

INTERIORS

by sarah firshein • photos by frank wojciechowski



# OF PLACES I HAVE SEEN

Design psychology brings 'past history of place' home



Design psychologist Toby Israel's spirit seat, in the kitchen of her Princeton home, echoes memories of her childhood experience with woods.

**THE** Princeton home of design psychologist and author Toby Israel is one of the world's least humble abodes. In the kitchen alone, sleek, Japanese-inspired cabinetry and an exquisite tree-trunk settee whisper tales dating back generations, weaving together one thickly braided narrative: hers.

Ms. Israel wouldn't have it any other way; such objects, colors and furnishings greatly please her. Woodsy elements such as the tree trunk echo her great grandparents' dwelling, a hut in Hungary. Asian objects point to ways in which other ancestors chose to distance themselves from their Hungarian roots.

"Your house reflects your life," Ms. Israel says. "And the story of your life is written into your house." When Ms. Israel, a Jersey City native, moved to Princeton 12 years ago, she completed her own series of nine exercises to determine a "design psychology blueprint" that outlined, in detail, which memories of her environmental past permeate her new home. "Design psychology is really helping you to write in a way that helps you envision a positive future based on your past," she says.

In one such exercise, clients are asked to fill out a family tree by recalling the different types of spaces their ancestors called home.

"It's very revealing and very positive, and she really brings you to awareness about the strands that are there," says author Jennifer Morgan, who is working with Ms. Israel to renovate her Princeton Township neo-colonial home. "I realized I needed to get to my core — my happiness core — what really makes me feel fulfilled and happy," Ms. Morgan adds.

Incorporating the concept of "design from within" — or "helping draw from personal environmental experience and understand what emotions are attached to that" — Ms. Israel guides clients through a five-step process that outlines their ideal space in terms of setting, furniture, shapes and colors. By exploring someone's environmental legacy, present setting and goals for the future, Ms. Israel says, the individual's wants and needs begin to take shape.

"Because I had a lot of farming in my family background, when I'm in those settings, that's where I really feel most comfortable," Ms. Morgan says. "Toby came up with an idea of having a sliding barn door between my office and the living room/dining room area. It's things like that that just make your heart sing."

Ms. Israel, a former schoolteacher who earned a doctorate in environmental psychology at the City University of New York, disputes the notion that design psychology, a field she co-founded in 1999, is a form of therapy. "My emphasis is on the design aspect, and because I have a background in psychology I know just how far to take people," she says, adding exercises are designed to dredge up positive memories only.

Ms. Israel arranged candles in her bedroom to give thanks to her good health and well-being.



Formal therapy or not, the therapeutic benefit of design psychology is another matter entirely, one that makes Ms. Israel's eyes light up. Two years ago, she was diagnosed with early stage breast cancer and, despite having caught it, decided to undergo three months of chemotherapy to be sure it wouldn't spread. On the first day of radiation, she set out to redo her bedroom, a project that would last the duration of her treatment.

She wanted to create a comfortable place, one that would help her envision a positive future. Ms. Israel is now cancer-free, and it's easy to appreciate just how palliative her bedroom must have been during chemo. A memory-foam mattress, soft bedspread and Hungarian feather quilt all provided tactile relief. She painted the entryway of the bedroom a deep blue and the walls inside a buoyant, celery-like hue.

"The room opens up to the lighter springtime green, widening, kind of like there's light at the end of the tunnel," she says. Mimicking that scheme are the diaphanous blues of the bedspread — "I came back here and laid down and imagined the ocean cooling me down after radiation" — and gentle light filtered by shoji screens.

After receiving the diagnosis, Ms. Israel decided one of her life's wishes was to learn to sail. In subtle suggestion of this, she suspended white curtains by ropes and portholes in the bedroom. Two oil paintings, both by her uncle, hang on one wall. "One represents where I've been, the sailboat in troubled waters, and that's where I want to go," she says, gesturing at the work depicting a sunset scene of a sailboat in calm waters. And by June 2007, just three months after her treatment ended, she was out taking sailing lessons.

"It was a therapeutic catalyst for me to envision both physically healing and emotionally — and to envision a future," she says of the decorating experience, which she believes has given new direction to her work with clients transitioning through the "Ds" (disease, death of a loved one, divorce or disaster).

One client at a time, it's almost as if Ms. Israel seeks to undo the notion famously set forth in Hobbes' *Leviathan*: "After great distance of time our imagination of the past is weak; and we lose, for example, of cities we have seen, many particular streets; and of actions, many particular circumstances." This may be so, but if Ms. Israel has anything to do with it, we'll all hold tenaciously to the idea that we are where we've lived. ●



After being diagnosed with breast cancer, Ms. Israel created a healing bedroom to help envision a positive future.

Ms. Israel's book, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places* (Wiley, 2003), is available at area bookstores and through amazon.com. She has lectured extensively to architects, designers and, recently, the Breast Cancer Resource Center at the YWCA of Princeton. She kicks off a new home therapy workshop Nov. 17. 609-683-8317 | info@designpsychology.net | designpsychology.net

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