

## Episode 243

# Embracing the “Not So Big” philosophy – with Sarah Susanka

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/243](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/243)

- Sarah: I'm very well, thank you Ben.
- Ben: This is great. One of the reasons I wanted to get you back on to the podcast is because I have built a house now!
- Sarah: Congratulations. Is it not so big?
- Ben: Well, this is part of what I want to talk about because there were a few issues along the way. However, what I really appreciated about our last chat is that actually, some of your advice really stuck with me as I went through. Which is interesting because I have lots of conversations and I can't always say that I can remember what I was talking about with a certain person, but with you there were some really clear messages, it was very valuable.
- You probably want to know about the size of the house first of all, which I think I need to deal with just to let you know. Actually, I ended up going bigger than I thought I was going to. I don't know whether you work in square metres, but floor area, two-hundred-and-twenty-six square metres.
- Sarah: Gosh, I don't. Let me convert that. So actually, that's not big by our standards. That would be seven-hundred-and-forty-one square feet, I think.
- Ben: Well, I think it might be a bit more than that.
- Sarah: Oh, you know what I bet that is? I now need to multiply it.
- Ben: We're starting with a big maths equation here. I didn't expect that to happen.
- Sarah: I can't do it quickly. I'll have to do it another time, but I believe you.
- Ben: The purpose of me saying that is because when we started, we started thinking about having a smaller house. We did want that,

within budget and all the rest of it. But what we found is that we were led a little bit by the land that was available.

On this particular piece of land, the permission that had been granted for it was for a much bigger house. So, I've pretty much halved the size of the house that was on this site, but I just thought that it was really interesting, that you're guided a little bit by what land, what you'd call a lot, you go for.

Does that make sense? Because that wasn't something I knew about beforehand.

Sarah: It is, to some degree. It's an interesting phenomenon that when you're building to a piece of property, the property governs a lot of what you can and can't do.

One of the things that architects are very much aware of is that, for example, if you wanted to be able to purchase a floor plan and just build it, it doesn't convert automatically to the piece of property that you have. In fact, it's very rare that a pre-made plan is going to fit exactly the piece of property that you have.

A big part of what my profession exists for is to help make a house that really grows out of the site very naturally. So, yes, the site has an enormous impact on the character of house that you can build.

Ben: Where we were, it's a slightly unusual situation. We have something called green belt land here which is what you can't build on, and one of the great joys of where I am is that actually, because we have most of our piece of land as a green belt and you can't build on it, it naturally means that you have to take advantage of that small bit of land that you can build on, for it to almost sit as the right sized property on there.

Sarah: I see. Yes, absolutely. And so, did your property have some elevation change?

Ben: It's fairly flat, but it's part of a neighbouring property, or it was before. So, we were effectively building in their garden plus a bit of a field. Every place is different, isn't it?

But what we did follow, one piece of advice you gave me which I tell loads of people and no-one ever seems to value it as much as I have, was about using all the space every day. So, although we've got this slightly bigger house than perhaps we originally set out to, with the exception of one room which is a guest room and I can say today is actually being used – we've got one dedicated guest room – all of the house, all of that space, I have my office, the kids have

their rooms, we've got our main room – yes, maybe you could tell us a little bit about where that came from and why it works so well? Because I love it.

Sarah: Can you repeat the key idea here?

Ben: It was to use all the space every day.

Sarah: Yes. I got this really from being in the US and looking at how many rooms almost never got used. That wasn't true where I grew up in England, but it was certainly true here. So, I found, isn't this crazy? They're building more and more square footage – square metres in your case – and not really using it every day.

I could see that there was a way to build a house that was smaller, but also better because it was alive. If every space is in use every day, you don't feel like you've got an appendage that's not used for anything.

Ben: Exactly.

Sarah: Yes. So, I started this idea of doing double duty – it's a little bit like in a Japanese house where they'll use a dining area as a sleeping space, but we have other things that we can convert from one space to another.

A very common one that I do is if you've got a guest bedroom, unless you have guests very frequently, that room sits empty most of the time. So, why not use it for an in-home office, for example? Or what I call an away room, a place to put kids playing computer games or noise that you'd rather have isolated. Let them use that space and then when you do have a guest over, it can easily transform into its occasional function, what it's named for but doesn't get used very frequently for that purpose.

Ben: I can tell you right now, this is another one that I massively embrace. I'm talking to you from my office, but right behind me is a sofa which turns into our sofa-bed when we have guests.

It's technically a four-bedroom house, dedicated bedrooms, and then we've got one that we can have here, I've got my mother-in-law and my son downstairs in the snug which is again another room that will convert into a bedroom if we decided to host quite a few people, and then the kids can double-up in their own room and then you've got another room there.

I'm marvelling in your advice.

Sarah: [Laughs] that's great. Congratulations. It does work and I know that I have saved a lot of people from building rooms that really they don't need but never really thought about before.

Ben: Do you think that this is just some people living like this, or have we gone through a change in how we use our houses? Because our main space is what you'd talk about as a more open-plan space that can have different zones in there.

Sarah: I can't say that everybody has embraced this. I think that there's always going to be a variety of different types of folks looking for different types of houses. But I think that there is a much wider acceptance of what I say is building better rather than bigger.

In the UK, I don't know how often it is that people do build bigger, but I can tell you, in this country, given the option, in the US market people tend to spread out. We've got more space to spread out into and so, houses got crazy big.

And I know that I've had an impact on helping people to re-asses what actually fits them. We don't buy a bigger piece of clothing just because we can. In the same way, we don't need a bigger house just because we can. Let's tailor it so that it really fits us. And I think that idea has really caught on.

Ben: Is it a status symbol? Is that one part of it?

Sarah: That's a big piece. And again, I can only talk about values that I've seen here, but I know that for a long time, people wanted a better house and they equated better with bigger.

I actually had one client who could pretty much afford whatever he wanted to build, and he was going for the bigger house. He had started working with another architect and I saw the plans and I was just frankly horrified. It was not a pretty thing. So, I challenged him and I said, 'look, I would like to design a house for you that's half the size of what you've got shown here, but that's really the coolest house, the most interesting house, and I guarantee your friends and neighbours are going to want to come and visit because it's going to be really enjoyable to be in.'

Of course, the project wasn't without its hitches with moments of his worrying that it was smaller than other people's, but he actually ended up loving the house and when it was finished, it absolutely was the talk of the neighbourhood and people did gather there a lot.

So, I think it's questioning some of those values, but once people see what you can do when you spend money effectively rather than just on more, they're sold. It's instant. It's obvious.

Ben: Money is a huge part when you tackle a project like this. We went over budget. I imagine a lot of people do, particularly those first timers.

Sarah: Everybody does, but most people don't tell you.

Ben: They keep that quiet. Well, I've been podcasting about it so, there's no great secret here. I'm shocked with how much more we've spent. But I don't think we've been excessive. I love the way that when we came into the house, it felt like home straightaway. Just because of all the thought and maybe watching the space develop day by day as well.

But that's a big bonus of going smaller, isn't it? If you can stop yourself. We're not saying that everyone wants to live in a tiny house, but what budget advice do you give people when they're going through this process?

Sarah: This is actually where this process starts. Because when I was helping a lot of homeowners to build a new house, they would come in and they'd show me these gorgeous pictures from magazines – nowadays it would be from things like Pinterest and the web – but they had a budget that was limited and then they would say, 'and I want such and such size.' And I knew from the first meeting that with those pictures and that budget and that amount of square footage or metres, they could not build their house.

So, I had to figure out a way to help them. Obviously, the budget was not likely to change. The quality of what they could build could change or the quantity. And of course, most people who are coming to an architect, they cared about the quality. So, I had to figure out a way to show them how to build less quantity but get a better house.

That's really where the Not So Big House movement started. I was beset with this conundrum with almost every client. So, just helping people to see what they don't need to build because they're really not using it anymore – like in this country formal dining rooms are rarely used but everybody used to build them. Nowadays not so much because of the impact of these books – it's allowed people to think outside the box and create a house that's really tailored to them rather than some sort of generic idea of how we live.

Ben: I think there's some sound advice in there, certainly.

One of the things that I found going through the project is, when you've got your designs together, let's say you have overspent, how do you go back? If the advice was you need a smaller house, it's actually very difficult when you're that attached to what you've got to go back. So, do you think it is a case of just being brave and saying, 'I've spent all this money on these plans so far. Let's rip them up and try again'?

Sarah: [Laughs] you're asking a very, very difficult question. And it's a really common question. Because people do get overstretched many times.

There are a lot of different solutions. One is in the design process itself, and this is something that I try to do when I'm working with a client and they know what they want, I try to build in what I call safety values. Places where you can cut back if you need to.

For example, you might say, 'we could build this porch or sunroom now, but if you need to save a chunk of money, this is something that you could do later.' That's one approach. It doesn't usually work that way. When push comes to shove, people tend to end up building what they want and finding the resources.

I suspect you went through some of this. The other thing you can do, instead of granite countertops, you do something less expensive for the first ten years you're living there and then you upgrade later.

There are things that you can do like that. But once you've got the plans, if it's really way overpriced, there's no way you're going to be able to afford it, I would say then treat this as an expensive lesson and go back to the drawing board and start over.

Sometimes you can start over working with the same person, sometimes it may be the chemistry between you and the person that you're working with that is not really right. But you will have learned an incredibly valuable lesson going through that. And I can tell you, I've worked with a lot of people who've actually done that, even though it sounds heart wrenching to have all of your dreams embodied in a plan and then to put it aside and say we've got to start over. But sometimes that is what's required.

Ben: I think that there's a lot of wisdom in, as you say, we've tried to keep this house quite simple. There were elements when we looked at value engineering, bringing the cost of it all down so we could have built the garage afterwards, we've got a balcony as well, we could have done that at a later stage.

We decided to plough ahead because we thought about the disruption and we're in a financial position that we could. We changed the specification of a couple of things and I'll give you an example, the driveway we saved about thirty-thousand pounds by taking the spec down, and it's one of the things that bugs me a bit because it's so noisy. It's loose gravel and goes everywhere.

So, it's tricky, isn't it? But you can't have everything and I'm not saying that you can.

Sarah: But you can always do that later. That's the thing. It feels like you're selling out when you're doing it. You're changing something and you say, 'I didn't get exactly what I wanted.' But you can always make that modification.

A few years ago, I did exactly what I was just talking about. I took laminate countertops out and put quartz countertops in. I could do that ten years after I'd done the remodelling. I couldn't do it at the time that I was doing the kitchen remodel the first time.

So, you just have to be realistic. There's a huge part of realism in this whole process and I think when we are thinking about either building new or really rethinking the existing house, we think, 'this is my dream and it's got to be perfect.' And I try to help people see that there are incremental steps that you can take to making it just the way you want it.

Ben: Where are you then, in this whole journey? Because architecture was obviously where you started out, but Not So Big had more elements really. It wasn't just houses. So, what do you do on a day-to-day basis these days?

Sarah: My life is quite a bit different than it was when I was originally writing The Not So Big House. Some of your audience may know that I also wrote a book called The Not So Big Life, which really was how it was that I got to start writing in the first place. I actually gave myself a life remodelling.

I had always been aware, since I was a little kid, that there was more to life than what meets the eye on the surface. I really wanted to probe that some more and I wanted to learn more about how did I think? How did my world get created the way that I experienced it? And one of the things that I realised very shortly after beginning that, I call it inner work, was to see that I was always describing myself as too busy.

I started to think, why is that? Because life doesn't inherently have to be too busy. And so, I started to look at the inner architecture of

my world. What were the beliefs and the fears that kept me on this rat-wheel trying to go faster and faster all the time?

That was an incredible eye-opener and it allowed me to actually one, recognise that my true passion was writing; and two, make time to write. And so, I went through a period when all the Not So Big House books were being written where I would designate a chunk of time – it was actually on Tuesdays and Thursdays – where I would just write. I was still an architect, I was still doing all the things that I used to do, but I would write in those periods.

Interestingly, as you put effort into something that you love, your world organises around that. And so, as some of your audience may know, I am one of those Oprah Winfrey lucky people that got on to her show and my life changed dramatically and I was able to start doing more public speaking, more writing, still did a little bit of architecture.

Now fast forward to today, I'm actually teaching people about how to remodel their own lives along the lines of the Not So Big Life, look at some of the inner conditioning that has kept us away from the things that we really love, and I do quite a bit of that work. Then I also still do some public speaking and I still do some writing and I still do some architecture.

So, I've got fingers in a lot of pies, but I am not nearly as busy as I used to be. That's the big one. It sounds like, 'how can she do all those things?' But I'm doing them in a much, much more balanced way. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Ben: How much of this was a spiritual journey?

Sarah: It was a big part of it. It was really looking at who are we really? That's really the question. And if you look at almost any spiritual tradition, the biggest question is, 'who am I?' I didn't realise it at the time I was asking, 'why am I always too busy?' but at root I was starting to look at what makes me tick. And then gradually, in any spiritual journey, you'll start to realise, 'who is this "me" character? How did I create this notion of myself?' And also, 'how can I learn to let go of patterns that are really not useful so that more of the natural capacities that each of us is born with can express?'

It's a very powerful process and it gives life another dimension. In the Not So Big Life, I talk about learning to see with a new pair of glasses that reveal another dimension. And that other dimension, it's sort of trite at this point. We say, 'be here now.' But it's really about learning what it means to be present in what you're doing.

When you're completely present, it's vibrantly alive. So, no matter what's happening, you can be having a very frustrating day, but it can also be vibrantly alive because you're learning and you're seeing things about yourself that you couldn't see if you weren't present in the process.

Ben: I think you've hit on something that's incredibly important. I'm going to try and tie it back a little into housing, because that's what we do here. I'm interested because it's a massive project when you build a house. Some people think it's going to be the answer to everything.

Now, I have thoroughly enjoyed this journey, but I think that's part of the point that I've just loved blogging about it and talking about houses all the time. But I'm well aware there's another side where it can go horribly wrong. You can run out of money and it can just turn your life upside down.

Do you think that there is sometimes too much of a draw to try and build this dream house?

Sarah: I think a lot of people have the desire to find home. I actually think this is where these two worlds intersect. There's the desire for feeling at home in our lives and we start with, 'let's make a place that really feels wonderful to live in.' So, I think it's a very natural desire, even if it's just fixing up your existing home. There's something about it that makes us feel like the place is reflecting us back to ourselves better.

I wouldn't discourage people from that dream. But I would really encourage people to think about, 'what am I engaging? I'm actually looking for that sense of home in my life.' Honestly, you can do it without building a house.

Ben: That was my point. I feel sometimes, although we're talking about scale, I have upped scale. It is, I think, the right time in my life if I'm ever going to do it, but I was perfectly happy back in the much smaller houses and life didn't change really.

Sarah: You learned a lot by going through the process of building the house. And that's really the point. We think the point is the product. It's great living in a house that you've designed and built. But the actual living through that process, however difficult it might be, is actually an immense learning experience.

And so, you came into this with what sounds like a pretty positive point of view, and you took, I'm sure, the challenges that came your way and learned from them and engaged your audience with them.

That's fantastic. That's the way that we can use every moment of our lives when we're really engaged, present and it's happening.

But the house itself is a nice by-product but it's not actually the point. The point is the living through whatever it is that we're making. And that's true whether it's about writing a book, building a house, or raising a child, all of these things are about how are you as you engage this process. Any time there's frustration, you can learn from it if you are not blaming others but are looking at what can I learn from this situation.

That's really how house and life sort of come together. Because everything can teach you.

Ben: How do you live these days?

Sarah: I have, I think, the perfect situation. I can go for a walk in the morning, meditate, I usually start work late by most people's standpoints. I start at probably ten-thirty, eleven in the morning. I work for probably two-and-a-half hours. Sometimes it's writing, sometimes it's working with – the builder this morning, for example, I was on a call with a builder, working out some details for trim on a house that I'm doing. Then I have a nice lunch and then often in the afternoon, I will work with students on this Not So Big Life material. So, I have sessions with students.

If I'm in a big writing project, I try to save my mornings for that because I find if I turn my email on, right away I'm involved in the world of answering questions.

Ben: Other people's agendas?

Sarah: Yes, exactly. I just have to just keep everything silent. I'll meditate and then I'll write. And those are honestly my favourite times because things feel very, very balanced then, very calm. It's a lovely way to start the day.

Ben: It's been a lovely chat. Thank you so much for making time for us. And once again, thank you very much for all your great advice that has gone into this house.

Sarah: Thanks, Ben. And I want to tell you, your house in US denomination is twenty-five-hundred square feet.

Ben: That sounds more like it.

Sarah: Yes. And that's actually about what I say when people ask me how big is a Not So Big house. They can be any size, but that's probably

right around the average in this country for a Not So Big house. So, even though I know in the country in which you are living, that may not be seen that way, if you're following my principles, it's probably why you ended up with twenty-five-hundred square feet [laughs].

Ben: And did you take the whole interview to work it out, or had you had it on a piece of paper for a while?

Sarah: No, I had it figured out early on. When I had to ask you to repeat a question, that's why because I was trying to multi-task. It does not work.

Ben: Love it. I must get my wife to listen to that bit because she says she's brilliant at multi-tasking. You see, it does go both ways.

Sarah: Absolutely.

Ben: Sarah, thank you so much. Hopefully chat to you again sometime.

Sarah: You're welcome. Thanks so much Ben.