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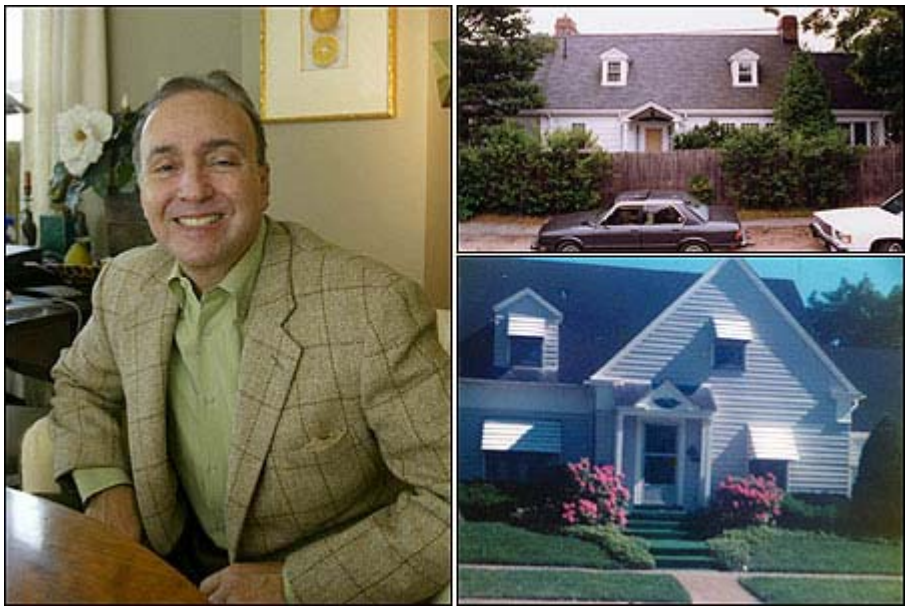

Designer Jay Philomena (left) bought this Cape-style home in Beverly Farms (top) without even going inside because of some intangible allure. Later he ralized that it reminded him of his childhood home in Youngstown, Ohio (bottom). (Globe Staff Photo / Lane Turner)

Recreating the past: You *do* go home again

The Boston Globe

Designers are linking tastes, style choices to unconscious feelings from childhood

By Linda Matchan, Globe Staff | December 2, 2004

There was no accounting for why he loved that house. But whenever Jay Philomena saw it, he'd tell himself that he would buy it someday.

The question was: Why? He was an established Boston designer, accustomed to working with high-profile corporate clients . *It* was a nondescript 1,800 square-foot Cape -- a dime-a-dozen house in his neighborhood of Beverly Farms. "From the street," he said, "this just looked like the most unpretentious little Cape Cod house you could ever imagine."

Then the house went on the market, and he did buy it -- over the telephone, sight unseen. "I knew I loved it," he said. "I just didn't know why."

He does now, though. Not long ago, he heard a talk about an emerging field called design psychology that holds that our past environments -- childhood homes, for example, or favorite haunts -- influence our choice of houses later in life, as well as our notions of home.

"I started to think about it, I looked at old photos, and then it came to me: I realized it reminded me of the house I was very happy in when I was a boy," said Philomena, who grew up in Youngstown, Ohio.

The notion that our behavior, tastes, and choices are affected not only by our psychological histories but our "environmental histories" is a relatively unexplored area in the world of design. Design psychology, with its threateningly Jungian undertones, is not likely to be on the curriculum of most architecture or design schools, which dwell more in the domain of aesthetics and theory than on squishy concepts like "environmental memories or "self-place connection."

"It's too personal for architects," said Faith Baum, a Lexington architect who teaches at Rhode Island School of Design. "We're all bricks and mortar."

But its tenets are definitely catching on in the design world, in part due to the work of Toby Israel, author of "Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places" (Wiley-Academy, 2003). Israel, who is based in Princeton, N.J., and has a degree in environmental psychology, contends that "each of us possesses our own unique environmental autobiography," a repository of memories and impressions of past homes and significant places. And only by recognizing and understanding these influences -- "our buried sense of home," as she puts it -- can we turn our surroundings into a place that truly *feels* like home.

There's a cautionary note in here for folks who embrace architectural trends or give carte blanche to decorators, said Israel.

"Don't let them run away with your place," she said in an interview in Boston. "I see people who don't feel confident that what they like is really valid. They look at magazines and say, "That's the look I should have. Which is not to say that designers aren't tremendously helpful, but a home needs to reflect what is special and unique about your own sense of place, not reflect the design sensibility of an interior designer or architect alone."

Israel interviewed three design luminaries for her book -- architect and product designer Michael Graves; architecture critic Charles Jencks; and architect and town planner Andres Duany -- and took them through a series of exercises to determine whether their childhoods had influenced their homes and later work. Each of them, she concludes in the book, "subconsciously reworked their history of places not only to create their own homes but their well-known public buildings and/or architecture/planning philosophies." Duany, for example, is a pioneer of New Urbanism, the planning movement that encourages human interaction through the design of walkable, people-centered neighborhoods. Not coincidentally, she believes, he grew up in Barcelona, where he spent hours every day on the streets and in cafes.

Israel believes the field of design psychology is slowly but steadily gaining ground. She was recently consulted by NBC talk-show host Jane Pauley for recommendations on decorating her new office. She was also invited to be scholar in residence at Drexel University's College of Media Arts and Design.

"I get an instant reaction wherever I go," she said. "Whenever I give lectures about it, people say, 'Now that you mention it' -- and then they'll say things like, 'the house I'm living in now is very similar to my grandparents' ' or some other house from their past."

She is not design psychology's only practitioner, though. On the West Coast, two women with backgrounds in psychology and design -- Susan Painter and Constance Forrest -- teach a course in design psychology at UCLA's interior design extension program. They also run a California design psychology firm, ForrestPainter Design, where they use their clinical interview techniques to question clients in depth to learn about their environmental histories and create a "sensory portrait" of them. Then they make design recommendations based on that history.

Both Painter and Israel say their work has been inspired by Clare Cooper Marcus, author of "House As a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home" (Conari Press, 1995), which explores what Marcus calls the "subtle bonds of feeling we experience with dwellings past and present."

Marcus, professor emeritus of architecture at UC Berkeley, conducted dozens of interviews with people about their homes. She found that many had profound memories of special childhood homes that they unconsciously reproduced in their adult homes, by replicating a color scheme or floor plan, for example, or by planting gardens with the vegetables their grandmother had grown. Others she interviewed had profoundly *unhappy* memories of earlier homes, and were uneasy in homes that evoked those feelings, even homes they were living in.

Israel knows this experience firsthand. She grew up in a housing development in Englewood, N.J., in a split-level home where her childhood "was not a childhood I'd like to repeat," she said. To her, the house symbolized a homogenized, conventional suburban lifestyle, "a view of America with 2.5 kids, and I saw myself as much more iconoclastic than that."

A few years ago, she moved back to New Jersey after spending 12 years in England, and started looking for a house. The process, she said, taught her a lot about the tenacity of early environmental influences. "When I

looked at one split-level, I couldn't run out of there fast enough," she said. She felt "like I was visiting a ghost," she writes in the book. "I could not go back to *this* home again, so filled with mixed memories, so synonymous with the conventional life which I had rejected."

Instead, she bought a house nearby that was "unbelievably similar" to the home of some cousins where she had happily spent a lot of time as a child. "My cousins were artists and intellectuals, very much into thinking about deeper things in that way, and that attracted me," she said. "The house I grew up in was more traditional, and less creative."

Whether design psychology will affect the field of architecture is an open question. "Let's face it, [architecture] can be a very snobby, elite field," said Rena Cumby, director of the master's program in interior design at Drexel University. "I have an architecture degree and an interior design degree, and the big complaint on the part of commercial or residential clients is that the designer hasn't listened to one thing they've said. You can see it on those dumb little [decorating] TV shows."

Jay Philomena, for one, is listening. "I've learned we are incredibly connected to our past and our experiences whether we're conscious of it or not," said Philomena, director of interior design for The Stubbins Associates in Cambridge. Although he wasn't aware of it years ago, he now sees strong architectural parallels between the house in Beverly Farms and two homes he lived in as a boy. All of them had dormers, front columns, porticos; they sat on large lots close to the street. "I have wonderful memories of that yard," said Philomena, referring to the house he lived in till he was 11. "It had tadpole ponds**,** and was a great place for kids to play." A third Tudor-style family home, purchased when Philomena was older, is evocative of the Tudor home he currently owns in Gloucester.

Philomena sold the Beverly Farms house in 1999 (after putting his design skills to work, bumping it up to a grand 4,400-square-foot, 4-bath showplace). He now owns a condo on Beacon Hill that he believes also reflects traces of that early house in Ohio. It's painted beige, a shade he chose for what seemed at the time to be solid design reasons -- the color's "restful" qualities, its ability to create a "neutral backdrop" for the view through the living room window.

But it recently occurred to him that the real reason he painted it that color was, simply, "my mother loved beige. It occurred to me that I'd replicated, in my own way, my mother's color scheme," Philomena said. "It's bizarre when you think about it."

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