



**A tight ship** A captain's bed, inspired by the reading nooks in Sarah Susanka's book *The Not So Big House*, fit neatly into the homeowners' plan to build a house that didn't waste an inch. Not only does it have the playful appeal of a ship's berth, but it also transforms instantly into a private "guest suite" with its own bath when the pocket doors just beyond the kitchen are closed.

Invest in high-end materials and workmanship rather than simply in square footage

# A Better House, Not a Bigger One

BY SIGRID SIMONSON

**W**ith the friendly face of a suntanned surfer, our contractor, Tony Hunter, looks approachable. That might explain why so many total strangers felt free to offer their opinions about the one-story house he was building for my husband, Bob Manwaring, and me. “Where is the second story?” and “Are they crazy?” were two common queries Tony fielded on an almost daily basis during the construction phase.

No one can remember the last time a permit was issued for a one-story house in our neighborhood. We live in a small island community in southern California, where the typical lot size is 30 feet wide by 80 feet long. With no room to expand laterally, two- and three-story homes are being built to replace the smaller ones that once lined our tiny streets and canals. As a result, some of the funky charm that characterized our neighborhood is being lost.



## **Small but standing tall**

**Sigrid and Bob raised the foundation of their new home 27 inches above street level to provide privacy from passers-by and help it stand out beside its two-story neighbors.**



# It's amazing what psychological space a high ceiling provides.

—Sigrid Simonson, homeowner

**Raise the ceiling** Given the house's small size, the single most dramatic way to create a feeling of spaciousness was to raise the ceiling. Intrigued by the concept of loft living, Sigrid and Bob let that vision guide their choice of which interior walls to extend to the ceiling and which to leave at a header height of 9 feet. An exposed forced-air heater duct and skylights also emphasize the loft feel and draw the eye upwards. "Occasionally, I have tried to visualize what our house would have been like with traditional 8-foot ceilings," Sigrid says. "Although the footprint would have been identical, the sensation of a lower ceiling seems almost claustrophobic. It's amazing what psychological space a high ceiling provides."



**Use pocket doors** The small size of the house made pocket doors a necessity. In some locations there is simply not enough space for a standard door to swing open. The doors adjacent to the captain's bed, for example, are completely hidden until pulled out but are key to a flexible floor plan.





**Build it in** A house this small requires a lot of built-in storage to control clutter, so every room in the house makes use of deep drawers, cupboards, and shelves. Kitchen cabinets are designed one foot taller than standard (another visual trick to draw the eye upward), allowing for seldom-used items to be placed above. Cupboards along the fireplace wall (above) house stereo and TV equipment. Drawers under the banquette and the captain's bed hold over-size serving items and extra bedding.



We moved here several years ago, into a 680-square-foot former rental home not much larger than a double-wide trailer. It not only was small, it *felt* small. It wasn't long before we—like our neighbors—started planning to replace the house with one better suited to comfortable year-round living.

Bob and I spent many months contemplating what size house to build. We are empty-nest baby boomers with no grandchildren in the foreseeable future. The common wisdom was to build a home with maximum resale value, should we wish to move. But did we need all that space? And could we afford the quality workmanship, appliances, and materials we wanted if we built a larger home? The cost of home construction, we knew, follows a simple formula of dollars per square foot. With a specific budget in mind, we calculated the cost of building a home with high-end workmanship, materials, and appliances. The answer was soon obvious: we could build the house we wanted if we kept it small.

Uncertain of what to do, we invited Charles Lane, a local realtor and dear friend, over for a glass of wine and described our dilemma. His advice was simple: Build the house you want to live in.

So as an exercise, we made a list of exactly—and only—what we needed to live and entertain:

- ▶ One room to “live” in with multiple doors opening to the outside.
- ▶ An open kitchen with a big island (which could also be used for things other than food preparation).
- ▶ One bedroom large enough to accommodate a king-size bed.
- ▶ Two bathrooms, one with a deep tub.
- ▶ Well-organized closet space.
- ▶ A dining area large enough to



seat our long-running dinner group of eight people.

- ▶ A small home office with room for a computer and space to pay bills, etc.

- ▶ A private place for an overnight guest to sleep and an adjacent bath.

- ▶ Lots of outdoor entertaining and living space with room for pots and planted areas.

After many floor-plan doodles, scribbles, and revisions, we called in architect Jeff Jeannette to discuss our unconventional concept. We wanted to build a casual “beach house” on one level, with high ceilings for a loftlike feel. The resulting structure would measure less than 1,200 square feet. We chose Jeff because he came highly recommended, we’d seen his work, and we felt he was willing to collaborate—rather than make a personal statement—on the design of our home. It proved to be a great decision. During our first meeting, I presented story boards, like the ones I use for my design work, as a visual aid to help describe our ideas (see “My Inspiration,” p. 86). To this he added his own measure



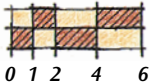
**Expand space outdoors** A raised stone patio adds 375 square feet of outdoor living space, easily accessible through the front door as well as from a pair of French doors off the living room. A wrought-iron table and chairs at one end and recycled-wood Adirondack chairs at the other make these two areas the summertime dining and living rooms.



## SMART MOVES FOR A SMALL HOME

**F**eatures that make the most of limited space are designed into every room of Sigrid and Bob's home. But the skylights, built-ins, and pocket doors lend more than a few extra inches: They also introduce enough charm and character to fill a house twice its size.

Scale in feet

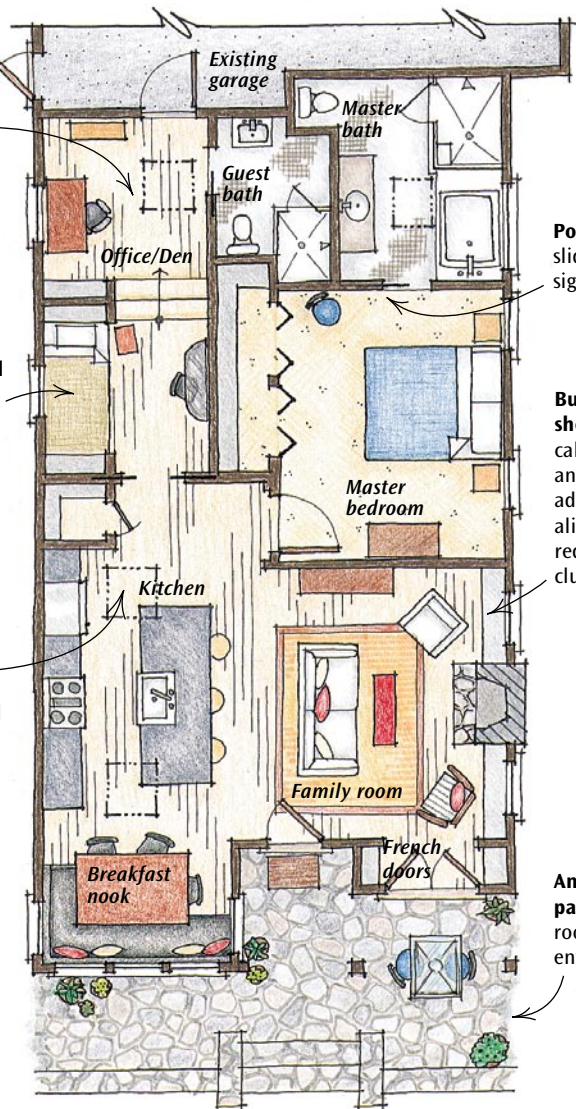


**Splurge or save?** Sigrid did both. For the sconces over the captain's bed, she selected \$130 copies (below left) rather than the designer originals. In the bath, she used reasonably priced tiles from Walker Zanger's Soho series to avoid the look of flat "machine-made" tiles (center). But she shelled out for a pricey Dornbracht faucet (right) "for its sculptural beauty and because it can be seen from all angles of the house."

Room for a stairway was figured in, in case the couple's needs change.

A built-in captain's bed provides privacy for guests and a reading nook for every day.

Skylights and a loft-style ceiling provide plenty of psychological space.



Pocket doors slide out of sight.

Built-in shelves, cabinets, and benches add functionality and reduce clutter.

An outdoor patio adds room for entertaining.





## FURNISHING TO FIT

After living in a home with 2,000 square feet, here's how Sigrid and Bob fit their furniture and possessions into a much smaller space:

**Start with placement** During the framing stage, the couple determined the precise location of their seven major furniture pieces by moving newspaper templates about the floor so that electrical outlets and TV cables could be properly positioned. Sigrid also made rough scale drawings of the sconces she had selected and taped them up at various heights around the rooms to determine their best height relative to the furniture before the wiring was done.

**Refresh with slipcovers** In a small house with few rooms, it's important to be able to change the scenery from time to time. So when Sigrid ordered the sofa, she ordered two sets of slipcovers (spring and fall "wardrobes") and had the factory make two for the existing chair as well. This strategy also helps prevent excessive wear.



### Fill in with "part-time" furniture

The couple purchased six stackable Bellini chairs from Heller after seeing them at a local cafe. Two are used as dining chairs. The others store compactly in the garage, if needed for additional seating. Small wooden stools and benches are scattered throughout the house, filling in as end tables and step-stools as needed.



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—Sigrid Simonson, homeowner

**Don't sacrifice comfort for scale** Sigrid's philosophy for furnishing smaller spaces is to use a few large pieces rather than multiple small ones. That meant making sure the bedroom was large enough to accommodate a king-size bed and a favorite pine armoire rather than buy a smaller bed and dresser.



of creativity, knowledge, and experience and returned with a great plan that required little revision. And he remained involved throughout the building process, always available to answer unanticipated questions.

Building a small house, we discovered, isn't a matter of just shrinking everything down to size. We used specific strategies and design elements to help our small home seem more spacious (see p. 31 and left). And as satisfied as we are with the small scale of our new house, we did provide for the possibility of a phase two: an additional two bedrooms and bath over the attached garage at the rear of the house. In this design, our office area would be replaced by a stairway that would ascend to the top of the existing 530-square-foot garage, which was designed with reinforcements to carry the weight of a second story.

Now that our home is complete, we're the ones hearing the comments. And they sound like this: "If we didn't have so much stuff, we could live like you do." Or, "The truth is, we live in only three rooms—our bedroom, den, and kitchen. That's exactly what you've built." Or—my husband's favorite—"Congratulations, dude, you've built a purely selfish house." **H**

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**For more, see Resources, page 82.**