



Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places

By Toby Israel, Ph.D.

Some Place Like Home

Would you believe someone who claims to challenge your most basic notions of home, place and, ultimately, architecture and design? You might pause and swivel around in your chair, but before doing a 360-degree turn and rethinking all assumptions about your profession, you might want to hear more about *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*.¹ In this book, interviews conducted with design-world superstars Michael Graves, Andres Duany and Charles Jencks reveal how their “environmental autobiographies” — their past histories of place — unconsciously influenced their choice of home, well-known public projects and widely influential philosophies.

These are not typical “tell me about your project and work” interviews. Instead, they are based on a carefully developed series of ‘Design Psychology’ exercises administered to these world-renowned design figures to encourage them to recall their past, present and future sense of place and home. Through memory’s magnifying glass, the exercises helped Graves, Duany and Jencks recollect the houses, rooms, backyards, streets and neighborhoods that held deep personal meaning for each of them. This heightened their awareness of the ways in which these early experiences impacted their later lives as they (unconsciously) have reworked, replicated or rejected their past environmental experiences.

For example, Graves remembered a favorite transcendent childhood place — the stockyards where his father worked. Interestingly, Graves’ current home echoes the same form as this stockyard of Graves’ youth. Graves also unconsciously utilized the same cross-strut design element that typified his well-remembered stockyards in many of his public projects — the Venice, Denver and San Juan Capistrano public libraries, for example.²

Why is this relevant to you as a practitioner? Given the profound influence of our childhood experience of place on our design sensibility as revealed by these interviews as well as in other sessions with designers and non-designers³, I am now pioneering a new, “inner vision” school of design called Design Psychology. This field is defined as “the practice of architecture, planning and interior design in which psychology is the principal design tool.” In fact, *Some Place Like Home* includes examples of residential, corporate and institutional projects created via the Design Psychology process. A “Design Psychology Toolbox” at the end of the book gives professionals hands-on programming exercises they can use “to explore and design from the client’s most fulfilling inner experiences.”

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Design Psychology as Emancipatory Design

Why is it important to explore and design from the client’s most fulfilling inner experiences? Inevitably, after hearing me speak about the environmental autobiographies of design superstars, audience members approach me to share their epiphanies about how past place has unconsciously influenced them. In these “ah- hah!” moments, listeners are simply jiggling the keys to their environmental treasure chests, which contain clues about their hidden story of self in relation to the world.

According to psychologist Ernest Schactel, we all suffer from a kind of “early childhood amnesia”⁴. As we begin to learn words and labels, we lose conscious memory of our most intimate childhood places. Thus my talks sometimes trigger memories of *transcendence* — of primal connection to the world. Particularly in younger years:

The child . . . is poised . . . halfway between inner and outer worlds . . . Three- and four-dimensional realities possess the child’s imagination and carry him into a deepening world image. He is, in fact, in love with the universe. That is to say he wants to possess the whole world as this theater of perception.⁵

Triggered memories may also be ones of *attachment* in relation to place — of association with family, love, security, a sense that “this is my place in the world.” Besides attachment, there is *ambivalence* — pain as well as pleasure, particularly if the remembered place is one of poverty, oppression or even abuse.⁶ Regardless of the actual childhood place circumstance, adults often view their early childhood environment and, in fact, their entire childhood, through rose-colored glasses — the childhood of a stereotypical ideal rather than a reality.

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The point of going through the Design Psychology exercises is not to have participants engage in “nostalgia design”; to simply re-create idealized places from their past. Instead, the point is to unlock people’s memories of visual images, special objects, experiences, as well as patterns and messages received about their relationship to the world. By becoming more aware of their past place stories, both designers and non-designers can identify their “highest positive associations with past place”⁷ — the primal, satisfying *essence* of these most special places. They can then use these “high positives” to help envision ideal design of homes, of other buildings, landscapes and even towns and cities in a way that mirrors their most fulfilled selves.⁸ Thus, they experience *emancipatory* design — design of depth and connection between self and place.⁹

Emancipatory design stands in marked contrast to conventional design training or practice. Currently, when design students enter the lecture hall for the first time, we act like they are writing on a blank slate. We teach them about design gurus but give them few tools with which to understand

their own place sensibility in relation to these “greats.” For example, when Michael Graves began to explore his own design style in architecture school, he was warned to start designing like Le Corbusier or risk getting thrown out.¹⁰ Luckily, Graves eventually developed his own, unique post-modernist style, as typified by his warehouse/stockyard-inspired home. After going through the Design Psychology exercises, however, he recognized that even that home lacks the primal warmth and conviviality he had so cherished in his grandmother’s house.

Similarly, TV design shows and shelter magazines, while often providing us with good tips, all too often bombard us with messages about how our places “should” or “must” look. Design Psychology as emancipatory design offers us the opportunity to create places that have meaning for us rather than places that express some stylized, homogenized or dictatorial ideal.

Spirit Matters: The Practitioner’s Role

When I speak about Design Psychology, designers and design students often ask me if this field is similar to Feng Shui, the Chinese art of placement. I explain they are only similar in that both fields recognize the importance of deep “spirit” in design. In fact, given the growing interest in the non-physical aspect of design, it seems that, increasingly, *spirit matters*.¹¹

While some have suggested that Design Psychology is a new paradigm in architecture¹², I suggest it is the *convergence* of a number of movements in the design world that, together, form a new “emancipatory design” paradigm. Taken together, not only Design Psychology, but the New Urbanism/TND, Smart Growth, Green Design and the concept of “The Not So Big House”¹³ all hold sacrosanct the core connection between people and their built and/or natural world. The New Urbanism, for instance, emphasizes the construction of people-centered communities. In introducing *Cradle to Cradle*, co-author William McDonough attributes his childhood experience of place as the early inspiration for “eco-effectiveness.”¹⁴ Design Psychology champions design with personal meaning.

Such intertwining of the spirit of people and place in the design world parallels the current intertwining of the worlds of religion and politics on the national scene. As political/religious preachers from both the right and left lay claim to moral high ground, such debate increasingly has led to a polarized dead-end. A unifying thread that both groups share, however, is that so many Americans on both sides of the political divide are genuinely searching for *meaning* and *purpose*. Such a search has become more and more challenging in the face of the violence, superficiality and materialism we see every day in the media.

Rather than affiliating themselves with religious or political extremists, preachers, politicians and the public might be best served by committing to a more holistic view that:

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Unity of All Being, to stand in awe and wonder at the glory of all that is, and to bring forward as much consciousness, love, solidarity, creativity, sensitivity, and goodness as we can possibly manifest.¹⁵

Similarly, the visionaries who are championing a holistic view of people and place need to see themselves as representing a groundswell of design thinkers and practitioners who wish to honor the built and natural world and our place within it. Such a stance serves as a crucially needed counterpoint to media-driven design and the merchandising of products, homes and communities with which we are bombarded. In fact, Design Psychology’s exploring, recognizing and articulating of primal, authentic experience of places re-frames any architecture, planning or interior design project at hand and gives it a higher purpose. The challenge before designers becomes not just to create places that are functional and aesthetic but places that are psychologically and socially fulfilling.

Many of the design visionaries and scores of those practicing today cite Christopher Alexander’s *A Pattern Language*¹⁶ as their “bible” — their source of inspiration when it comes to people and place. While I, too, have been inspired by Alexander, much of Design Psychology theory and practice is grounded in the work of Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist. Maslow believed that we are all motivated to become “self-actualized” human beings — whole, fulfilled people who, similarly, are able to “appreciate again and again freshly and naively, the basic good of life with awe, pleasure, wonder and even ecstasy . . . ”¹⁷ Maslow believed that we could only become self-actualized once we have satisfied a hierarchy of human needs as included in his classic hierarchy:

Maslow’s Hierarchy



For the purpose of Design Psychology, I have transposed Maslow’s theory into a theory of place as “self-actualization.”

Design Psychology



While Alexander’s and Maslow’s theories may be inspirational to designers¹⁸, it has been a challenge to put theory into practice in a way that has integrity but is also time- and money-sensitive. In the deadline-driven business of design, practitioners necessarily focus on the bottom of the pyramid, i.e. shelter: buildings must stand up, the roof can’t leak. Of course, designers also focus on aesthetics. Often, however, the middle pieces — the psychological and social aspects of design are like the poor stepchildren who have been left behind.

With this challenge in mind, Design Psychology exercises can be integrated as part of a comprehensive and rigorous programming process of the heart not just the head. For example, a “Favorite Place Exercise” and an “Environmental Timeline Exercise” enable clients to take a “deep dive”¹⁹ back to their primal, most profound experience of the type of place being designed. Perhaps, for instance, they remember quintessential qualities of light, color, configuration of space and/or textures of childhood homes, schools, public places, etc. At its best, such fresh perception “breaks through and transcends the confines of the labeled, the familiar and establishes a relation in which direct encounter . . . takes place”.²⁰

Clients can then compare their highest positive associations with past place to official mission statements. This helps client and designer arrive at a more focused, authentic statement of the “ideal” design they wish to achieve/actualize.²¹ Enlightened designers already rely on authentic experience — substance, not just image — to lead the way. In *Workplace by Design*, for example, Becker and Steele discuss the challenge of corporate design, stating:

There is an inherent tension in this area between, on the one hand, choosing an image to project and then making headquarters that will project this image and, on the other hand, choosing desired ways of working as an organization, making a good workplace to support that, and letting the result be the image statement, reflecting how the system really work.²²

Further exercises in the Design Psychology Toolbox correspond to a level of Maslow's triangle, enabling clients to "climb the pyramid of needs to be satisfied to achieve ideal design." Once complete, this process results in a "Design Psychology Blueprint" — specific recommendations regarding the functional, psychological, social and aesthetic design requirements to be translated into actual design.

In my *words* here and in my three-minute PR "elevator speech" while dashing off to our next projects, it is impossible to describe the *experience* — the meaning and purpose that Design Psychology has to offer architects, interior designers, planners, homebuilders and . . . our clients. Yet I know that spirit matters in design and can add value beyond words. Thus, if we are to create the reality, not just the image of the "American Dream" when it comes to our built and natural world, those leading the way can join together to:

- Utilize mass media to champion design trends that honor authentic connection between people and place
- Encourage design schools to include the social/psychological aspect of design as a standard part of training
- Include Design Psychologists on their project teams
- Commit to an emancipatory design paradigm that unites people and place

You want to buy a house.

You want to redecorate.

You want to design a garden, a school, a workplace, a park, a city.

You look to TV, magazines, books, designers, mentors.

And then you can look to . . . YOU. Just you.

And the accumulation of all you are, all you have been and all you have the power to become. . . . 

Notes

- 1 Toby Israel. *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places* (Chichester: Academy Editions/Wiley, 2003).
- 2 Portions of this article have been extracted from *Some Place Like Home Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places, AD*, January/February 2004, p. 110-111.
- 3 Similar Design Psychology sessions were conducted with interior designer Margo Grant Walsh, former vice chairperson of Gensler Worldwide, former IIDA board member Jay Philomena, developer Henry Turley of

Henry Turley Company and others in the design/build world. I also continue to carry out Design Psychology sessions with homeowners and renters.

- 4 Ernst Schachtel, *Metamorphosis: On the Development of Affect, Perception, Attention, and Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).
- 5 Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 54-55.
- 6 Louise Chawla, "Childhood Place Attachments" in I. Altman and S. Low, (eds.), *Human Behavior and Environment Advances in Theory and Research: Place Attachment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), p.75.
- 7 The use of the term "high positives" in relation to design was suggested by Constance Forrest, Ph.D., who thereby made reference to a new area of psychology, "positive psychology."
- 8 I attribute much of the inspiration behind Design Psychology to Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1995).
- 9 I derive much of my thinking regarding emancipatory design from Michael Lerner, "Emancipatory Design," *Tikkun*, Vol. 15, No. 3.
- 10 Comment by Michael Graves, lecture Princeton University, date unknown.
- 11 I derive much of my thoughts about why spirit matters from Michael Lerner, *Spirit Matters* (Charlottesville: Walsch Books, 2000).
- 12 See comments by Charles Jencks in Israel, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*, p.142.
- 13 Sarah Susankah, *The Not So Big House: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live* (Newtown, Ct.: Taunton Press, 1998).
- 14 William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way we Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).
- 15 Michael Lerner, "Emancipatory Spirituality," *Tikkun*, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 34.
- 16 Christopher Alexander, et. al, *A Pattern Language: Towns Buildings Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 17 Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 163.
- 18 See comment by Andres Duany in Israel, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*, p.95 and Sarah Susankah, *The Not So Big House*, p.17.
- 19 IDEO, the Palo Alto (Calif.) design firm, also uses a "deep dive" process when designing, though IDEO's process does not dive deeply back to childhood experience of place. See cover story *BusinessWeek*, May 17, 2004.
- 20 Ernst Schachtel, *Metamorphosis: On the Development of Affect, Perception, Attention, and Memory*, p. 177-8.
- 21 During my session with Andres Duany he commented that the Design Psychology exercises, ". . . would have a great deal of efficiency focusing the client — many people who are having houses designed are all over the map." See Israel, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places*, p. 150.
- 22 Franklin Becker and Fritz Steele, *Workplace by Design: Mapping the High-Performance Workplace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 30.

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