

# Introduction



How much space does it take to be happy? Most of us have noticed the dramatic increase in new-house size, and some of us have asked that question. Working in construction, I watched people's dream houses balloon into unmanageable giants. I saw the effect on homeowners, the psychological, social, and financial toll, and I looked for new options that could lead them to a simpler, happier home.

Construction has some alarming effects on the environment. Forty percent of all the raw materials humans consume, we use in construction. Most of the trees we cut down become buildings. Half of the copper we mine becomes wire and pipe inside these buildings. Building an average house adds seven tons of waste to the landfill.<sup>1</sup> It's estimated that humans, using machines, now move more materials than rivers do.<sup>2</sup> New-house construction is arguably the single greatest threat to endangered species: even in areas where human population is on the decline, animals and plants are more threatened each day, due to the construction of new houses.<sup>3</sup> Might our homes feel more comfortable if they weren't also destructive?

Working as a natural builder, I tried to ease the destruction of construction by using nontoxic, natural materials, and by designing homes in alignment with the sun's path, the prevailing winds, and other natural factors. Throughout North America building has been influenced by "green" thinking, and houses have improved, but despite major

advances in insulation and design, the typical house built today requires almost as much energy to heat and cool as one built in 1960.<sup>4</sup> Why? Because it's bigger. House size and location are the greatest determinants of a home's effect on the environment. The challenge to builders is to construct a single-family house as efficient as a New York City apartment, which, on the average, uses a fraction of the energy of a typical detached house.

All over North America, people are taking up this challenge, and they are bucking the trend. They see that excessive housing has not led to excessive happiness. They build, remodel, redecorate, or just rethink their needs, prudently

“Most of us have noticed the trend: new subdivisions filled with McMansions pumped up on steroids, neighbors who demolished their cottage and replaced it with a mini-castle, the friend of a friend's childless brother who just added on a third bedroom. Maybe you've heard the story of a couple who “lost” their toddler in their new, huge house. Many of us know someone who has suffered the consequences of an inflated mortgage, an overwhelming construction project, or a house simply too large to keep clean. Will our dream home always be a celebration of excess, and a drain on our lives? Is it, as one of our former presidents said of the American way of life, ‘not up for negotiation’?”

and calmly, constructing a joyful, sane life around themselves. The following pages report on the designs and patterns they've come up with, and the values they share. The fourteen principles of the book are a condensation of a few hundred people's experiences, and offer the foundations of a simpler and happier home.

This is not the first time in history that people have seriously rethought their built environment. Archaeology shows us a variety of sudden and drastic changes in ancient people's lifestyles. Near the end of their empire, the Romans attempted to preserve their last forests through what we'd now call "conservation easements" and solar building codes. Their situation had some parallels to ours: it was common for wealthy Romans to own huge villas, heated by *hypocausts*, furnaces that burned as much as two cords of wood in a day. By 100 A.D., wood had to be imported from the Caucasus, more than 1,000 miles away.<sup>5</sup>

Our situation is a result of decisions that our nation has made. Modern North Americans decided early on to occupy land in a way that encouraged further subdivision, and instead of preserving and separating vast commons from private, concentrated settlements, as some societies have chosen, we created a pattern we now call "sprawl." We debated, and then in most cases chose the single-family estate over the more compact, ideal city model. We created tax and lending institutions to promote our choice. Our collective national "dream" has materialized in the form of perfectly spaced, heavily gabled, tiny mansions that spring up overnight, covering up the sloppiness diversity of farms and wildlands.

How did the "American Dream" become a dream about a big house? Some say that "bigger is better" is simply in our nature. Indeed, men lie about their height, and women pump up their breasts and we drive big cars down big streets. But there has also been a parallel trend, of Quakers and Shakers, and modest, happy Lutherans in semi-fictional towns. North Americans have a long history of frugality.

Some say we like big because we are a nation of immigrants, and any immigrant feels homeless, and tries to compensate for that feeling by overbuilding. Indeed, when my grandmother looked at new subdivisions, she didn't see what her grandchildren saw—

the destruction of the view and wildlife habitat—but instead she saw a miracle, that thousands of families could live in freedom and luxury, next to each other, as equals, so different from the muddy, freezing village her parents described in their tales of the old country. New subdivisions embodied for her the promise of America. Why wouldn't we want this for everyone? Our suburban homes seem to express the Jeffersonian idea of a nation of small, equal landowners.

This notion that connects single-family homes with equality and democracy is related to the original definition of *husband*, which once meant *house bound*—that is, a man who lived and worked in his own home, neither serf nor servant to a lord, but also not a lord over another. In other words, middle class. His female counterpart was the housewife.<sup>6</sup> If building single-family homes could create a solid middle class, who wouldn't want them? It would even make sense for a democratic nation to support their construction through tax laws.

I understand the desire to build houses. During a brief stint as a social worker, I became certain that if the women I counseled just had their own homes, they'd be able to work out their other problems easily. It's a simple, straightforward solution, and I wanted to be part of it. So I returned to the kind of construction labor work I'd done before college.

Fairly quickly I was attracted to solar architecture, or sustainable design, and I learned about adobe, and then straw-bale construction. There's a deep pleasure in watching an edifice rise from the ground. Construction allows interaction with the rough material world—something I'd missed in the office. Many people crave this interaction so much that they dedicate weekends to it, either working on our own homes, or volunteering. I understand the attraction of building.

But there were two problems that began to nag me. One was that most of the jobs available involved building second homes, or large houses for couples, often at the end of a long road, freshly bulldozed in the wilderness I thought I wanted to protect. Have you seen a forest right after it's been plowed? The birdsong is eerie.

The January 1999 issue of *Environmental Building News* caught my eye. One graph<sup>7</sup> showed