

Building Small is Right for Everyone

By Marilyn Standley, Architect, CSI

Architects and designers have sold small house plans and published books featuring small houses for decades. Many people are now familiar with architect Sarah Susanka and her series of Not So Big House books on home design. Those of us who are old enough will remember Small is Beautiful by E. F. Schumacher. Anyone who has designed or lived in publicly funded affordable housing will know just how small living spaces can be. The U.S.

Green Building Council's "LEED for Homes" calls out specifically for building smaller homes by imposing severe point penalties on houses that are too large. Building smaller is not a new idea. It is, however, a most worthy idea, and the time has come for everyone to embrace it and put it into practice.

Reasons for building small cover a wide range, from saving money to the satisfaction of being super "green". Homeowners and affordable housing funding agencies attempt to stretch their available construction budget simply by building less square footage. Sustainability and "green" advocates tout building smaller as conserving resources and leaving a "smaller footprint" on the planet.

McMansion Mania

Why then have we insisted on designing and building such large homes? As David Byrne so aptly sings, "How did we get here?" How does an idea like building smaller homes become popular in print and conversation and yet not catch on in practice? What can we do to change this?

Since the 1950's, the trend has been to build and live in larger houses. In post World War II America, the middle class enjoyed a growth period. Average people held good-paying jobs. They built small houses

at first, then bigger ones. Despite an energy crisis and several recessions, by the time the 1990's rolled around, "McMansion mania" had blossomed and people were convinced they could not possibly live happy, rewarding lives unless they lived in large houses. Children needed their own bedrooms. Extra bathrooms meant everyone could get up and out to school or work without having to wait for someone else. Career people with busy life styles required their own personal private space in addition to shared space within the home. Spacious master bedroom suites were essential for owners to unwind in a little luxury after a day of climbing the corporate ladder. People who had grown up in much smaller 2-3 bedroom, one bath homes, asked themselves how their parents could possibly have done it.

Things have changed

Today things have changed drastically. Many bubbles have burst. Our lives are in flux, and our values are being tested. Home prices have taken a dive over the past 5 years. Unemployment is high, and the "comfortable" middle class is not so comfortable any more. We are all looking around for ways to restructure our lives to make the most of our own dwindling financial resources as well as the planet's dwindling natural resources.

Large, luxurious homes are out of sync with this picture. Large homes can be expensive to build and maintain. They are big property tax burdens, and they can be energy hogs.

Energy conservation and energy efficiency are now topics of mainstream concern. People with the best of intentions have jumped on the "green" energy bandwagon. Some think they can still build large homes as long as they are "green". And there is some merit there. An energy

efficient large home is far superior to the average inefficient large home. But the time has come to design and build more thoughtfully and intelligently, in other words, to design and build both "green" and small.

Designing Green and Small

People that have the funds to remodel, add on, or build a new home, are justifiably concerned about spending their money wisely. They are concerned about the value and quality of the final result. They don't want and can't afford to over-build. Yet they also worry that building something too small will be uncomfortable, not "big" enough, that their property value will not reflect their investment, and that the real estate resale market will not smile on a "too small house".

The first task everyone faces is to understand that a small amount of extra space can make a big difference. In many cases reconfiguring an existing home without adding any extra square footage can bring enormous improvements in functionality, comfort, and value. Building small takes some time. It is not the easiest thing to do. But taking the time up front to creatively explore the possibilities has its rewards.

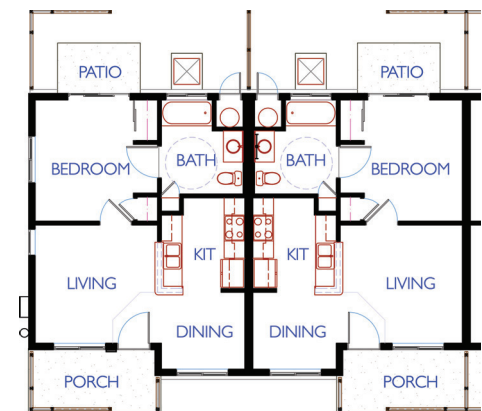
Second, any successful design is the product of a real partnership between the homeowner and the design professional. The homeowner can help with this by fully participating in the design process. Find an architect who cares and who will listen to your needs and ideas. Talk to them openly and honestly. Make lists of your needs and goals. Carefully consider what you can compromise on and what you can't.

Third, after discussing all of your concerns and desires with your architect, ask him or her to challenge you regarding any stated need for more space. Avoid gravitating toward the "easy" design solutions that work only

by adding extra space. Take the time to explore some other options. Walk through several design alternatives. Examine the pros and cons of the possible choices and discuss the implications of these choices throughout the design process.

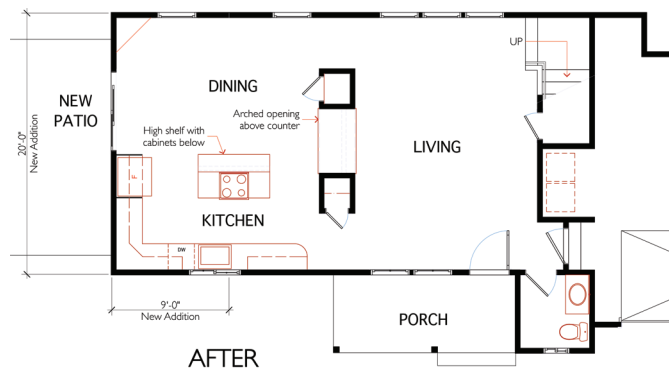
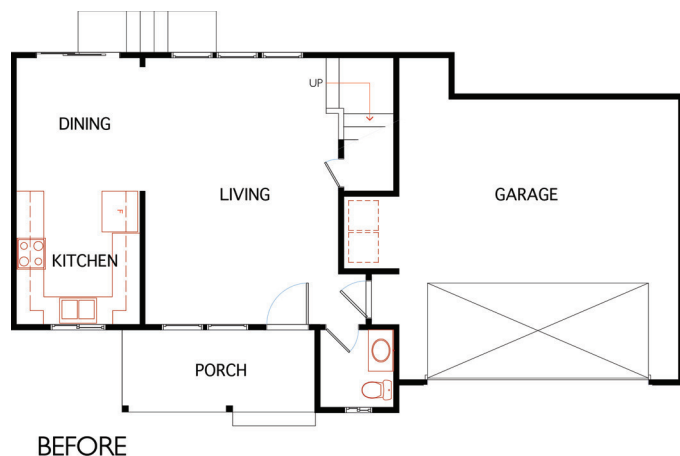
In this way the design solution can be personally tailored to each homeowner's needs. Instead of just "making things smaller", one can cut space where it works and add space where it is truly needed. For increased success, include your contractor and structural engineer at the design table as well. As members of a project team, everyone whose work you count on has experience and expertise that is important to consider. Their contributions even at the early stages can be very valuable.

It may take a little more time and effort to arrive at a thoughtful, efficient design, and then to follow through with careful, efficient construction, but it can be well worth it. Building small and living well are both desirable and possible. We can do it, and we need to start doing it now.



These one-bedroom affordable housing apartments at Brentwood Senior Housing are only 540 SF yet are fully accessible and feel spacious

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In this example, adding a moderate amount of space and opening up the wall between the Living Room and Dining Room makes a dramatic difference.