

# Small House, Big Rewards

by Renee Elder

In virtually every community where historic architecture exists, grand homes and stately structures mingle with smaller, simpler examples. These smaller properties are often overshadowed by their more elaborate counterparts, especially when competing for the attention and investment dollars of preservation-minded buyers.



*Charming Glencoe Mill Village attracts small-home enthusiasts.*

Now, at least for some homebuyers, these preferences are changing. A combination of economic, environmental, and quality-of-life factors is strengthening the appeal of the smaller home. Studies released in recent months by the American Institute of Architects and the National Association of Home Builders show that more new home buyers are choosing smaller living spaces. Similarly, fans of historic homes are finding that small-house restorations are no less satisfying than projects of larger dimensions.

"I like the smaller house because it's simpler," says Linda Cann, who exchanged her spacious 1916 country home for a small 19th century cottage in Glencoe Mill Village. "When you downsize, you cull the things you own until what you've kept with you is important, and you've gotten rid of all the excess. Even your mental overhead is less."

The lure of a simpler lifestyle is just part of the appeal, according to Sarah Susanka, whose book *The Not So Big House* marks its 10th anniversary this year. An early herald of

the smaller-is-better architectural approach, Susanka says environmental concerns and even a sense of economic vulnerability play a role.

"I've been on the lecture circuit talking about small houses for the last decade and suddenly these ideas have become mainstream," observes the architect and author who lives in Raleigh. "When I was at the International Builders Show in Las Vegas [in January 2009], everybody was talking about smaller, better-designed houses. Clearly the tide has turned."



*Cheryl Mohr*

*Sarah Susanka, author of the Not So Big House book series, will speak at Preservation North Carolina's 2009 conference Oct. 29-31 in New Bern*

When Paul H. Ray published "The Rise of Integral Culture" in 1996, he described a "cultural creative" class, at most a quarter of the population, whose values focused on the environment, community-building, globalism and personal authenticity. Concern over such issues has become widespread in recent years, Susanka believes. And a preference for smaller houses, which fits in with these ideals, has been accentuated by the recent economic downturn. "My sense is that people across



David Sirevel, Capital City Camera Club

*Top: The Canns' new house had hidden potential. Above: Their renovated cottage is comfortable and welcoming.*

the board became concerned with the volatility of the cost of maintaining a high amount of square footage. The economic downturn made people realize there is financial uncertainty, something that hasn't really been a factor to this extent since the Depression," Susanka says. A smaller historic home can be especially appealing because it has "built-in charm," she adds, "but the challenge is that a lot of older homes are designed for very different lifestyles."

In fact it was a lifestyle change Linda Cann was seeking as she and her family moved from their large historic home in Harnett County to a 1,200-square-foot mill house in 2002. "The big house was our first historic house; we've learned a lot since then," admits Linda's husband, Steve, an instructor for a California-based software company. "We ended up as two people with a huge house, a 3,500-square-foot four-over-four with a kitchen ell and two acres. The barn was 20 x 40 feet. That's as big as the house we live in now."

The couple's decision to downsize came just as opportunities were opening up for homeowners in Glencoe Mill Village, a community developed in the 1880s to house workers from the nearby cotton mill. The 105-acre site along the Haw River, purchased in 1997 by Preservation North Carolina, included the mill complex, 32 houses, a mill store, office, and other buildings. Following a design charrette, PNC installed water and sewer as well as other infrastructure for the community and began to offer the homes for sale to restoration-minded buyers and sold lots for new infill houses,

including one constructed by *Country Living* magazine as its 2002 House of the Year.

Although ready to make the move, the Canns had other hard choices when it came to divesting themselves of furniture, collectibles and other items. "We had yard sales and we donated a lot of our stuff to a nonprofit," Steve Cann recalls. "We donated an entire truckload of books to the library."

Even after trimming down their possessions, moving from a large home to a small cottage required some adjustment. In June 2008, the Canns made another move, to a 1,100-square-foot home in Glencoe that came with a large lot and two additional buildings, where they plan to open yoga and artists' studios along with a coffeehouse. But restoration of their new small home had top priority. Steve and Linda added many custom details that make it function well for them, including smart storage strategies. "The upstairs is all one room, so Linda put shelving all the way down one wall," Steve Cann says. "And we use boxes with lids that are labeled, so as things need places, we've got a system for storing them."



*The Canns borrowed space for storage and seating from unexpected places, including the back porch, entryway and attic.*





Photos on this page by McIntyre Photography

Bob Hansen, right, and an assistant work on bathroom renovations.

Such strategies can be useful in almost any small home, says Susanka. "I've talked a lot about taking advantage of small alcoves, nooks and crannies in innovative ways so that you end up with more useable space—not because you've added square footage but because you've found a way to shape existing space," she adds. "In fact, a big rectangular room can contain fewer activities than a smaller room with shelves and alcoves."

Susanka, whose latest book is titled *Not so Big Remodeling*, says longer-range views can make small spaces read larger. In historic homes where interior alterations may be limited, homeowners would do well to emphasize existing views between rooms and into the surrounding landscape. In some cases, minor adjustments can be made. "Making doorways wider, into framed openings, is one way you can make that visual connection." She also recommends extending living space outdoors via screened rooms, patios and porches. "What happens in a closer-knit community is that the neighborhood becomes the front porch, providing a connection and a greater sense of space."

This philosophy has been embraced by the Canns, who consider the entire Glencoe neighborhood as part of their home. "It's good to be in a community rather than removed and isolated, as we were at our old house seven miles from town," Linda Cann explains. "Even though this is a smaller house, we still have the whole village surrounding us, so it feels like we have outside space that's our own. Here we know 44 households. In our former community, we only knew a couple of the families nearby."

Living in a 19th century mill village has taken some adjustment, but not as much as people might expect. "It doesn't matter that I'm in a 128-year-old house when I have a great high-speed internet connection," Steve Cann concludes. "We're also close to Greensboro airport, where I go when I need to fly out to teach in other cities."

The bottom line is that their new old home is a better fit. "In the big house, we lived in about three of the rooms," Linda Cann says. "There were some rooms we'd just keep closed. Here everything has a purpose."

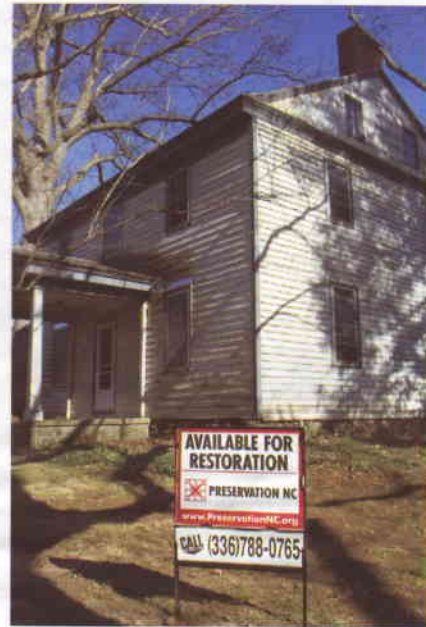
Some new-home builders and designers are using historic houses as a design guide, according to David Maurer, whose Raleigh architecture firm is known for urban restoration, adaptive reuse projects, and designing new homes for older neighborhoods. "Even when it's new construction, they are making an attempt to use a lot of what was good in older houses, but making it more responsive to today's needs and family needs," Maurer says. Susanka also credits historic properties for influencing her ideas. "In many cases, I've learned techniques from older homes," she adds.

Today, when homeowners contemplate additions, they tend to think smaller than in the past. "The 500-square-foot living room loses a sense of intimacy, and people realize they can have the same activities in a smaller space," Maurer observes. Quality details are key to enhancing a home's livability, no matter the age of the house, he adds. Well-designed shelves and closets can address storage needs without adding square footage. "Big open spaces are magnets for clutter.

We can design a living room just for living, and closet space to store other things. People are tired of clutter and they also are tired of cleaning those big houses," Maurer says. Susanka agrees: "If storage is designed well, it can make a place feel bigger because of the charm."

While Glencoe residents Steve and Linda Cann considered thoughtfully their decision to move to a smaller house, Bob Hansen's restoration of an 18th century log-frame home in Forsyth County came about somewhat spontaneously.

"I remember driving through Bethania and seeing the 'Available for Restoration' sign then pulling over and walking around the empty house," he recalls. Hansen, a member of the theater faculty at UNC-Greensboro, called PNC Northwest Regional Director Mike Stout, who had obtained an option on the property, part of an estate.



McIntyre Photography

A chance encounter with an endangered property launched Hansen on his small-house adventure.



"Another homeowner in Bethania convinced the estate's trustee to let us sell it with a preservation covenant," Stout says. "It is one of the oldest houses in Bethania." The covenant was to ensure that the new owner didn't demolish the home or stray too far from its original historic style during renovations. For Hansen, the home's historic architecture and its links to the community's heritage were part of its allure. "I had long harbored an interest in working on a historic home like that one," Hansen confesses. "There's a charm to Bethania, as well. It's kind of captivating."

At the time, Hansen was living "in what you would call a McMansion, close to work and with all the modern conveniences," he says. But the tradeoff seemed worth it. "There was something, I suppose, romantic and Quixotic about the idea of saving an old house. It captured my fancy. And because I had a home-equity line of credit I wasn't using, I took the leap."

In 2007, he bought the 1,500-square-foot German-influenced log-frame home built about 1780 by Michael Hauser, an early settler in the Moravian community of Bethania, founded in 1759. The house has two-stories in a four-room plan with an ell, an enclosed rear stairway, corner fireplaces, and a fieldstone foundation. "The bones of the house remained untouched, or if there were changes they were mostly cosmetic, like putting up some modern paneling," Hansen explains. "The arrangement of the rooms was intact and many of the original features were still there. The core was pure, and that was apparent. So I thought: This could really be kind of an exciting and enjoyable thing to do."

A 1950s house in livable condition also came with the property, so Hansen moved in there and began work on the Michael Hauser House, including an addition of about 450 square feet. "We added a master bath and a laundry/closet area where we extended the ell," Hansen says. "The new kitchen is in an existing space."

Hansen took care to make the addition compatible with the original style of the home, an important consideration in remodeling an older structure, even when preservation covenants don't come into play. "It's important to be cognizant of things like the width of trim," Susanka advises. "You can capture the flavor of the original without trying to make it a reproduction."

Originally intending to spend five years doing rehab work on the house, Hansen now thinks he could be ready to move in as early as May 2009. "We're way ahead of schedule at this particular juncture," he says.

His progress is being closely monitored by two friends, Will and Deni McIntyre of Winston-Salem, photographers who are documenting Hansen's big small-house adventure. "Our film is about the restoration

## *Susanka's Not So Big Remodeling Strategies*

1. Start with the least. Begin by working within the existing footprint and only move to a more complicated solution, such as a bump-out or small addition, if the need is clear.
2. Incorporate more storage. Well-designed storage in the right places can help create more useable space for other activities.
3. Create multi-use areas. Learn to think in terms of activities that need to be accommodated in the home, rather than in the number of rooms.
4. Bump out if needed. A wall bump-out of just a few feet can create an alcove that provides just the right amount of additional square footage without making the room overly large.
5. Add on with care. If extra space is needed and the budget allows, a carefully considered small addition can enhance value. Overscale additions may detract from a home's desirability.

project itself, and what it reveals about the Moravians who built the Hauser House and the whole Moravian enclave known as Wachovia, which today is Forsyth County," Deni McIntyre explains. "In addition to what can be learned from the architecture itself, the ground around and under the house is a treasure trove of artifacts going back to the 1760s."

Hansen, 57, says he expects he will have invested about \$225,000 in the property when the project is completed, an affordable price tag for fulfilling a dream and finding a special place to call home.

"Given where I am in my life and where I am financially, this was the size and scope of a project that was ideal for me," Hansen says.

Economics often plays a role in the initial decision to downsize. But, as Susanka points out, the opportunity to lead a simpler yet more satisfying lifestyle may be actually what's compelling more and more home buyers to make the move.

Hansen, it seems, would agree: "I didn't want a big Victorian painted lady. I already was living the modern equivalent of that. I needed something more modest, something more authentic. That's what appealed to me." ❀

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