so that we don't have time to really enjoy what's right here in front of us. And these attitudes are all really interwoven so the understanding that we can slow down a little bit and really enjoy our lives in the moment as opposed to be rushing around trying to keep up with all of the emails and all of the things that we have to do. Our lives can get completely out of control just as our houses can get completely out of control.

For me the community, which in England is . . . I actually just visited last summer and there's such a wonderful sense of community in so many of the towns and villages in England that are largely absent in this country. So I've been trying to help bring that sense of a heart to the community so that people can have more of a sense of integration in their lives, really.

Ben: Why is that, why is it missing? I don't really understand why there should be a difference.

Sarah: I think the big difference is that a lot of this country was developed after the advent of the automobile and so even though obviously there were settlements around the country before the automobile really took hold, the freeway system and the interstate system in this country have made everything spread out so you don't need to walk anywhere.

In fact it is very difficult to walk some places. You have to get in your car to go and so when you move past people in a car you don't get to talk to them, you don't get to stop and say: "How are you doing?" Just those everyday interconnections that are so vital to our feeling connected to one another, they don't happen.

A lot of people in this country don't even realise it's missing because they have never lived in a place that has that but those of us who have grown up in another country often realise that there's a big something missing and we would love to get that brought into the community. So just introducing the idea that you can walk places, you don't have to go in your car for two blocks.

Ben: But this is difficult as you say because it's developed around the car that must pose some huge problems as fuel - or gas as you guys like to call it - gets more and more expensive you can't just walk around the town. Is that in anyone's vision that we are going to change things?

Sarah: Just barely. [Sarah laughs.] I mean there are certainly some groups of people, most notably a group called The New Urbanists that you may have heard of who are really trying to learn from both European towns and villages and some of the older communities in this country.

Just to get the proportioning, for example, of a street width correct so that you feel like you've got some connection to the other side of the street as you're walking down one side or the other, really basic things that are just not normal to development in this country. So it's going to be a real learning process and in some ways an uphill battle because it's changing people's behaviour dramatically. Everything relates to the car here.

Ben: How do you see the vision of the next ten or twenty years? What's your view of the changes that are coming, because I feel that there are going to be some big changes and they could actually happen quite quickly? We are noticing them and we have been living through them for the past twenty years but I wonder whether it might accelerate.

Sarah: I think it will. I think actually if you look at anything, not just house design or urban planning many, many different parts of our culture because we are now able to talk to each other so easily, you know here are you and I speaking across thousands of miles very simply and sharing ideas and being able then to disperse these ideas on

the Internet etc. that we are able to connect our thoughts around the world, I often call this our infant global brain is coming online and so . . .

Ben: Yes I am with you one hundred percent on this. This could be quite powerful just at the right time luckily.

Sarah: Exactly, and I personally feel that although we've been through hard economic times in this country I think they've been very valuable because they have woken people up to the recognition that they don't need as much stuff and as much space as they thought they needed. A lot of people got a big wakeup call and realised we want something that looks nice and feels nice to live in but we don't need masses and masses and masses of space, which is really a new idea for a large segment of the population in this country.

So I think it is really changing for the better. I think that we've got a huge opportunity to design a better environment all round and people are ready and receptive, although as I say, in this country at least a fair amount of reconditioning in order to get people used to that notion. I think there's a lot of interest and if you look at for example generationally, the millennials and the boomers are both really interested in downsizing and in living closer to the town centre or a place where it's very walkable. So I think there are a lot of very good signs.

Ben: I have a friend who I used to work with and he moved away and it was only recently that I realised I haven't actually seen you for about a year and a half because we are always talking over the Internet or I can see his face on Skype. So it's quite funny like that and I do wonder that working remotely might become far more acceptable. There is outsourcing that happens day by day but that could be another way of actually saving a lot of energy by working at your desk. You would be working at your desk if you had to drive on the commute an hour each way or how ever far it is.

Sarah: Right, certainly in my world that's already happening. I work now with architects in several different states and we don't need one place to all be meeting. We can share our desktops when we are working together. You know, it's actually easier in some ways than leaning over someone's shoulder so it's happening and when I design a house I try to make sure that it's got workspace in it that can be the in-home office that will allow people to work virtually. So I think it's well on its way to happening and I think we'll find each other working not just from county to county in England or from

state to state in this country but from country to country very frequently.

Ben: Well it's been fascinating to chat with you Sarah so thank you very much for your time. Maybe you want advise us where's the best place to come and find out more information about you.

Sarah: Well if you go to [www.notsobighouse.com](http://www.notsobighouse.com) you'll be able to learn a lot more about the Not So Big House concepts and there's actually nine books in the series and so I've got quite a few things for you to read.

I know I have an English following and those of you who are English will recognise where a lot of these ideas came from and then also if you are interested in the Not So Big Life part, if you go to [www.notsobiglife.com](http://www.notsobiglife.com) that's got lots of other resources.

Finally I'm on Facebook so communicate with people from all over the world on Facebook so that's just Sarah Susanka's fan page.

Ben: Superb, well is there a final thought that you want to finish on?

Sarah: I'd just like to say that the way to make your house really feel as though it fits you is to start by looking at what is it that I like? Often times people are scared out of making their house their own because they are told they can't do that because they won't be able to sell it later and I think that's a very poor idea for not making your house your own. So hang up those pictures that you've got sitting in the cupboard and really make it personal because that's what will make it personal because that's what will make you fall in love with your house.

Ben: Sarah, thank you very much.

Sarah: Thank you so much Ben.