



“NOT SO BIG” A REALLY BIG DEAL

PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q2: CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS





“Not So Big” A Really Big Deal

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Sarah Susanka responds to the question: Can the principles of “The Not So Big House” be applied to larger contexts?

DesignIntelligence (DI): We’re talking with Sarah Susanka, author of the popular book “The Not So Big House” (published in 1998) and eight other books, and a leading residential architect and voice. While many readers may know your books and your work, they may not know you. To frame our conversation, can you please tell us a little more about your practice and your career focus?

Sarah Susanka (SS): Absolutely. I was a residential architect working away quietly in Minneapolis and St. Paul from 1983 until 1999. That’s when I left the practice I’d founded back in 1983 with partner Dale Mulfinger. I left in 1999 when my life and career refocused around the book that I’d just published. I started writing “The Not So Big House” in 1996 and it was published in 1998. The book encapsulated a lot of what my business partners and I had figured out about the residential market. We had grown a residential practice from just two of us to over 45 people, with three branches in and around the Twin Cities. We’d figured out how to serve middle-class America with residential architecture. And we were absolutely convinced there was an enormous market that architects were missing. We made an excellent living at it, and everybody and their brother wanted to come work for us.

DI: What was your biggest challenge?

SS: The biggest issue we had was to help people who didn't know what an architect does, to connect what we do with what they wanted. After giving many talks at places like home and garden shows, the local science museum and continuing education events, I had learned how to help folks understand what it takes to make a better house, one that would really fit them. It became apparent that the things people ask for when they sit down with an architect have very little to do with what they actually want.

They don't know how to articulate their needs, so they default to names of rooms and square footage expectations. That first book was a treatise to help non-architects recognize what it is that they really want. I explained, "You can't describe what you really want because you don't know how to articulate it. Here's how to do that." All the books that have followed in "The Not So Big House" series have tried to give a language to people who care deeply about their houses but aren't well versed in architecture or residential design. In other words, just about everybody.

That's how "The Not So Big House" was born. It was also born because I saw another major disconnect in my travels around the Midwest – Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin – where much of my work was located. There were humongous houses being built all around the area, and every time I would go for a drive, I would see enormous houses that didn't really fit what I knew people were looking for. They were the equivalent of the big hamburger buns without hamburgers – all size and no substance. When I was speaking with a friend about the phenomenon, she called them "starter castles," and the name struck a chord. I used the phrase in my writing to explain what I was trying to help remedy.

The book touched a nerve with people who realized, "I want a better house, but not necessarily a bigger house." It's not everybody. Some really do want a bigger house, but an awful lot of people want something that fits them more like a well-tailored suit than a sack. That's what this book series is about.



Sarah Susanka speaks.
Author photo used with permission.

DI: Your early awareness of client service and client focus is a rarity in our profession. Likely a big contributor to your success. And focusing on empathy and listening are skills many practitioners haven't mastered yet.

SS: Too many of us assume everybody speaks our language, because everybody in the architecture profession is three-dimensionally adept. We enter architecture because we think spatially, but most people don't. Helping them tune into what makes them feel good in a space is educating them at a different level. Architects often feel like people don't want what they do, but so many don't even know that what we do even exists. But once they see it, they like it. In a way, I feel like I'm an interpreter and a bridge of worlds.

DI: Did you have exposure to other building types or scales?

SS: Very little. I started off in a firm that did larger buildings, corporate structures and airports. I was cutting my teeth on larger buildings. I felt incredibly frustrated that the primary focus for clients seemed to be "Does my office have more square footage than yours?" It made me sad because we have so much more to offer and so much more capacity to create truly nurturing environments that have very little to do with size.

And so, at the ripe old age of 21, I decided I wanted to work for people who really cared about the spaces they inhabit. I wanted to be working directly with the people who would use that space. That's what led me into residential work. I did do a couple of other buildings while in residential practice though. Those were libraries, which drew on many of the skills I'd learned in residential practice.

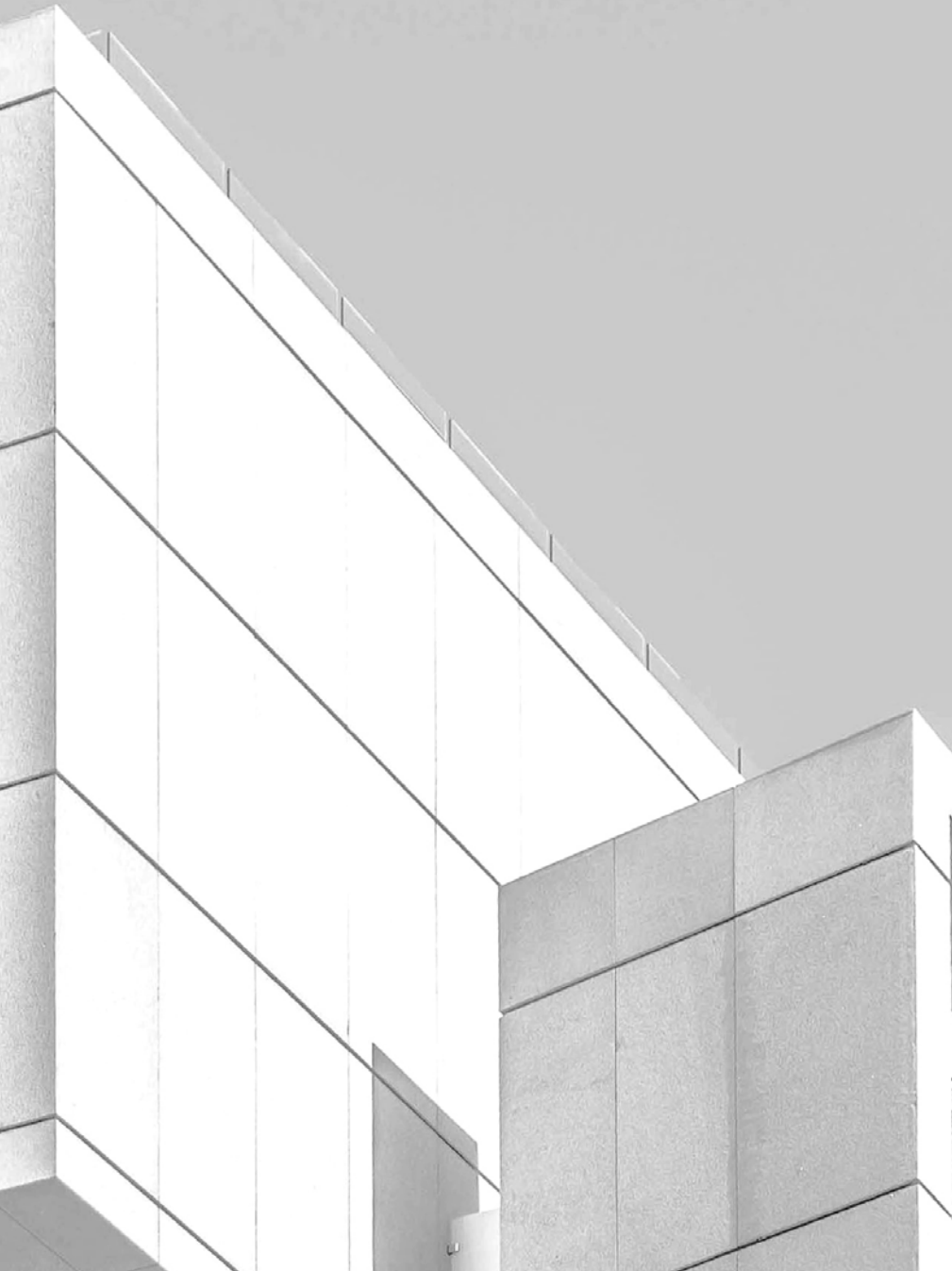
DI: You mentioned your partner. Were there other mentors who might help us understand your journey, who helped shape your career?

SS: There were many. I was hugely influenced by Christopher Alexander and the book, "A Pattern Language." That's the most important one. But I also loved Fay Jones' work and got to meet him several times. He's a kindred spirit. And more globally, before I really knew anything about Frank Lloyd Wright, I learned a lot about Japanese architecture.

I had a professor at the University of Oregon who was steeped in Japanese architecture. I learned a lot about architecture through studying the traditional forms of Japanese architecture and design. When somebody told me my work reminded them of Wright's, I thought, "I'd better look into this." And then I discovered that he, the Arts & Crafts movement, and my own work were all influenced by the same root source—Japanese architecture.

DI: I'm exploring a thread in our conversation today. The idea of moving from "Not So Big" to "Big," meaning the greater potential impact of practicing "Not So Big" principles. Since the first book, you've gone on to create a brand with follow-on books, seminars and philosophies. How did all that come about?

SS: The expression "Not So Big" inadvertently spoke to a segment of the population that felt completely left out of the discussion about what they wanted, both in house design and in how they lived. As a result, I have a fan club that has an almost religious zeal. They're into it in a big way. I haven't published any further books since my last book in 2014 and yet I still have a huge fan club that wants more of it. I could clearly write many more books along the same lines. The audience is ready and waiting.

**DI: You're just responding to the marketplace demand?**

SS: I was. But I was responding because I was living this stuff and I loved it. And I knew that if I could simply better articulate what was wanted, it would give people the capacity to do it for themselves. When that first book came out, I suddenly realized what had happened. I sold so many more copies of that book than I ever imagined possible.

I realized I was telling everybody that they needed an architect, but they didn't know how to find one. The AIA wasn't really set up to do that at the time for residential architects. So, I started something called the [Home Professionals Directory](#) on my "Not So Big" website, now on Susanka.com, that allows architects to list themselves if they're interested in doing residential work. And it allows homeowners to find them.

It's still going strong. It's also a way that reporters are able to find architects that do "Not So Big" houses. Back in the heyday of my book publishing, many articles came out and they found architects through that means. But it's still a great way for homeowners to find architects in their area that are interested in a house or remodeling that's better rather than bigger. My goal was really to help the whole profession and residential architects in particular.

DI: To this day, the AIA or its local chapters are not set up to make recommendations, almost by intention.

SS: I used to be the chair of the publications committee at AIA Minnesota. I realized our magazine was oriented primarily to architects. You could give a subscription to a client, but it was always marketed to the corporate client. We were promoting each other, architect to architect.

We realized, especially because of the work my firm was doing, that we could use the magazine as an outreach vehicle to capture the imaginations and interest of fans of architecture for their own

homes. Every corporate CEO has a need for a beautiful place to live, as well as for a new corporate headquarters. But there are also many fans of architecture who aren't CEOs, but who want to know about local architects' work as well. So, we found a way to use the magazine to appeal to a much larger general public audience, and it helped the whole profession as a result.

That's the part that still isn't completely understood. Folks see residential architecture as a little brother that's just not that important in the context of the whole profession. Yet, I have always believed that we have a pivotal part to play in introducing the public to what architects actually do and why what we do might be of value. Because if somebody has hired an architect to make them a beautiful house, they're much more likely to be happy about working with an architect for a larger building and understanding more of what it's about.

So I always felt like an advocate for architecture as a whole. That's why I've thought of myself as an interpreter and translator of architecture into "normal people speak." There are of course many layers to this profession, but residential architecture plays a more important part than most of us understand.

DI: That begins to answer my speculations that you had early interest in broader goals that transcended your practice and the response to your book. Let's talk more about houses. One of the unwritten aspects of that is the architect as confidant and psychologist. In my experience, that can be intimidating in the intimacy it requires. You have to resolve squabbles and become a therapist, a referee. Was that your experience?

SS: I have a great line with my clients. When things started getting heated between couples, I would say, "You guys clearly need to have this conversation, but you don't need to pay me to listen." That always solved the problem and ended the discus-

sion quickly. They didn't want to argue in front of me anyway, but they were in the middle of it. That response always brought things back into focus.

DI: That's smart. You seem to be an early trend recognizer. You take action and solve the problem. The rest of us just keep muddling through because we're focused elsewhere or don't see it. Your ability to diffuse and disarm those difficult personal client situations is admirable. Are those skills transferable? What else is required?

SS: You have to be a good people-person. Don't go into residential architecture if you don't enjoy people. For me, the biggest pleasure of serving that clientele is making friends. Most of the people I have worked with I end up becoming very close with. They're revealing their worlds to me. I would often tell them, "I can make the best house for you if I can come and stay with you for a weekend."

It's true because you see stuff communicated that you can't learn in a meeting. The magic comes in being situationally aware and being willing to listen, watch and learn, by being a good observer of human interaction.

DI: That's a helpful insight. The public reception of your books has been an astonishing, smashing success, with more than a million copies sold. That is John Grisham and J.K. Rowling territory. Did you love to write when you were in grade school and high school?

SS: I did. I actually wanted to be a writer first. My dad was certain that was an extremely bad idea. We moved from England to the U.S. when I was 14. Before moving, I had declared I was going to be a neurosurgeon (which it's a good thing I'm not, because I shake a lot now, due to something called Essential Tremor, which is an inherited condition that gets worse with age).

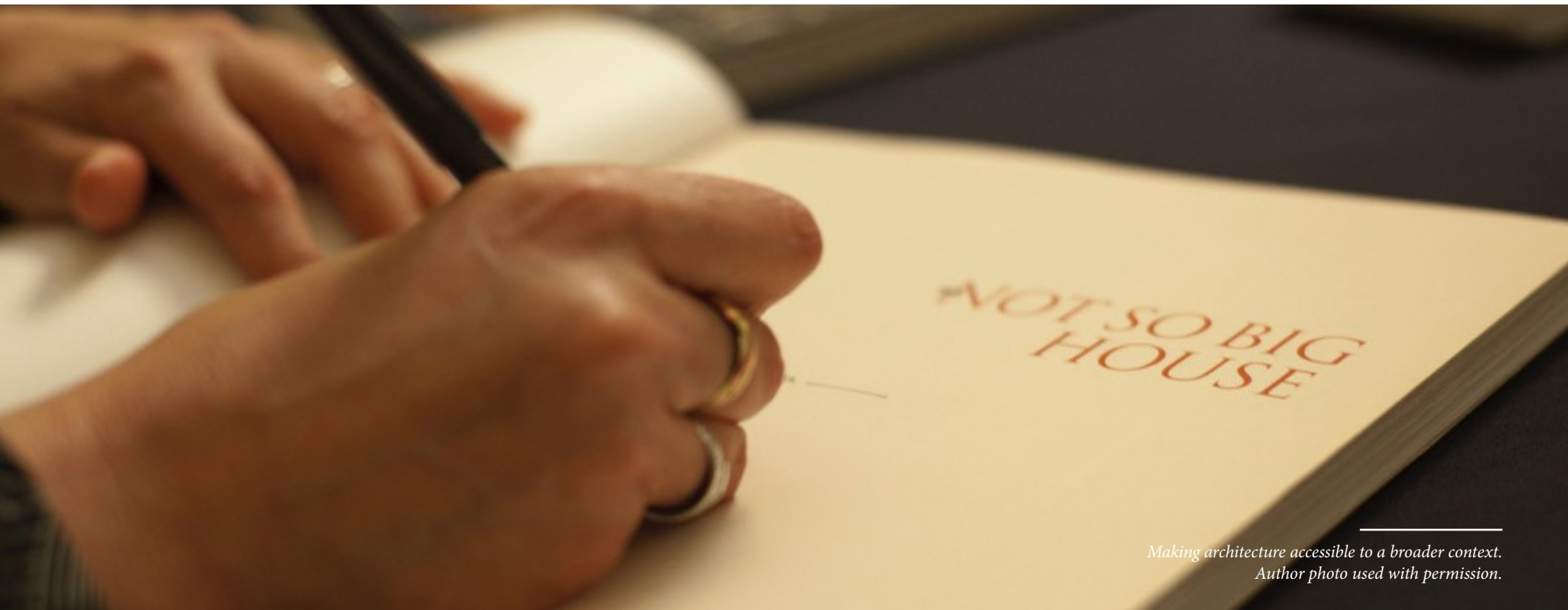
So, when I came home from school one day and announced I was going to be a writer, my mother burst into tears and my father suggested I choose another more dependable career. But it was definitely my first love. I adored writing. He had counseled, “Why don’t you wait until you’ve got something to write about?” but I loved writing fiction, so I didn’t feel I needed to. He was more practical, though, and wanted to make sure I landed on my feet. I get it now of course, but at the time I was frustrated.

But I took his advice, since I also loved building models, drawing perspectives and making plans of imaginary buildings, and I went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo first and then the University of Oregon to study Architecture. By the time I started my practice in Minnesota, I’d gotten my master’s degree from Minnesota. As I started to work with residential clients, it didn’t take long to

realize: Now, I definitely have something to write about because these people (my clients and the public in general) clearly do not understand what we do.

They wanted something badly, and I knew how to help them get it. I knew somebody had to write this down, but at the time, I was too busy. Our office employed 45 people at that point, and I was the managing partner. I had a lightbulb moment – I realized I was just saying I couldn’t because I filled my calendar every month with all the other stuff I had to do.

I thought, if I make myself into a client and plug myself into my own calendar, then that’s when I’ll write. I gave myself a new client number, designated two hours every Tuesday and Thursday morning, and off I went. That’s how it started.



DI: Very few architects' written work has engendered such accessibility. Peter Eisenman's polemic, intellectual essays or Frank Lloyd Wright's books, for example, are not accomplishing that.

SS: That's true. An amazing conjunction of things happened when I was part of AIA Minnesota. I gave a talk at one of the local AIA conventions. I was speaking about how I felt architects needed a spokesperson that would help people understand what architects do.

I became passionate about it and looked at research studies that had been done. Then, the whole thing with the book and the response to it happened, and I realized, "Oh, my God, I'm playing that role." That wasn't the way I had envisioned it, but that's what I had clearly turned into.

DI: Your residential work and your writing are two coincident vehicles for a larger purpose. At some point, your bigger message and desire to give back to the profession emerged. Have they succeeded?

SS: It has certainly succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, but there is always more work to do. And you can probably tell by the way I'm answering your questions, I love to inspire people to find their own creative sparks. It comes in so many different ways. Young architects today are picking up the torch on all the things I was interested in in the past. It grows generation to generation. There's so much more that's possible by simply allowing people the opportunity, and we structured our practice to enable that. I've had innumerable young architects over the years call me and say, "I heard you gave this AIA convention speech about how to structure a firm for residential architecture. Can you help me?" That knowledge has been out in the ethers for several decades now. I do less of that advising now, but it has permeated into the residential architecture culture and has per-

sisted. It's not loudly announced, but it's had a huge impact on residential architecture and, I suspect, architecture in general, both in terms of how we serve our clients and in how to speak a shared language of spatial design that's applicable to far more than just houses.

DI: Doing single-family houses for middle- and upper-class clients can carry an elitist label. At the same time, within architecture, doing residential work has always been a kind of R&D learning lab with the lessons and benefits being contributed to the greater good.

Is there a sense of guilt in just working on one project for one well-to-do client? Some practitioners don't do that because they're busy saving the world. They're working on systemwide global issues. Can you talk about that spectrum or responsibilities, choices and contexts?

SS: First, it takes all of us, and there's room for myriad different missions. I do not judge clients that have built very large houses using the same philosophy I use for a 600-square-foot house. It's a universal language. It doesn't require a particular scale to be applicable. But what I see is that when we speak about what we do without imposing our own ideas of what's right or wrong, everybody benefits.

I gave a talk – I can't remember which state it was in – where a young woman was serving at a cash bar in the back, and there were all architects and their clients in the audience. I gave the presentation and was explaining how to make houses that are comfortable and livable – houses for average Americans –, whether remodeling them, or building new. And when I was done, that young woman came up to me. Everybody else had left, the book signing was done.

She said, "Can I tell you something?" I said, "Of course." She said, "You just changed my life." I said, "Really? Tell me more."

She said, “Well, I live in a trailer. I don’t have a fancy place like those pictures you were showing, but you just gave me the tools to make my own little place hundreds of percent better.” She had tears in her eyes. It was amazing to me because I’ve worked with Habitat for Humanity and all sorts of other organizations. But when we speak simply about what we do as architects – the small changes that can be made to make a place a more delightful place to live – it touches so many people. That’s because home is something that, if you give people the tools, they can start applying for themselves. It doesn’t have to be complicated.

DI: I was searching for those essential principles. My question is: Can the principles of “The Not So Big House” be scaled to address broader responsibilities? We’re talking about them within DesignIntelligence. What are our new responsibilities as architects now? People are taking ownership for the well-being of the occupants of their buildings, and they’re measuring that. I didn’t go to school to learn to do that. Being aware of the growing range of contexts is daunting: social responsibility, environmental stewardship, economics, misinformation, et al. Can the principles of “The Not So Big House” be scaled to embrace broader responsibilities and contexts?

SS: I have believed all my life that, although we can each only act from our own small point of awareness about what’s going on in the world, when we do so with passion it can affect that world in a big way. “The Not So Big House” had a huge sustainability component to it way before most people were talking about sustainability. Every one of my books, and especially that first book and the one about remodeling, have dealt with it in a way people can hear and learn how to use their available budget more effectively, to include both livability and long-term sustainability.

I tend to do it by giving the tools to the person reading. Yes, we have a responsibility, but if we only talk about the responsibility, we tend to end up talking only to each other. If you just



do what's in your heart, the necessary societal changes happen automatically because each one of us sees a different issue that needs attention, and by speaking about that one thing, the whole moves toward balance. No one of us can see the whole picture, but collectively, as we act from our own heart and awareness, things can shift quite dramatically for the better.

Being militant about an issue is different from bringing clarity to it. If you're concerned about housing homeless people, for example, getting engaged even in a small way can become the beacon for others. It's the way we are all inspired, and the way we all learn – standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before us. That's the way I go about it; many of my books refer to Gandhi's famous quote, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." (And if you want more on this subject, I've written a non-architectural book called "The Not So Big Life," in which the deeper meaning of the quote features prominently. But that's for a different interview.)

This is about living with integrity by speaking and acting upon what you know through your own direct experience. I'm not so much talking about fixing the world. I'm talking about moving from your heart's center, from a place of your own inquiry into what really matters. What am I responding to? What really affects and moves me? And then engaging the world from that place, authentically, human to human. Then, just like Gandhi, you are embodying what you have come to know through your own life experience. That's how things actually shift.

DI: I love the ideas of giving tools to the people and starting from the center, but do we need to assume broader responsibility? Clearly, you believe we do.

SS: We do. We can and do have an enormous impact on society, in many ways larger than we realize. But the understanding

of how we make that impact has to come from the heart or it doesn't work.

DI: We're seeing an amazing growth in current awareness of women and diversity in the profession, but how can we advance the cause beyond awareness? There's a growing momentum, but I wonder if anything is changing. I'm thrilled to see it. Maybe we have to celebrate this awareness stage first to get to the next stage of true integration, real work and change. What are your thoughts?

SS: I come from an odd background in this, in that I never had any problem in the profession because of my gender. I don't think of myself as a woman architect, I think of myself as an architect, and I've never really had the difficulties that I know many others have. I'm quite certain that I have benefited from those who paved the way before me, and I commend those who continue to blaze the trail for those who will benefit over future generations. But I just haven't made it a big issue for myself. Mostly I just say, "I'm an architect. I know the world needs what we do, and I want to help them find us."

DI: That's one way to get ahead of the issue. Live it, do it, be it. Lead by example versus talking about it. In my years working inside a construction company, I learned the difference between talking about things and doing them. It's a different mindset.

SS: The only place I ever found discrimination against women was early on. I was 17 years old, and I wanted to get into Cal Poly's architecture program. I went to meet with three or four architects in Los Angeles, where I was living, to find out a bit more about the profession. One of them told me, "You're a girl. You should be an interior designer." That, more than anything, made me want to be not just an architect, but a damned good one.



Our whole culture is oriented around “If a little is good, more must be better.” It’s a design problem. It’s not about getting more and more and more. Our society tends to think more is going to make it better. By disconnecting more from better, we get to what we really want and really need.



DI: It’s staggering how many times you hear that story.

Many current thinkers argue that to make a difference with our bigger issues, it’s going to take more than individual gestures. They believe if we want to have wholesale impact, it’s going to take systematic change, major government interaction, changing the rules of the game, and incentives and rewards seen in new frames of reference. Do you agree?

SS: To an extent, but I’d also say it will still take passion and individual efforts that may not always be recognized as part of a larger plan. Ed Mazria and I were jurors at the Solar Decathlon¹ one year, and he had just started talking about the 2030 Initiative. He hadn’t even named it yet. He just articulated what we needed to do by 2030 to affect climate change and that, as architects, we had an important role to play. I could feel his passion as he was speaking about it and was moved by it.

He hadn’t started to promote it yet. I was at the time being interviewed all over the place, and I told the Washington Post and the New York Times that same day what he had been telling me about and that he had something important to say. Although I don’t know if it influenced any instant interviews and articles for Ed, I do know that the reporters I spoke with were now greatly interested and listening for further word of this new initiative from Ed.

When an idea’s time comes, doors open and it moves out into the world – often at lightning pace and seemingly defying the laws of gravity as it does so. Change happens because of your passion, not because you’ve got an organized and overarching plan – though planning has its role. It’s just not the full extent of how change happens.

If an organized plan comes down the road, and it’s your passion, great. Dive in, and if you see something that’s missing in the

¹ My friends Richard and Melissa King are releasing their new book on the subject, “Solar Decathlon: Building a Renewable Future,” for which I have written the Foreword.

plan, make it your job to bring that to the table. My passion was to help people find a better way of using their limited available budgets, rather than building gigantic sacks of space they didn't enjoy living in. I was passionate about that, and it translated into action. Without passion, you can have the best laid plan, but it still may not catch fire and spread, as world-changing ideas tend to do.

DI: Aristotle said, “When an object moves, something causes it to move.”

SS: That's right. And things happen way faster than you can imagine. That's why I often look at the pessimistic “doom and gloom” views of our ability to change with skepticism because I know how things change when somebody sees a way. You don't necessarily know how it's going to happen, but in those instances, they are onto something. It's the individual with passion that is the real mountain-mover.

DI: Bucky Fuller's trim tab idea.

SS: Absolutely.

DI: What are you most proud of? Your greatest achievement?

SS: Where I've had the most impact, I believe, is in inspiring people – architect or not – to recognize they have a lot more capacity to engage in the things they love doing than they might have thought. Simply that. By just encouraging people to see that if they love something or want to participate in a certain kind of project, they can – that gets the creativity inside each one of us activated. That's what they are in fact being called to do. It's not self-centered or out of reach. It's what they were made for. So, place your attention on that dream and let it take flight. You don't actually have to make it happen. It will happen by itself when you let yourself dream and take the first step like

I did, making time in my calendar to write. Everything else happened because of that first step. I simply had to notice that that's what I really wanted to do to make a small shift in my life so it could happen. That's an important message, and one we don't get taught in school.

I've had the privilege in my public speaking to watch, on many occasions, as an audience suddenly gets it – the permission to do what they really want to do or believe needs to be done. You can feel the electricity in the room when they start to see that, “Oh, I can do this. I don't have to keep telling myself I can't because somebody else is doing it or I couldn't do it well.” A big part of what I've been doing over the last 20 years has been to help people see beyond the limitations they've put on themselves.

That's where my “Not So Big Life” book has had an impact on many. In the architectural profession, letting people see beyond their preconceptions about what they can and can't do is, I believe, a significant legacy. Because once you give people permission to pursue their insights and their dreams, and to follow what their hearts long to participate in, that's world-changing.

And it's not “me” that's doing the world-changing. It's letting people recognize that we can each do it for ourselves. I often say to my architectural audiences when I'm speaking, “Stop for just a second and recognize the amount of creativity in this room. Here's 500 architects. Imagine what we could do if each one of us had the courage to act upon what we know and see and dream.” Our ability to change the world is massive, but it doesn't start by trying to figure out how to change the world. It starts with “What am I really drawn to engage?”

As you follow that, the world changes with you. That's what I think is the biggest legacy. It may not be visible, but it's a big deal.

DI: When people come up after a talk and say, “You just changed my life. You changed the way I look at the world,” that’s gratifying, I’m sure. Any final life changing thoughts?

SS: It certainly is. Often when people hear “Not So Big,” they’re thinking size. I try to point out it’s not about size, it’s a sensibility. It’s about proportion rather than scale, because our whole culture is oriented around “If a little is good, more must be better.”

The “Not So Big” philosophy is about taking stock. What do we really want? What do we really need? And then, how do we design a truly sustainable way of living? As William McDonough talks about, it’s a design problem. It’s not about getting more and more and more. Our society tends to think more is going to make it better. By disconnecting more from better, and then learning to forget about square footage, we get to what we really want and really need. Finally, how do we make that the best it can possibly be? That’s what “Not So Big” is about, and despite its name, and even after all these years, it seems it’s still kind of a big deal.



Once you give people permission to pursue their insights and their dreams, and to follow what their hearts long to participate in, that’s world-changing.



Sarah Susanka, FAIA, is a bestselling author, architect, public speaker and cultural visionary. Her “build better, not bigger” approach to residential architecture has been embraced across the country, and her “Not So Big” philosophy sparked an international dialogue evolving beyond our houses and into how we inhabit our lives. Susanka was named a “Fast 50” innovator by Fast Company, a “top newsmaker” by Newsweek, and an “innovator in American culture” by U.S. News & World Report. She is a member of the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, a recipient of the Anne Morrow Lindbergh Award, a senior fellow of the Design Futures Council, and the author of nine books, including “The Not So Big House,” “The Not So Big Life” and “Home By Design.” She has demonstrated through her designs, books, articles and presentations, that the sense of “home” we seek has to do with quality, not quantity. As a leading advocate for the re-popularization of residential architecture, Susanka has improved the quality of home design while countering the elitist image of architects commonly held by the public. Her books have sold well over one million copies. Join her online at www.susanka.com.