

Design psychologists analyze your interior psyche

How to design your dream home? Experts in an emerging field analyze your childhood, happiest moments and favorite objects to come up with a prescription.

By Linda Marsa, Special to The Times
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WHEN Ran and Ronit Ever-Hadani expanded their Mar Vista home, they ended up with a long, narrow space that had a fireplace smack in the middle. Because the room was almost like a bowling alley with no natural flow, the couple didn't have a clue what to do with it. So the area remained unused, and became a nagging reminder of their disappointment with the costly remodel.

"No matter how we rearranged our furniture, nothing seemed to fit," Ronit says. "Every time we looked at it, we thought about all the money we spent."

Instead of using traditional decorators to help them make over the room, the couple contacted Constance Forrest and her partner and sister, Susan Painter, two Venice-based psychologists who are pioneers in the emerging field of design psychology, which plumbs people's emotional responses to an environment in order to create living spaces that truly feel like a home.

In this approach, the design scheme is dictated by the results of lengthy interviews they conduct to learn about their clients' environmental histories, and to tap into the fulfilling experiences and emotions that contribute to their vision of an ideal place.

Now, after months of planning, Ran and Ronit are in the final stages of transforming the oddly shaped room into a warm living and dining area that not only reflects their personal tastes but also resonates with their psyches. The rich color palette echoes the persimmon and ivory hues in Ronit's bridal bouquet and the buttery yellows of Ran's favorite shirt, while an intricately designed wooden chair is reminiscent of the furniture Ronit's father used to lovingly restore when she was a child. "I can still smell the turpentine," she says, laughing.

Tapping into such psychological underpinnings can help define a home. "We want to create spaces that elicit that feeling of 'yes!' when the client enters them," Painter says, "that instant, instinctive gut-level reaction that a place feels just right."

Though there's only a handful of design psychologists across the country, the field's basic tenets are increasingly being adopted in the design world. Interior designers, environmental psychologists and architects are paying more attention to our psychological attachments to the home, says Denise Guerin, a spokesperson for the American Society of Interior Designers and a design professor at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul.

"More residential interior designers are focusing their practices on the psychological aspects of people's needs," she says. "And the meaning of home is becoming more important because the purpose of the home has changed. More people work at home and baby boomers are now aging in place instead of retiring elsewhere."

Getting to "that feeling of yes" — whether you're buying a home, remodeling or revamping the interiors — most often means reconstructing, in some way, places that remind us of our childhood homes or favorite haunts, these experts say. In fact, Painter says, most people decide to purchase a house, the biggest financial decision in their lives, after spending 20 minutes or less in it. We make up our minds so quickly, Painter believes, because we're subconsciously reacting to memories and impressions of past homes and places that were significant in our lives.

FROM a neurobiological standpoint, when we encode our experiences into the neural circuitry of memory, the physical settings connected to these experiences also become engraved in our psyches. The sensations linked with these experiences — whether good or bad — are rekindled when we're in similar surroundings.

"What explains that 'a-ha moment,' when something draws you in, is often not even conscious," says Toby Israel, an environmental psychologist in Princeton, N.J., and author of "Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places," considered the bible of the field. "The point of design psychology is to identify the primal, satisfying, existential essence of these places in order to use the positive associations they trigger as a touchstone from which to design. That way, we can create homes and other places that mirror our most fulfilled selves."

The field of design psychology has been inspired, in part, by intriguing research done more than a decade ago by Clare Cooper Marcus, a professor emeritus of architecture at UC Berkeley and author of "House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home."

In dozens of interviews about their relationship to their home, Marcus discovered that people unconsciously reproduced some aspects of their childhood environment, whether it was the location, the style of home or the type of furniture. The opposite might be the case if they had a difficult family situation — if their parents liked traditional furniture, they wanted Danish modern. "But either way, their surroundings were somehow tethered to this core," Marcus explains in an interview. "The emotional climate of our childhood reverberates through our life for good or ill, and the physical environment has an enormous impact."

Design psychologists take this one step further because, they believe, it's not just our environmental memories — our aunt's two-story Cape Cod-style house with all its nooks and crannies that we happily played in as children, or the beach house where we spent an idyllic summer — that provide the templates for the type of surroundings that make us feel cozy, fulfilled and secure. Our temperaments and where we are headed in our lives play a huge role too.

"People seek the services of a designer when they're in transition — they're getting married or divorced, changing jobs, or moving to a new city," Painter says. "So the design should reflect their new selves and meld that with what they're comfortable with."

To formulate a design scheme that weaves together all these disparate threads, Painter and Forrest do intensive interviews to elicit the most positive, peak experiences that the client has had and mines those experiences for details of color, texture, light and spatial configurations to be used in the design of the new space. They also get a feel for clients' taste and style by learning about their favorite things, such as articles of clothing, furniture, artwork or even jewelry, so that the final design reflects the client's vision and not that of the designer.

Although these may seem like self-indulgent New Age-y exercises — at \$175 per hour, which is what design psychologists typically charge — Painter and Forrest say the process is actually quite efficient. By getting clients to focus on what they truly want, it saves time rather than wastes it, says Forrest. "The process is front-loaded," she says. "Once we figure out the design concept, things move quickly. We don't have to look at dozens of couches to find the right one."

THAT was certainly Jennifer Morgan's experience. A children's book author in Princeton, N.J., she is planning to renovate her 100-year-old Colonial-style house. She wants to add on a 1,200-square-foot apartment so she can live there and rent out the main house after her son leaves for college next year.

Morgan had extensive conversations with an architect, but they weren't able to distill what she really wanted. But working with design psychologist Israel was an entirely different process because the systematic exercises clarified her likes and dislikes — she prefers a cozy, farmhouse style rather than sleek, modernistic lines, a discovery that was a "revelation," she says — and what she would be most happy with 10 years down the road.

"It's so easy to get swept away by the latest trends in the interior decorating magazines," she says. "But now I have this psychological blueprint that provides an anchor and which I can use as a measuring stick whenever I'm making a decision. And because I have a much clearer idea of what I want, it will cut down the amount of time I spend with an architect."

To be sure, doing analysis before picking out paint chips isn't for everyone, but this approach appealed to Ronit, a psychotherapist herself. In 2003, she and Ran, a software designer, renovated their three-bedroom bungalow by enclosing the outdoor porch and courtyard on one side of the house. This doubled the size of the original room, but they ended up with that long, narrow space.

Once they hired Painter and Forrest, the couple went through a three-part series of exercises (see story, below left) to find a stylistic design that meshed their distinctive preferences, and to elicit how they wanted to feel in their home. Ronit wanted a warm space that was sensual, energetic and joyful, while Ran's buzzwords were strong, confident, fascinating and purposeful.

Their shared design prescription was a home where they felt like they were on vacation and were connected to nature, with sensual lines, elegant materials and modernistic expressions. This translated into a design concept that featured streamlined Art Deco-style furniture and exquisitely detailed accents, such as a chair covered in fabric that looks like a garden tapestry and mirrors peeking out from behind a mesh-like screen.

Sitting in an ornate wooden chair at one end of the long, bowling alley-like room, Ran was suddenly able to visualize how the space would flow: Unfurling the persimmon-colored rug in front of the fireplace is what finally did it. He can now "see" the conversation group in the middle, with a curved sofa facing the fireplace, because the rug gives the space visual definition. At the other end is a cozy wooden dining room table and chairs, adjoining an open kitchen.

An added plus: Because they now have an eating area by the kitchen, the light-filled front of the house that they used as a dining room is being converted to a morning room with bright orange couches and walls of bookshelves, mimicking the ambience of Ronit's favorite library-like cafe where she loves to sip tea and read.

"When we met with Susan and Connie, we felt we had a shared language and they listened to all our questions," Ronit says. "Ran and I wanted to grow together and share in the process, and not just come back two months later and have it all done by a decorator. I know we're doing something different, but it's been exciting, and the result really reflects who we are as a couple."

(INFOBOX BELOW)

Diagnosing an aesthetic

Design psychologists use a variety of tools to gauge their clients' tastes, preferences and personalities, and to uncover the emotions attached to meaningful places from their past. This information is then used as a springboard for creating a design blueprint or prescription. Susan Painter and Constance Forrest, for example, have created a three-part series of exercises for their clients. The exercises involve:

A developmental history of place: A description of all the places they've lived and the most important things that happened to them in those places.

Favorite objects: Clients bring in objects that are meaningful to them and talk about why each one is important. For Ronit EverHadani, for example, they included her bridal bouquet, which had a lot of bright colors, her silver wedding ring and an antique chair given to her by her father. Among her husband Ran's favorites were a yellow shirt, a professional photographer's lamp and a leather briefcase with rounded edges.

A mental inventory of every place they've visited: Using techniques of hypnotherapy, clients are told to relax, and think back on all the places they've ever been, and then stop at the place where they felt their absolute best. What were the physical attributes of the place? The color, the light, the shadows, the sounds, the scents? What was it about the space that made them feel good? This can provide specific clues as to the environment cues that trigger good feelings.

— Linda Marsa

