

Close quarters: Life in a not-so-big house

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

We had a new bunk bed delivered recently, and our sons spent a happy afternoon—albeit a dangerous one—wielding socket wrenches and screwdrivers as we put it together. Buying this bunk bed allowed us finally to move the youngest out of our bed, where he has happily parked for the last three years, to his older brothers' room. We placed a third mattress below the bottom bunk that we pull out at night and push under during the day.

This means that our three sons, ages seven, five and three, are sharing one room. At night they look something like a three-tiered rock formation, one layer of boy jutting below another jutting below another in the silent strata of sleep. I do not know how long this arrangement will last.

My father slept in a room with his two brothers; my husband shared a room with one of his brothers. But these days, most of my sons' friends have their own rooms. This evacuation of siblings from the American child's bedroom can be traced, in part, to the ballooning square footage of new homes. The average new American house size has nearly doubled since the 1950s. For middle-class kids, having your own room is something of an inalienable right.

Our own sons' tripling-up is in some ways little more than a provisional answer to the question of how to fit five people into a rather small ranch house. Yet I'm hoping that living on top of each other, besides increasing the number of arguments and territorial squabbles, which it's bound to do, will teach my children something about intimacy, tolerance and the inescapable nearness of the Other (or in this case Brother).

In the 1950s, the average American house had 290 square feet per person; today someone moving into a new house has over 900 square feet to call her own. The National Association of Home Builders says that almost half of new homes built today have over 2,400 square feet, compared to 10 percent with that much space in

1970.

Our house is 40 years old, and while roomy enough according to 1960s middle-class standards, by today's measures it leaves a lot to be desired—namely, a great room, high ceilings and a couple of sleek black kitchen appliances. Our development, which consists mostly of split-levels and ranches, was the residence of the American dream in the 1960s and 1970s; the dream has since moved across the highway and left our neighborhood mostly to blue-collar workers, single-income families and retired folks.

Mansionization, the tearing-down of smaller houses and replacing them with larger homes, is occurring in neighborhoods like mine that are located close to large cities. And while mansionization has yet to hit many small towns, the phenomenon means that houses like mine have shrunk within the American imagination, becoming a cultural cognate of the fabled childhood memory, “It seems so much smaller now than when I was six!”

“The big house represents the atomizing of the American family,” said John Stilgoe, a professor of landscape history at Harvard University, in an interview on National Public Radio several years ago. “Each person not only has his or her own television—each person has his or her own bathroom. . . . The notion of compromise is simply out one of the very many windows these houses sport.”

Stilgoe overstates his case; it's way too simplistic to correlate the size of someone's house with the state of their family life. Virtues like compromise, generosity and hospitality are very much alive in many of the big houses I know. Plus there's nothing particularly righteous about living in a smaller house—or if there is, my husband and I have been creeping ever farther from holiness as we've moved from apartment to duplex to single-family home. But perhaps this much is true about any move from cozy to capacious: if you're not vigilant, it's easy to lose something along the way.

It is possible that the mortgage crisis, gas prices, and general economic and ecological anxiety will add the momentum of necessity to the trend of living in smaller spaces. Architect Sarah Susanka, author of the popular *The Not So Big House* series, has brought a design-oriented perspective to helping people live creatively, comfortably and stylishly in smaller homes. Judging from the constant addition of new titles to Susanka's book series, her ideas are resonating with people.

The not-so-big house is a not-so-new concept. For most folks in the world who share living space with aunts and cousins and a couple of chickens, close quarters has a lot less to do with aesthetics than with necessity. Even for those of us nearer to the top of the global class hierarchy who live in not-so-big houses, our habitations are often characterized less by choice than by circumstance.

Being forced to compromise, not being able to escape from others, and living on top of each other should not be romanticized; it's tiring and requires virtues like patience and kindness that are sometimes almost impossible to summon. But I'm coming to believe that living in close quarters, like praying or fasting or going to church, can be a spiritual discipline of sorts—even if most of the time it feels a whole lot more like discipline than like anything spiritual.

It would be disingenuous of me to claim that I don't sometimes wish for a larger home. I often long for a house in which I could stuff toys completely away from view, one in which I would never yell "Go to your room!" to two boys at the same time—and then realize that they'll just continue the fight once they get there. Indeed, too often I forget to be grateful that I have a house at all, for the privilege of owning a home that in most places in the world would be considered a mansion and that would be filled with a lot more than five people.

And I imagine that some day, when teenage limbs and moods begin colliding, we'll try to figure out other arrangements. We'll probably have to turn the study into a bedroom and move our desks down to the dark, dank basement. Until then, however, my children are going to have to learn a lot about living with the stuff, habits and bodies of two other people.

By bedtime of the day that the bunk bed was delivered, our sons had been able to both test its suitability as a climbing gym and fight about who got to sleep on top. Already, it seems, they've learned a lot about stratification, about how the winner always ends up on top. But I'm hoping that somewhere along the way to adulthood they get a glimpse of an alternate metaphor of stratification—the geological one, in which no value is assigned to either the top or the bottom, in which pressure, proximity and time converge, and in which the color and texture of each layer is more beautiful because of its closeness to all the rest.