



## Break the Rules — Create Authenticity

by Kathie Hightower  
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I attended a workshop on home design by Oregon architect Tom Bender, author of *Building With The Breath of Life* (Fire River Press, 2000). One comment he made struck me immediately: "Don't look at things the way you think they should be."

He gave examples from his own life. In one house, he and his wife used the dining room as their master bedroom because it had the best setting and view from the window.

"We had no use for a formal dining area since our family ate in the kitchen eating area and, with small children at home, we weren't entertaining much."

His point was to look at how you live rather than living within constraints created by a builder or previous owner, or by what the societal norm happens to be.

Architect Sarah Susanka echoes that idea in *The Not So Big House Book: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live* (The Taunton Press, 1998). She describes how many of us today live in houses designed for the lifestyles of those in generations before us.

"At the turn of the new century, most houses are designed for the turn of the last," says Susanka. As she points out, "formal living rooms are rarely used in most houses; they stand almost as memorials to the way we used to live."

That concept of living by others' ideas and rules struck me again a few weeks later. I was talking about how I wanted to paint some of our rooms in different colors, one in yellow, one in taupe, one in seafoam green. A friend who was visiting said, "But I thought the rule was that you use one color so it flows from one room to another."

Who says? I thought. Whose rule is that and why should I have to abide by it if it doesn't fit with how I want to live?

We buy into a lot of "rules" in our houses — and in our lives: rules that probably made sense when they were created, for the people who created them. But they may be rules that have nothing to do with our own current reality.

We listen to all those rules — or "shoulds" from others— from our parents, from our peers, from society. Everyone seems to know how our house should be designed and decorated, how we should act, what we should do for a living, how we should dress, how we should wear our hair, etc.

Many of us spend most of our lives living those shoulds — conforming to whatever everyone else thinks we should do. With our houses, that can mean we end up with a house full of rooms that we never use. In our lives, it can mean we lose ourselves in the process.

I wrote down a quote from a book by Rita Mae Brown, *Venus Envy*, where her character says, "The trouble with conforming is that everyone likes you but yourself."

Figure out instead how you want to live, how your family wants to live, what really works for you. Make choices — in your home and in your life — based on your own authenticity.

Break the rules that don't fit you. Live by who you are — not by who someone else thinks you should be.  
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### Sidebar

- Make a list of rules that you live by now. Even better, get together with a group of friends and come up with all the rules you can think of. And then decide if they fit or if you are ready to break them. How would you live instead?
- Besides the books I mentioned about creating homes, I recommend:

— *Frugal Luxuries: Simple Pleasures to Enhance Your Life and Comfort Your Soul*. by Tracey McBride, Bantam Books, 1997.

— *Feeling at Home*. by Alexandra Stoddard, William Morrow and Co. Inc., 1999, and many of her other books like *Creating a Beautiful Home* and *Making Choices*.