

Outside the Not So Big House by Julie Moir Messervy and Sarah Susanka

The Landscape of Home

My starter home was a big Victorian on a tiny site in a neighborhood of Boston. With its wraparound porch, turret, and stained-glass windows, it was an exciting house for bringing up a family. But when I ask my children about this period, they describe how they used the landscape, making cascades over the backyard ledges with the hose, building forts in the forsythia bush, and conducting tea parties on the steps of the front porch. Creating these spaces for outdoor living brought us as much—if not more—pleasure as decorating the inside because we were using the outside as an extension of our house. And by extending the house, we transformed the whole property into what I call our landscape of home.

Each of us carries a mental picture of what constitutes our particular landscape of home. It might be entertaining friends for dinner under a grape arbor or roasting marshmallows around a firepit or perching on a parapet looking out to a distant view. Gardens are also part of the landscape of home. A cottage garden greets visitors from the street. A water garden brings sound and visual delight to a corner of the yard. As a landscape designer, I work closely with my clients to wrest these images from them so that I can design gardens that match their inner visions.

Most homeowners are overwhelmed by the vast amount of information required to know how to organize their space into a coherent whole. Often, they have no idea where to begin. Perhaps it is because, unlike the inside of a house where each room has walls, a ceiling, and a floor, the outside feels boundless, and little but the property line is defined.

And the possibilities seem limitless, bounded only by one's budget, which is usually constrained after the expenses of building or renovating. So the question is: How do we make the outside of our homes as wonderful as the inside? How can we craft places on the land that fulfill our needs and delight our souls? In *Outside the Not So Big House*, you'll find the answers as we break down this new design territory, the landscape of home.

In her earlier *Not So Big* books, Sarah explained how to make a house into a home. Giving words to spatial concepts that underlie our understanding of the built environment, she developed a language of space and form that describes the qualitative experience that people want in a house. As they read her books, many asked for help in thinking about how to approach the landscape from a *Not So Big* perspective. In this book, we do just that, for we believe that a house is not a home unless it is seamlessly interconnected with the landscape around it.

Imagine a house where you throw open the doors to find an outdoor world in which you can live with all the comforts of home. What would this look like? Just as in the inside, you would have areas of “shelter around activity,” such as the grape arbor, where you sit in a protected place looking out onto a larger space beyond. You'd find the *Not So Big* concept of “layering,” in which a series of openings and surfaces break the perceived

space into segments, as when sliding doors open out to a veranda that flows down to a series of terraces beyond. And you'd find at least one "away room," such as a cozy gazebo that provides sanctuary. As you'll learn, many Not So Big concepts also apply to outside spaces, helping to connect the inside of your home to the landscape around it.

A New Definition of Home What do we mean by the landscape of home? It's not only the gardens, but also the views and vistas, and the walkways and thresholds that let you feel at home on your land. Of course, your house is part of this landscape, too. How do you decide when to use these elements? You begin by realizing that designing your landscape is not so different from designing your house. Each property in the chapters that follow shows a different response to the challenges posed by site and structure, but the professionals who designed the properties used similar tools to create very different landscapes. Giving names to those conceptual tools—i.e., the language of the landscape of home—is the first step in understanding the design process so that you can use them to create your own.

Homescaping

We typically discuss landscaping as though it were something completely separate from the house. If you look at most garden design, you'll be hard pressed to find much connection between inside and out. There might be a screened porch, a terrace, or a deck that provides a gesture at a transition between inside and out. But there's often nothing else.

Like the artistry required in designing a welcoming entrance, there's an artistry required in the design of the interconnections between interior and exterior places. There's much potential to enhance the experience of everyday living when you consider the outdoors as a design element of the indoor space. And vice versa.

Every interior sitting space and activity area offers the opportunity to connect to and participate in a particular aspect of the surrounding landscape, whether that be a view to a beautiful tree, a long vista to a standing stone at the far corner of the property, or a glimpse through a tiny window to a courtyard garden. When inside and outside are designed as one, the results can inspire you on a daily basis, feeding your spirit and allowing you to truly delight in the natural world without having to go outside to do so.
—Sarah

Site

Embracing the Habitat of Home

Your site, your house, and your outbuildings make up your habitat: the environment where you feel most at home. When you create the right habitat of home, you set the table for all other design decisions. Every site has a vantage: either a prospect—a view from a high position, as on a mountain; or a refuge—a protected setting such as under a canopy of trees. To create the most favorable setting, it's important to know how the site is oriented, its soils, and existing vegetation. Your house also enjoys a particular relationship to the land, with slopes that face upward, downward, or remain level. Those familiar with Not So Big principles will see the connection. Like a home designed for the way we really live, a landscape designed to make the most of its site is more inspiring and more fitting.

One property in the book, a Not So Big House set high in the Berkeley Hills, was designed to take advantage of every square inch of its narrow site. The house nestles into a steep slope and, in every room, high-framed windows and doors bring in views of a flower garden that was lovingly planted by the owners. Brick and stone terraces offer places for entertaining and quiet contemplation, helping make this the perfect habitat for the social couple who live here.

Flow

Composing Journeys

Stripped down to its essentials, a landscape is really composed of two elements: paths and places. A path indicates the way you should flow through a landscape—which direction to stroll in and the pace you walk—as well as the mood with which you move. Places are stopping points you encounter along the way, such as spaces for enjoying views inside and outside the house. You can choreograph movement through space, from place to place, through the design of the journey that the path takes. Like a Not So Big house that has a thoughtful circulation pattern that leads us through the entire house, a landscape with a carefully designed journey is one that integrates the inside flow to the outside and vice versa. Whether meandering or straight, a well-designed path links different places, events, or activities to each other around our properties.

The rocky stream that flows alongside one house in the book leads visitors from the cobble parking court across a bridge to a roofed outdoor veranda. The veranda follows the meandering streambed and terminates in a circular outdoor room that overlooks the water. Sitting in what is a private escape for this in-town house, visitors can enjoy the sight and sounds of the babbling watercourse.

Frames

Linking the Inside With the Out

It's wonderful to look out the windows of your house and see a landscape that knits nature and building into one complete design. Your home feels as though it extends beyond the walls of the house. Being mindful of framed openings, such as windows and doors, helps you to establish a visual link between inside and out. In addition, building transitional spaces, like decks, porches, or balconies, makes the space between building and landscape more accessible. By enclosing parts of the landscape with walls, fences, or hedges, you create outdoor rooms as pleasing as those inside the house. When you create frames—structures that surround or enclose a particular space—you extend the presence of home beyond your house to embrace the whole property. Of course, this very concept of indoor-outdoor connection is at the heart of Not So Big design.

A Not So Big House in Texas displays many ways to link inside to outside. With an open floor plan that maximizes every bit of space, the house features floor-to-ceiling windows that offer views out to the backyard. A deck seems to float over a series of lawn panels that step down to the level yard. The owners are free to live equally inside or outside on their property, experiencing every inch of their landscape of home.

Details

Crafting the Elements of Nature

You craft the inside of your home when you choose a window style or a special molding. Each selection reflects your style and displays aspects of your personality, as an individual, a couple, or a family. Similarly, the details that you choose in crafting your outdoor landscape help to anchor the house to its surrounds. This means emphasizing the interplay of materials and echoing forms and patterns to bring consistency to the whole. For example, you can compose a planting palette using colors and textures that delight. Or select native materials that suggest a sense of the history of your locale. By shaping the personality of your home this way, you bring outside into union with inside. And whether or not you're talking about the interior of your home or the area surrounding it, all good design comes down to the crafting of the details.

Every property in this book possesses elegantly crafted details, but one Chicago residence shows how effective using simple building materials with beautiful plantings can be. Carefully edged planting beds harness riots of colors and textures. Each detail fits into the whole; the whole is defined by the personality and aesthetic of the owner.

Owning the Landscape As you read through this book, you'll discover new ideas and images that will indelibly change the way you see—and own—your property. Look out your kitchen window, and you'll imagine a host of new possibilities: a wildflower meadow or a deck floating over a lily pond. You'll learn techniques for designing an appealing approach to your home, methods for making a small property seem bigger, and ways to hide views and reveal others. The variety of landscapes and houses highlighted in this book—large and small, located in rural, suburban, or urban settings all around the country—offer ample ideas for every homeowner.

In the simplest sense, the ideas in this book are all about well-being: being well both in your house and on your land. Isn't this what we all want from our homes? Just as my children took delight in playing in spaces we made for them outside our house, so too will you derive joy from creating your own very personal landscape of home.