

Sarah Susanka

home by design

The Language of
The Not So Big House

From the author of *The Not So Big House*

SARAH SUSANKA

HOME BY DESIGN

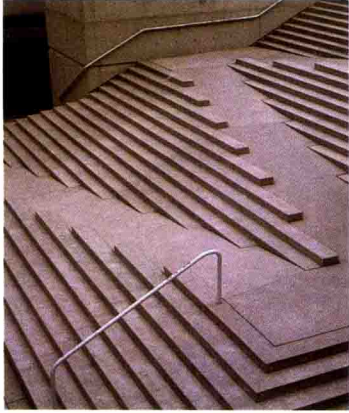
Transforming
Your House into Home

Photographs by Grey Crawford



The Taunton Press





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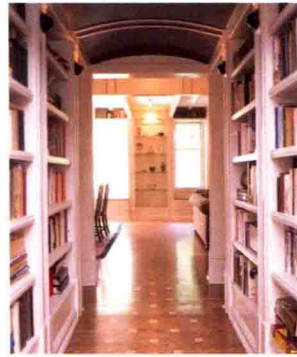
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HOME BY DESIGN







This book is dedicated to Christopher Alexander, architect and author of A Pattern Language, who through his research and writings helped shape the dreams and aspirations of a new generation of architects, builders, and the people they serve.

IT SEEMS LIKE ONLY A FEW SHORT MONTHS AGO that the book you now hold in your hands was a solid wall of photographs and Post-It notes covering the interior of my writing studio in North Carolina. Of all the four books I've written, this one has been the most challenging to put together, and I'm truly grateful for the wonderful organizational skills of my assistant and dear friend Marie St. Hilaire, who helped keep everything straight. The photographs that illustrate this book were taken from 30 different houses across the country (culled from over 200 houses collected by my friend and colleague Janet Maineri), each one chosen to illustrate a specific design principle. The challenge was then to assemble the photographs and the words, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, into a cohesive whole.

The photographs themselves were taken by California photographer Grey Crawford, who also worked on my second book, *Creating the Not So Big House*. Grey has an eye for the perfect shot and an uncanny ability to capture on film the design principles I'm explaining in words. Thanks again, Grey. I'd also like to thank all the architects who are featured in this book and, of course, the owners who allowed us to photograph their "homes by design."

My old friend Peter Chapman, a senior editor at The Taunton Press, has worked with me on each of my four books, and by this point we each know pretty well how the other one thinks. We make a great team. Also at Taunton, my thanks go out to art director Paula Schlosser, photo editor Wendi Mijal, and design manager Carol Singer, who helped compose all the materials to make the finished book a work of beauty and clarity. Thanks also to layout artist Carol Petro.

There are many, many other players at The Taunton Press as well, all of whom help to make the experience of writing a book not only successful but also enjoyable. Although I don't have room here to describe the roles that each of them plays, a huge thank you to Maria Taylor, Allison Hollett, Carolyn Mandarano, Lynne Phillips, Robyn Doyon Aitken, and Amy Reilly.

And, finally, my gratitude goes to Jim Childs, the book publisher at Taunton, who has become a good friend as well as a wonderful advocate and promoter of my work. As an author, I couldn't wish for a more insightful or enthusiastic partner in bringing my ideas to market. You may also be glad to know that between the two of us, we have my life planned out in book-writing ventures for quite a few years into the future. So I hope you'll stay tuned. There's more to come.

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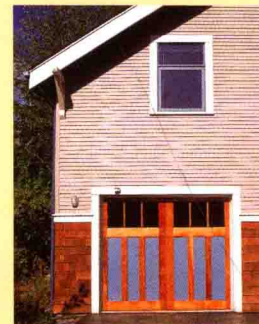
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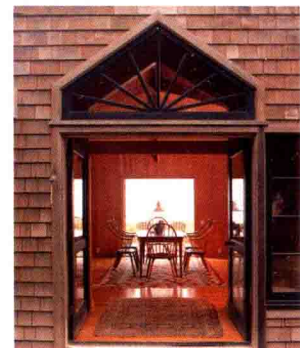
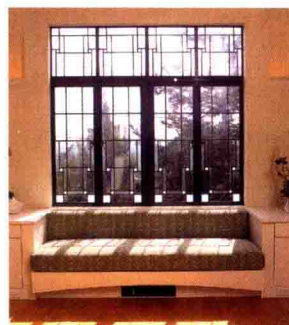
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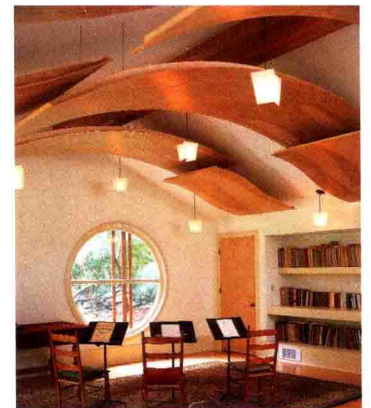
HOME BY DESIGN IS THE BOOK I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO WRITE.

About 10 years ago, I started work on a book about principles of design that I hoped would enable homeowners, builders, interior designers, and architects to start talking with one another about what makes a house a “home.” But along the way, I became fascinated with the state of residential architecture in this country, and out of this fascination was born my first book, *The Not So Big House*.

The Not So Big House offered a different vision of home, one that values quality over quantity, and the book produced a groundswell of enthusiastic believers. *Not So Big* was even dubbed a movement. *Creating the Not So Big House* and *Not So Big Solutions for Your Home* followed, fleshing out the message and helping explain how to tailor a house to fit the lives lived within its walls.

And now, finally, it's time for the book whose principles are embedded in each of the previous three. It's time for the book I dreamed of all those years ago—*Home by Design*. Organized into three sections, Space, Light, and Order, the chapters of the book take on one design principle at a time, explaining what it is, how and why it works, and how it can be incorporated into your home. So, for example, in the chapter on Alignments, the applications are Perfect Symmetry; Partial Symmetry; Asymmetry; View along a Main Axis; If in Doubt, Line It Up; and Half a Bubble Off. All of these terms are part of the architect's toolbox, but no one has ever illustrated them, explained them in jargon-free language, and made them accessible to a wide audience.

Good architectural design is every bit as important as good nutrition. Both are good medicine for our physical and spiritual well-being, and a lack of either one can cause a myriad of unnecessary maladies. You'll find that there is a rhyme and a reason to what you feel about the place you call home, and this book will help you understand how to craft your own surroundings into a better place to live.





From House to Home

I FIRST STARTED THINKING ABOUT BUYING A HOUSE in early spring of 1986. I didn't have a lot of money, so I knew I'd be looking for an existing home. I made a list of all the rooms I wanted, estimated how much space I'd need, and chose the community I wanted to live in—a lovely older neighborhood of small but well cared for homes along streets lined with stately elm trees.

Then one Saturday morning, as I was walking through the area, I found it. It was a house I'd passed before, but now there was a "For Sale by Owner" sign on the front lawn. The house wasn't much to look at—a square, turn-of-the-century, stucco box with a steep roof and nondescript green trim. But there was something about it that appealed to me, and as I walked up the path to the front door, with its full pane of intricate Victorian art glass, I started to get a good feeling about the house.

The homeowner answered the door, and almost instantly, before I'd even set foot inside, I knew that this was *it*—this was the house for me. As I stood there on the threshold, all my thoughts about rooms and square footage fell by the wayside as I succumbed to the indefinable something that said "home" to me. From the doorstep, I could look through two arched openings, both surrounded by wide oak trim, past a light-filled living room to a dining room at the opposite corner of the house. Although I couldn't see the entire room from where I stood, the dining room windows seemed to beckon to me, to encourage me to come on in and explore.

At the homeowner's invitation I went inside, and before the day was over I'd set the wheels in motion to become the new owner.

After this first home-buying experience, I started thinking about





The impression created by the front door deeply influences how we experience the rest of the house. Here, there's a strong sense of symmetry and order.

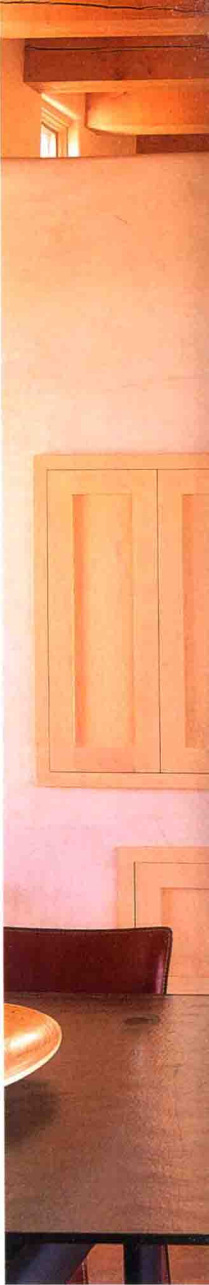
footage, the dimensions of a room, and the adjacencies of one room to another as though these alone can secure comfort, when in fact it is the interrelationships between spaces, walls and ceilings, and windows that shape our experience. These basic ingredients are the tools by which we give form to our interior environment, and though they seem simple enough, there's much more that can be done with them than most people realize. The problem is that most would-be homeowners assume that they need to select a style of architecture, such as Colonial, Georgian, or Prairie, to establish a particular character for their house. But although a style can define the exterior character, very few houses do much to distinguish themselves stylistically on the interior. Yet the interior is where we live, and where we really care about creating the feeling of home.

So if the style of a house doesn't guarantee a particular character and quality of interior space, what does? In fact, there's something even more fundamental than style, but we don't really have a name for it. If you peel away the surface stylistic embellishments, you'll find some basic principles that govern the ordering of space and light to create the experiences of home that we crave. A house that's been designed using these principles is a Home by Design. The alternative, which happens when these principles are not understood, is a house that provides adequate shelter and plenty of

what this "it" feeling was all about. Was there a way to quantify it, or to replicate it? Were there ways to describe it so that you could discuss it and tell others about it? What I discovered is that although almost everyone I spoke with about "it" knew what I was talking about, not one of them had the words to explain what "it" is.

The Elusive Quality of Home

So began a 20-year-long adventure into defining the elusive quality of "home." Over time, I came to understand that although many people have a highly developed sense of space, because we don't have a common language to describe our spatial experiences, we've resorted to talking in terms of size and volume rather than in terms of the qualities of the space. We speak of square





Revealing a partial view of a space and placing a window at the end of a visual axis are two tools that architects use to draw people from place to place in a home.



Contrast can make a room more dynamic and engaging. Here, the green door stands out against the white walls, focusing our attention.

square footage but that lacks the qualities of home.

Even architects to this point have had no consistent terminology for these principles, so these principles have rarely been committed to print in language that nonarchitects can understand. The names given to them, as well as to their applications in the home, will provide a common vocabulary for everyone involved in the making of houses, so that homeowners can explain what they are looking for and in turn be understood by those they hire to help them. This book, then, is a guide to what underlies

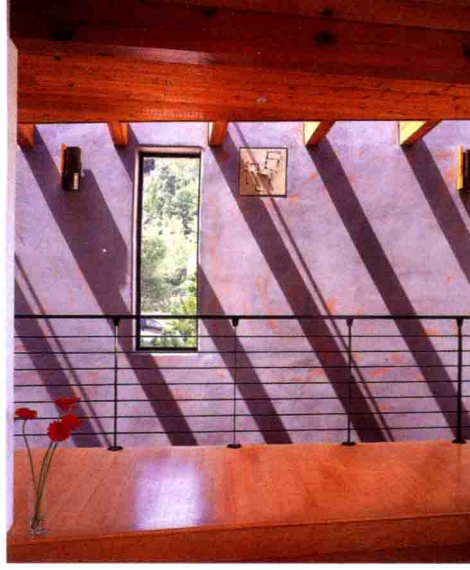
style, and to what transforms an ordinary house into home.

The Architect's Toolbox

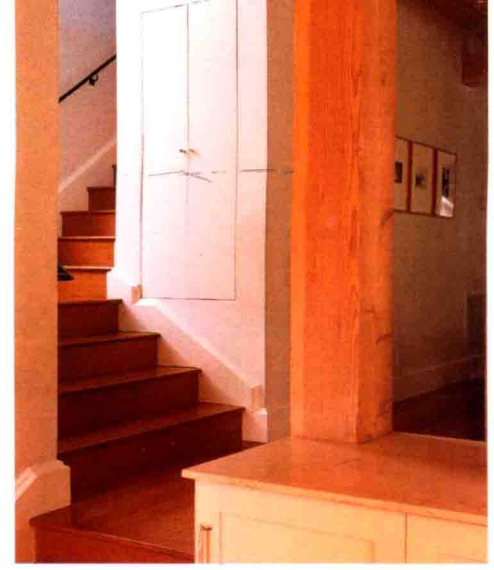
It might look effortless on television or in a magazine, but when it comes to making your own home a place that delights you, you'll quickly discover there are lots of things you need to know that require skill and training. Although architects and interior designers have the knowledge to help you, what's missing is a way to describe the spatial experience that is understandable to anyone with a desire for a



Space



Light



Order

comfortable and beautiful home. What's needed is a look inside the architect's "toolbox"—the principles architects use to sculpt space and light, to imbue their creations with a sense of order, and in so doing, turn basic square footage and volume into exceptional living space. These principles fall into three basic categories.

SPACE

First of all, there are principles having to do with space—with how volume can be shaped, molded, and divided to give you a particular kind of spatial experience. For example, most homes have ceilings that are all one height. There might be a cathedral ceiling in the living room, but other than that, the ceilings are all a standard 8 ft. or 9 ft. high—which can be pretty monotonous. The principle called Ceiling Height Variety explains how you can vary the heights of parts of rooms, as well as the connections between spaces, to define one activity place from another, without resorting to solid walls. This results in a house that's more open from place to place but that also has a greater sense of intimacy to it. So the whole house ends up feeling more comfortable.

One of the most important things to understand here is that we experience space not so much by quantity alone, but by the interconnections between one chunk of space and another. When space is divided into discrete but visible areas, our senses tell us there's more there. It works on the same principle that parents use when asking a young child how many pieces of bread he or she wants for breakfast. When you cut one slice into four pieces, the child assumes she's getting more than if you were to leave the bread uncut. The eye recognizes multiple segments whether it's slices of bread or chunks of space and reads more.

LIGHT

The second category in the architect's toolbox is light. In many ways we take light for granted. We put windows and skylights into the wall and ceiling surfaces to bring daylight into the interior of a house. And we scatter light fixtures around to provide artificial light for the places and times of day when and where daylight isn't available. But if you've ever been to a truly beautifully designed building, you may have noticed that the lighting gives the structure an almost transcendent quality. It not only enlivens the



space but also somehow draws attention to the surfaces of the building in a way that makes you want to explore it more.

Light is the great animator of space, and when placed with an artist's eye, it can make even a simple square room into a place you'll enjoy being in. It doesn't require a big budget to transform a very plain structure into a visual feast, just by understanding where to locate windows and light fixtures for maximum effect. For example, if you place a window or skylight directly adjacent to a perpendicular wall, the entire space is flooded with daylight, giving it a brighter, cheerier feel. This is the principle called Reflecting Surfaces, and it's a valuable tool in enlivening even the simplest of structures.

ORDER

The third, and final, category is what architects refer to as order. This simply means the way in which the elements in a design are arranged to give it an identity all its own. The room shown below, for example, illustrates a couple of principles relating to order. In terms of Alignments, the room is symmetrically organized around its centerline. There is also a distinct Rhythm to the space, created by the beams in the ceiling. And finally the room has a signature pattern—a set of small squares that form part of the lattice on either side of the window bay—that appears not only here but also in various places throughout the house. So it's a house that has a Theme and Variations. Most houses are lacking features like these that

tell you, as you move from room to room, that they are all parts of a singular whole. But a house that's a Home by Design has some underlying organizational features that help identify it as all one thing, no matter where you are in the house.



Space, light, order. This space is separated into two distinct activity places by the raised platform at the window bay and the patterned screens—implied walls—to either side. The brightness of the windows draws us toward the bay, and the repetition of square geometric patterns gives the entire space its own distinct order and identity.