

Small-Minded

We know you've been waiting patiently all this time — since March 2004 to be exact, when *ArchitectureBoston* published the “Big” issue. Gifted with intelligence and foresight, our readers just *knew* that one day, the “Small” issue would arrive.

And so here it is, with a nice bit of synchronicity to boot: our “Big” cover featured an image of the surface of Mars, marking the recent success of a very big idea: the landing of the exploration rover Spirit. This issue goes to press just days after the landing of the Phoenix Mars lander — a very small object only five feet in diameter.

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Within that introduction lies the essence of “big” and “small”: they are relative terms; one does not exist without the other. And in our culture, they come loaded with implied values. Bigness, as in a big idea, is usually lauded; smallness, as in the small size of the Phoenix, is considered merely a bit of data.

In 1973, economist E.F. Schumacher took on this cultural bias with his book *Small Is Beautiful* (see page 50). The title, with all its '60s sock-it-to-me period charm, has survived in the language as a sort of shorthand for a point of view that is often too readily marginalized, even though it has perhaps more relevance now than it did 35 years ago. Small seems to carry a whiff of either the countercultural or the precious, rarely having much influence on mainstream tastes and choices.

And yet there are signs that attitudes are shifting, however slowly, and like all cultural trends, beginning to influence what and how we build. Science and technology have brought new appreciation of the small, whether in nanotechnology, which has introduced entire new classes of materials, or in electronics and digital devices, in which “small” is usually synonymous with “elegant.” The business world, too, has learned to embrace attributes of the small, even in a time of ever-larger merger and acquisition deals. Small firms compete globally; consultants working from home offices no longer bother to try to conceal their non-corporate locations. A small office is not a sign of failure.

Even so, the super-size-me culture is hard to beat down. With the 1998 publication of *The Not So Big House*, Sarah Susanka FAIA became architecture's E.F. Schumacher. Susanka confronted the bloating of the American house (which has grown not only in area but also in volume) and demonstrated that the qualities that many homeowners *thought* they were attaining in larger homes could be found with greater satisfaction in much smaller structures.

Unfortunately (and also like Schumacher), Susanka so far seems to have been unable to sway mainstream culture, which, in our society, is often shaped by celebrities. No one was particularly shocked when Red Sox owner John Henry paid \$16 million for developer Frank McCourt's 13,000-square-foot mansion, with plans to tear it down and build what is reportedly an even bigger house. Every era has its excesses, and stories such as these will likely someday be recounted with the same distaste and amazement with which we describe 16-course Victorian meals replete with oysters, soup, fish, sweetbreads, casseroles, roasts, game, poultry, ices, cheese, puddings, and dessert. (Of course, every era also has its cultural critics — one Victorian observer sniffed that the custom of serving as many as 12 varieties of wine at a dinner was ostentatious, four being “quite enough.”) It now seems likely that the American appetite for bigger and bigger houses will be sated only when celebrities link HVAC consumption with global warming; Hollywood stars driving Priuses surely helped to make hybrid cars popular even before the recent surge in gasoline prices.

“Big” and “small” are relative terms, and in our culture, they come loaded with implied values.

A focus on “small” is not an exhortation to return to Spartan values. But by exploring and legitimizing the worth of the small, we discover more choices and more opportunities: the individual who abhors the megacorporation can find satisfaction and respect in a home office. The tendency of our culture is to pursue the big; by fighting the law of inertia, we all can live richer lives. ■

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