



DESIGN PSYCHOLOGY 101

Some Place Like Home

Matching People and Place Through Design Psychology

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What does your backyard have in common with your grandmother's garden?

How does your favorite childhood vacation spot relate to the plans for your new house?

How can the corporate meeting room you're designing reflect more than the corporate mission?

How are architecture, interior and landscape design connected to psychology?

Now, with help from a Design Psychologist, you can use the answers to such questions to guide design decision making. Design Psychology, a new discipline introduced at the 1999 American Psychological Association annual conference, involves the practice of architectural, interior and landscape design in which psychology is used as the principle design tool. Rather than looking outward to shelter magazines or to the signature styles of architects and interior designers, Design Psychologists call upon their clients to look *inward* for place inspiration. Design Psychologists help clients engage in *environmental* self-reflection, bringing to the fore the vast personal store of experience and emotions that contribute to their clients' vision of ideal place.

Inevitably, such self-reflection involves an exploration of the past, present and future links between self and place. Through memory's magnifying glass we can recall houses,

rooms, and even backyards, streets and neighborhoods that hold personal as well as environmental meaning for us. The theory is that such exploration of what has been called our “environmental autobiography” — or our personal history of place — enables us to recognize the seeds of future design choices for homes, offices and outside surroundings.

I reach back and can remember “The Big Woods,” the outdoor home away from home where all the children in the neighborhood played. Decades later, I can still recall the smell of onion grass mixed with apple blossoms and winding paths that led from the blackberry stickers to the dark moist world of the tall pines. Susan, Lynne, Jay and I created life in this world in real and imagined ways. The fort made from found wood was my brother’s domain. The stone house bordering the dirt road was clearly where the witch lived.

Design Psychology Case Studies: Michael Graves and Charles Jencks

In truth almost all of us — non-designers and designers alike — approach the choice and creation of a place as if we were writing on a blank slate. For example, design students arriving in the lecture hall begin on day one to learn about the aesthetic styles of the great designers, past and present. Necessarily, they also learn about the principles of design technology. Meanwhile, the deeper environmental memories that each student carries with them into the classroom, the experiences that have the most profound influence on their concept of place, are ignored.

Convinced that the design leaders who influence students’ (and our own) most basic notions of design, also possess personal

Design Psychologists help clients engage in environmental self-reflection

A cardboard carton was a halfway house for tortoises, garden snakes and other friends who passed with magic through our lives.

By going through a series of carefully developed exercises, Design Psychology clients can explore ways they may have consciously and unconsciously recreated or rejected past environments and the reflections of selfhood they symbolize. In this sense the purpose of Design Psychology is to highlight those aspects of past place that have the highest positive association for the client. Such associations then can be translated into the design of places that not only meet the need for shelter but one’s deepest need for psychic wholeness. As such, this “inner vision” school of design offers a new programming process that can help designers “match” people and place at the deepest possible level.

environmental autobiographies which they then translate into public theory, taste and style, I wrote to seminal figures in the design world, Michael Graves and Charles Jencks, offering to take them through the Design Psychology process. Both agreed to participate.¹ I embarked upon these sessions optimistically, hoping that I would discover with them some connection between their past experiences of place and the contributions they’ve made to the world of design. As the sessions progressed, I think they, themselves, were surprised to find how deeply they could dig down to the bottom of their environmental sources.

The environmental autobiography of architect Michael Graves is perhaps, the best illustration of the profound impact that the environmental past can have on the design superstars of our times — an influence echoed in the design of their public buildings





which resounds in our physical and mental landscape. Michael Graves' environmental story began in Indianapolis, a Midwestern city "without much culture, without much building." Graves grew up in a nondescript suburban house, the son of an often-absent father. Once a month, however, Graves would

Graves' personal and professional transformation. He escaped from the blandness of everyday Indiana, revisiting the drama and character of the stockyards by creating vaulted ceilings not only in his home but in many of the character-filled public buildings which mark the more mature Graves

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visit his grandmother's wonderful, creaky, old Carpenter Gothic house in rural Indiana. For him this was a place of "gathering and conviviality," his grandmother's very loving "wrap around us."

The only other place of real character Graves could remember as a favorite, transcendent childhood place was the stockyard where his father worked:

An exaggerated building with great, elevated passageways all made of wood, which crisscrossed in the air... It was not just the passageways, but that you looked down on the animals in their pens.

Interestingly, Graves' current home in Princeton, New Jersey — a ruin when he found it — was originally a furniture warehouse built by Italian masons in the 1920s. Divided into 44 long, thin rooms — none more than ten feet wide — its floor plan echoed the same form as the stockyards of his childhood. That internal form packaged in the Italianate, ruin-like wrapping he had come to love during time spent in his twenties in Italy, may have been the driving, though not conscious, force behind his attraction to this place he would call home.

Over the next 20 years, Graves transformed the warehouse into a home. Inevitably, embedded in the house's transformation was

style. He filled the warehouse with sophisticated furniture, paintings, and objects, expanding his "small town boy" persona to encompass that of the mature and sophisticated man. He rejected the stark modernism of his "white buildings" and resurfaced the exterior of the warehouse in the same warm terra cotta color that has come to typify many of his post-modern classical buildings around the world. Overall, however, his beautiful yet formal, museum-like house seemed to lack the primal warmth and conviviality of his grandmother's home, which had the highest positive association for him. Graves acknowledged, "That's missing from this place."

Similarly, Charles Jencks' environmental autobiography appeared to uncover startling connections between his past history of place and his choice of home, his design sensibility and his world-renowned architectural theories. His Design Psychology exploration also began with memories of his grandmother's home, a place he hadn't thought about in 30 years. Her house was "the number one house on the number one street in Baltimore," a grand, brick, aristocratic house. Inside it contained a sweeping marble staircase, a dome made by Tiffany and the impressive library filled with mysterious busts of Caesar.

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As perhaps the most eminent architecture critic in the Western world, Jencks designed his *present* main residence in London, the “Thematic House,”² in order to illustrate his theories of post-modernism, especially the idea that architecture could contain many levels of symbolism. His design may have been even more symbolic than Jencks, himself, suspected. On the outside of his London home, like his grandmother's home, is also a restrained 1840s brick building. When renovating the inside of it, Jencks also constructed an impressive library and a dome. He ripped out the original, traditional staircase, replacing it with a sweeping staircase.

Jencks' environmental legacy did not stop here: Jencks's father broke away from the family wealth and opulence to build the simplest possible Cape Cod, shingle-style “Bay House.” Jencks followed in his father's footsteps, acquiring a completely modest Cape Cod bungalow void of any hint of aristocracy or grandeur. Are these striking similarities between Jencks' London home and his grandmother's home, his Cape Cod bungalow and his father's Cape Cod dwelling simply a chance parallel? I suggested to Jencks:

You are working through two very different symbolic worlds. The world of your grandmother ...and the world of your father...[you] reconciled opposites...And so on the public level you've become a great advocate of pluralism, but it's partly because you've come to believe it privately, on the most intimate, unconscious level.

While Jencks had never examined his work from this psychological perspective, he was intrigued, suggesting that I was creating a new paradigm in architecture. Insightfully, he asked, “What does all of this mean for design?”

The Practice of Design Psychology

I believe that the findings from Design Psychology practice demonstrate that we must set aside all images of a generic “ideal place” or “ideal home.” Instead, design

trends, while certainly influential, need to remain just that — an influence rather than a mandate. On the domestic level especially, home must reflect the best of each of us uniquely, not the influences and inspirations of someone else. Design Psychologists seek to ensure that designers seize the opportunity to open both their own and their client's trove of experiences, to uncover the treasures that can be used in future design. To accomplish this mission, Design Psychologists have begun speaking to and giving workshops for professional designers around the country about this new field.³ Having garnered industry interest and support,⁴ Design Psychologists have begun to take other key designers through the Design Psychology process, including most recently IIDA board member, Jay Philomena.

Beyond these Design Psychology awareness and training opportunities, Design Psychologists are eager to see their theories applied in the wider practice of residential and commercial design. Dr. Constance Forrest, a Los Angeles-based clinical psychologist who is also an interior and landscape designer, uses Design Psychology tools to build what she calls a “sensory portrait” of the client, revealing how he or she uniquely experiences the physical world. The result is a *design prescription* that provides a reflection of the client and information to the designer that can be translated into the specific use of color, light, texture, the arrangement of space, and the use of significant personal symbols. These design elements are used to trigger a re-

experiencing of powerful positive experiences related to the physical world.

An office project Forrest recently completed demonstrated the way Design Psychology can anticipate and catalyze a client's personal and professional growth. The Design Psychology process allowed the client, a musician/psychologist to envision for the first time the integration of her multiple professions and of the two sides of herself — an earthy, pragmatic side and a more ethereal spirit. At first, the client believed it would take several moves over many years to achieve a space that would encompass all of the aspects of her work and personality. However, by going through the Design Psychology process, it became clear that a more immediate design prescription could be achieved: the creation of a space that would unite both her exuberance and her restraint, and contain the “sacred sound” — both the music and words of her clients — in an integration of music and therapy.

The project evolved from a simple modification of a one-room office into three linked, self-contained spaces, symbolically mirroring the fundamental link between the spiritual, mathematical and musical. To give her the quality of audio privacy she desired, acoustical and structural engineers were brought on to the project, as well as high and low frequency sound consultants. The sound studio was wrapped in nickel-coated fabric to block radio and microwaves. To achieve an integration of the exuberant and the restrained, the earthy and the sophisticated, materials were chosen that reflected the tension and harmony between beautifully finished surfaces and textured, organic materials in their natural state. Even before the project was completed, the client's confidence and the scope and direction of her work had evolved dramatically, facilitated and inspired by her vision realized.

In the realm of interior design education, Dr. Susan Painter, a developmental psychologist and practicing interior designer with A. C. Martin Partners, Los Angeles, is teaching UCLA design and architecture students to apply the principles and practices of Design Psychology to the design process itself. Her students learn to use Design Psychology research and programming techniques in the design of private sector and public projects, such as healthcare, educational and social service settings, where awareness of the users' needs is paramount.

As Design Psychologists expand their work to include both residential and corporate design, they are developing a new “toolbox” of Design Psychology exercises and techniques that can be used as part of the programming process. Such pioneering raises questions: How do we deeply divine and communicate the essence of a given corporate culture? How do we create design that reflects both the individual and corporate psyche? How do we accommodate individual as well as group design needs and preferences? While such questions are not new, Design Psychologists are approaching these questions from a new perspective, suggesting new ways to understand and match people and place. [↗](#)

1 Andres Duany, the champion of New Urbanism and a major figure in the international planning world, also agreed to go through the Design Psychology process though his case study is not summarized here.

2 Charles Jencks, *Towards a Symbolic Architecture: The Thematic House*. New York: Rizzoli, 1985.

3 Haworth, Inc. has begun to sponsor lectures by Design Psychologists and has assisted in the development of CEU sessions on Design Psychology which will soon be available through Haworth, Inc.

4 These activities also have been underwritten by Haworth, Inc., and the architecture, interior design and planning firm of Looney, Ricks, Kiss.