

# REBUILD YOUR INNER HOME

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## Contents:

1

What if our flaws, one assumed, become an opportunity to rebuild ourselves?

### **Foundations**

*This is the base that sustains our house. It is the backbone of our inner home, which allows us to stand tall and move forward in life.*

2

What does your home's exterior say about you?

### **Exterior**

*For our residence, it's the style of the building and its environment, the neighborhood. For our inner dwelling, it's the clothes we wear, the impression we give off at first glance.*

3

 Your home is YOU

### **Style**

*Like people, each home has its own look, its own silhouette. But outside appearances don't necessarily dictate how things are arranged on the inside.*

4

**Let your home breathe**

### **Use your nose**

*Each room in the house gives off a particular scent that reflects our lifestyle. In our inner home, smells are strongly linked to the past and trigger our emotional memory. They are also a means of expressing our sensibilities.*

5

**Compose your own score**

### **Soundscape**

*Every space produces a range of sounds according to the activities it encompasses. In our inner home, sounds call upon our sensibility, and sometimes even our creativity. They also contribute to well-being.*

6

**Feel the color vibrations**

### **Colors**

*Everyone has a favorite color, one that expresses who they are and vibrates with their own particular energy.*

7

## Crossing the threshold: the first face-to-face encounter

### **Entryway**

*Whether separate from the other rooms or not, it is the first impression you offer visitors into your home.*

8

Where your home draws its breath

### **Living room**

*This essential part of every home is also a manifestation of the occupants' state of mind.*

9

Nourishing body and mind

### **Kitchen**

*Where we prepare our meals and often where we eat, the kitchen is a source of both physical and emotional sustenance.*

10

Getting rid of clutter from the past makes room for an abundant future

### **Closets**

*This is where we store belonging in our residence and memories in our inner home.*

11

Look at yourself and accept who you are

### **Bedroom/Bathroom**

*Much more than just where we sleep and bathe, these rooms are the backdrop to the most intimate parts of our lives and our deepest moments of introspection.*

12

Build your cocoon for better concentration and creativity

### **Home Office**

*A space set aside for work that sometimes creeps into our inner home.*

13

A sanctuary<sup>[1]</sup> for discovery and growth

### **Nursery/children's room**

*This room is both our first personal space and where we lay the foundations for our inner home.*

Conclusion

Nurture your inner home a little more each day

## Chapter 3

Your home is YOU

### Style

*Like people, each home has its own look, its own silhouette. But outside appearances don't necessarily dictate how things are arranged on the inside.*

The most important consideration for your home, whether house or apartment, is that it mirrors your personality and your passions. Homes have a soul and a history that develops over the years along with the lives of the individuals and families they shelter. A home is much more than just an address. First and foremost, it's the roof over our heads, in the sense of a sanctuary, the cocoon that protects our intimate life.

Your home is you.

A person's physique doesn't always match their personality, and the same can be true with a home. For various reasons, the exterior might not resemble you at all but without going so far as to betray or mask your personality. The particular architectural style of a building's exterior doesn't necessarily define its interior.

As I explained in the second chapter, a property's external atmosphere can already offer many clues about its inhabitants. It often sets the tone and can sometimes transport visitors into a universe completely different from its surroundings. But that rule isn't set in stone. In Paris, people often judge very quickly based on the neighborhood where you live, but you can have an upscale building and apartment in a neighborhood that's seen as very popular, and vice-versa. In a way, the environment that surrounds your home is like a backdrop that either showcases or downplays the property.

When we first discover a home, we get three impressions that can sometimes vary greatly. First, what we see from the street. Can we actually see the home? Is it hidden behind walls, hedges, or a garden? What's the first impression the owner wants to give visitors? Second, when we pass the

gate and really see the house or building, we react to its architecture, size, color, and any decorative elements. What do these inspire? Is it clean and well kept? Do the surroundings harmonize with the building's architecture or is there sharp contrast between them?

The third is our reaction upon entering the apartment or house. Is the interior in keeping with the exterior? Or, on the contrary, is there a clear break between outside and inside? Either way, this is where we enter the owner's private world and discover their true style. It's the same process when we meet someone for the first time. How they dress, their perfume, and their voice communicate information about them that influences our opinion. Then, when we start talking with them, we enter into their inner home and start to discover their true character.

Of course, choosing to live in an ancient farmhouse, a classical apartment building, or a chalet reveals something about the owner. So I generally encourage my clients to emphasize the architectural identity of their home as much as possible. For example, if they choose a chalet-style home in the mountains, I would enhance the structure's identity by adding wooden elements to the facade rather than cement or wrought iron. Granite would be more appropriate than limestone for any decorative elements, and I would install unpainted, natural wood shutters. **Being in harmony with the exterior is a sign of well-being in the home.** It means that you didn't make a mistake in choosing this home over another. Of course, many buildings don't have a well-defined or specific architectural style, which gives the occupants more freedom to impose their own.

Since I moved to the Provence region, I've transformed a number of the traditional, local farms they call a *mas* into residences. In architecture, you often need to make bold moves, especially with old buildings that have to be restructured anyway, like Provencal farms. Originally, the farmers lived on the upper floor while the animals occupied the ground floor, coming and going through huge double-wing doors. Depending on the size of the farm, you might also find a second door through which the farmer threw hay to feed his livestock. Any other openings on the ground floor were small and their sole purpose was to provide airflow to the animals.

When I work with a structure like this, I like to create large openings in the southern and western facing walls on the ground floor to let in a maximum of natural light and illuminate these spaces that were originally dark and gloomy. If there are any openings on the north side of either floor, they are kept very small to protect occupants from the Mistral winds in winter while creating a breeze in the summer. Even while adapting a structure to a new use, you have to respect its initial design in order to conserve its architectural identity and also to conform to the centuries-old design that ensures its perfect adaptation to the climate.

You could imagine that the interior decor of such a farm should be simple, unpretentious, and rustic so that the ambiance and architecture coincide. But I created a beautiful example of the exact opposite when I worked with a modern-art collector. My mission was to convert one of these ancient rock structures into a living space that accentuated his artwork in a minimalist environment. The contrast was both striking and discreet.

The pure white or bare rock walls were perfect for hanging his large canvases. I reimagined the interior like a contemporary house, while at the same time preserving the *mas'* architectural identity. I opened the ceilings in the main living area up to the original roof beams, eliminating part of the second floor to give the illusion of a loft. This more ample space gave us the chance to display other pieces in his collection, in particular some imposing sculptures. Integrating other large sculptures into the gardens was another, equally fascinating challenge. I had to place these works against a natural and organic background, making it seem as if they had always been there. Quite unexpectedly, these colorful pieces, often composed of metallic or cement curves, fit right in among the low, dry stone walls, olive and cypress trees.

I always come out of these challenges enriched. It's like I absorb a little of my clients' passions and knowledge.

Not long after this, I worked on another project that adhered more closely to the Provencal style. In fact, its decidedly traditional character was harder for me simply because it was further from my world. But this client's request was just as well-thought-out as the art collector's. He wasn't trying to imitate houses he'd seen in magazines, he simply wanted his home to reflect his personality. The client was born in Provence and wanted to preserve the traditions he came from. To respect this style, I installed windows with small square panes divided by muntins, a massive fireplace made of local rock from the Gare region in the living room, and a smaller one in the master bedroom. The kitchen was given a rustic look and the upper level was laid with hardwood floors while the ground floor was covered with flagstone. A clawfoot bathtub and a shower hidden behind a ceramic-tile wall adorned the bathroom.

I've also been called upon to redo Haussman-style apartments. One particularly memorable project was for a client that absolutely wanted to stick to the style of the building. He had fallen in love with his apartment on the first visit. He adored the moldings, the Hungarian-point wood floors, and the marble fireplaces in almost all the rooms, even though they didn't work. He asked me to create an interior that corresponded to the era in which the edifice was built. All the furniture was pure Napoleon III. Some of the walls were painted Empire green, while others were covered with tapestries or heavy curtains hung on bronze rods with arrows on each end. The

bathrooms and kitchen were done in the same white or gray marble as the worktops. I installed radiant floor heating to attenuate the cold feeling of the marble in winter. This client was a history lover. Both he and his wife appreciated antiques, traditions, and authenticity. I had just come from Los Angeles where most of my clients were looking for modern interiors, with either zen or contemporary atmospheres. For me, designing and decorating in Second Empire style was a first, and a real challenge. To get it right, I started studying late 19th-century architecture and decorative arts to have a clear idea of the era and the couple's universe. This process broadened my horizons and made me rethink an antique decorating style that I had judged as obsolete, fit only for museums.

Another project brought me in contact with a couple who were first-generation immigrants from Italy to France. They were very attached to their parents' roots and had built a villa resembling those on the Amalfi coast.

Its interior was a succession of rooms that brought together various architectural elements they felt passionate about. Above the fairly contemporary living room was another space that felt like a chalet, with the warm wooden panels found in the Alps and cathedral ceilings with apparent beams. This was used as their TV and reading room, especially in winter. The kitchen was filled with the type of large glass structures framed in metal that were popular in the early 20th century, giving it the look and feel of an artist's studio. The exterior was laid out like an Italian garden. The contrasts were certainly surprising, but the end result gave each space its own, well-defined universe. In my profession, I have to understand my clients' expectations and personalities so that I can guide them in creating spaces that express who they are and nourish them emotionally. My job is not to impose my vision or my style on them. On the contrary, I need to fade into the background and capture their thoughts, their universe, their lifestyle.

### *Takeaways*

Whether you do your own decorating or call on a professional, you are the one who needs to choose the style for your home. Even if you're a decorating enthusiast or in the process of moving, don't read too many magazines or books on the subject. Despite your best intentions, they'll influence your choices and cause you to modify your original project. Remember, if you want to feel at home in your home, it has to be a part of your soul, reflect your tastes, your passions, your dreams. Hold out against advice and follow your path. That's how you'll get the most authentic end result, the one that is most true to your personality.



## Chapter 8

### Where your home draws its breath

#### **Living room**

*This essential part of every home is also a manifestation of the occupants' state of mind.*

After passing through the entryway, we find ourselves in the family room or living room. This space is an embodiment of the entire household. It's where everyone comes together, a place for dialogue, common interests, and social interaction when guests come to visit. This room carries the occupants' DNA, and offers a multisensory perspective on their being. For this reason, it's important that each member of the household finds their imprint in this space.

If you walked into your living room blindfolded, what would your first reactions or impressions be? Are the odors pleasant? Does it smell clean, fresh? Or, on the contrary, is there a musty or heady smell? It might be an odor of cooking, cigarettes, or animals that stands out, or the wood-burning fire in the fireplace, or a scented candle with a sweet, fruity, or earthy fragrance. Maybe it's the scent of exotic wood given off by a piece of furniture or decorative object, the leather upholstery, or the smell of a chemical used to dye certain fabrics. Any of these can permeate an entire room without our really noticing because we live in it every day. The density of these various smells also depends on how well the materials in the room absorb odors. The mixture of these various fragrances – that perfume-makers refer to as notes and the final bouquet – make up your home's olfactory identity, like the perfume or cologne you choose to wear.

When you walk into your home after a day at work, a weekend away, or a vacation, or when you walk into someone else's living room, your first sense of that environment, your most immediate and instinctive impressions, are olfactory. If the smell is pleasant, you'll immediately feel comfortable and want to sit down and stay awhile. Before you even meet your hosts face-to-face, you'll have a positive impression of them. If the odor is unpleasant, it's generally not just coincidence. It can create an unsavory impression that makes you want to leave the room, or even the house. This smell reflects a lifestyle, and most likely a personality, that differs greatly from your own, like false notes in music. Unhappiness and discomfort generate odors that are easy to recognize if you're tuned in to your sense of smell.

Next, without being immediately conscious of it, you'll pick up on the acoustics in the room, which depend on the materials used, its size, the ceiling height, and also the amount of furnishings it contains. Rooms with lots of furniture or piles of rugs, curtains, and couches offer a soft, cushy atmosphere because these items absorb sound. The sensation can be very pleasant as long as the general ambiance remains cozy without being stifling. On the other end of the scale, a sparsely furnished room or one decorated with glass tables, metal chairs, and mineral floor and wall coverings won't absorb any sound and will be quite noisy.

How do you know when your living room is over-furnished? Put on a blindfold and walk around. Do you find it hard to maneuver around all the furniture? Or, on the other hand, are your movements fluid, easy, and logical? Next, imagine you give a soft kick to a big rubber ball. Would it go a long way before bouncing off of something, or would it rebound back and forth all over the place? Don't forget that the living room is a space for dialogue, receiving, and passage, so you need to be able to circulate easily, whether alone or with company. This is even more important in small living rooms, so make sure you avoid anything that would give a cluttered feeling.

Freeing up space where you live also frees up space in your life and in your mind, by getting rid of objects heavy with the past like meaningless travel souvenirs or gifts you've kept out of courtesy. An airy living room indicates an openness to exchange with others, whether they are members of the household or guests. A spacious living room, meaning one that isn't cluttered, lets the entire home breathe.

If you continue this blind sensory experience in your living room, you'll also discover your environment by touch. You'll notice that each material in the room inspires specific sensations. For example, a tile floor will be cold underfoot. They offer a sober interior, easy to clean but a bit austere. On the other hand, walking across a thick, spongy carpet gives a sensation of warmth and comfort. You'll feel like you're wrapped in a cocoon. But that same touch can feel a bit muggy in hot weather or provoke allergies from the dust and mites trapped in the plush surface.

Lastly, concentrate on the decorative objects in the room. Do you feel like most of them are purely ornamental, or are they personal objects used in your daily life, like magazines, computers, clothes left on a chair, or discarded toys? The living room should be a backdrop that spotlights objects of personal significance like photos, artwork, and mementos brought back from travels or passed down through generations. These clues give us a glimpse of the occupants' personalities, and also their identity. If the general ambiance is neutral, exclusively decorative, it means that the owners are open to receiving guests, but without revealing anything of themselves. If you own beautiful objects, you'll certainly want to display them, but be careful of accumulation. It's better to spread

these precious elements around different parts of the home. A sophisticated vase will be better showcased sitting alone, maybe in the entryway, instead of bunched together with other vases on a shelf in the living room. You can quickly and easily feel whether an atmosphere is more masculine or feminine and determine whether or not a couple inhabits the space, and if so, which of its members was responsible for arranging the home. It's also easy to glean the presence of children or teenagers. Every member of the household expresses themselves in the living room, including the animals, notably by the traces they leave behind.

This tour of the living room isn't quite finished. Come back to the threshold and start over using your eyes. Your sight will predominate, but your experiments with the other senses will refine your vision of the space.

If the room is open to the exterior with an unobstructed view through picture windows or patio doors, your regard will go directly to the horizon. We're always drawn toward infinity. However, if bright colors dominate the room's decor, they will catch your eye before your regard reaches the view or the furnishings. If the decor has unity, a specific character like Scandinavian, Napoleon III, or Art Deco, that aspect will stand out first and plunge you immediately into its particular atmosphere.

All of these sensations taken together will give you a precise understanding of the inhabitants' identity. In the same way, if you do this experiment in your own home, you'll discover a wealth of details you hadn't realized about its workings, and about your own.

In daily life, we sometimes find ourselves caught up in the crowd. It makes us feel suffocated, trapped. We get a similar feeling in a living room that's too cluttered. **Our living room should be a space where we can breathe to regenerate and recharge our energies.**

When I redo a room, I try to imagine all the situations my clients might face in their daily lives. For example, I sit on each piece of furniture around the coffee table to find the most convenient place to set a glass without having to get up. Try it, and you might realize that your table is too small, maybe you should buy a new one, or add end tables around the couch, or a small table between two chairs.

Since I lost my sight, I use my body to judge and measure spaces. After all, we build and furnish homes to "human scale." With his Vitruvian Man drawing, Leonardo Da Vinci taught us that the human body is perfectly symmetrical, so, when I open my arms parallel to the ground, their reach is approximately equal to my height (six feet). Now, all I have to do is place my fingertips at the

starting point, like I would with a measuring tape, and spread my arms wide. Then I repeat the movement by placing the fingers of my left hand over those of my right and moving my body to the right. I continue this process until I get to the other end of whatever I want to measure. If the last length stops in the middle of my body, I know I need to add three feet (half my size). If it ends at my elbow, I need to add one fourth of my height. This is a practical way to visualize and estimate measurements because when you need to know the proportions of a wall or sofa, you always have your measuring tape on you. By using your body as a spatial reference, you can easily place the furniture in your living room without error, in a way that perfectly fits your daily life. But don't forget your guests. If you regularly have someone in your home who uses a wheelchair, crutches, or a walker, think about whether they have enough space to get around in your living room. When you leave ample distance between furniture, it allows you to get comfortable, release your stress, and relax mentally. Thinking with your body is one of the keys to well-being. So I advise my clients to feel their homes with their bodies, in particular for spaces like the living room. Walking barefoot across the floor should offer a pleasant, even reassuring sensation. Touch the walls, curtains, and couch, or even try sitting naked on your chairs if you're inspired! This contact, the way these objects feel to the touch, should be as pleasant as your underwear against your skin, warm like a cashmere scarf wrapped around your neck on a cold day, or as light as the shirt or dress you slip on in the summer heat.


In a way, the fabrics and materials used in your home are like your clothes, because your body is constantly in contact with them. Ideally, you should carry out this sensory experiment without thinking, exclusively tuned in to your primal sensations in order to recognize which elements are agreeable to the touch.

I remember one couple who called on me to redo their living room. As soon as I walked into their home, I felt like I was suffocating. The atmosphere was that of an old, forgotten museum.

After greeting the homeowners - a fairly young woman with sadness in her voice and a rather reserved husband - we sat down on the only couch in the room, a black leather sofa like you might find anywhere.

The husband explained that they wanted to create a more relaxed and joyous atmosphere in their living room. While he was talking, I got up to get an idea of the space in question. While skirting the walls, I discovered an immense TV unit that took up the entire main wall of the living room. Its shelves were filled with trophies and souvenir photos from an athletic career. All the furniture was in dark tones. The floor was covered in gray carpet and the walls were painted a taupe color. There were patio doors opening onto a garden, but the sunlight was blocked by roll-down Venetian

blinds in dark wood.

I sat back down on the couch next to my host and questioned him about his work. Like therapists, interior architects need to understand how their clients live, find out about their passions, tastes, and sensitivities. More generally, I also look for the deep-seated reason why they are calling on me and how they want to use the room once it's transformed. I learned from my hostess that her husband was an ice-hockey champion who suffered a serious injury during a fall in training that ended his career. That's where all the trophies, photos, and memorabilia came from. I asked the former athlete where he went to forget the weighty souvenirs of his past and revitalize. He immediately responded, Hawaii. 

In one word, he had given me the sensory palette I needed to transform their living room. The couple and their daughter often vacationed in this group of islands and all three adored it. Mentally, I had almost finished redoing their living room. Simple, modern furniture with the walls painted light blue - in reference to the limpid blue waters of Hawaii. The room would have two large rattan couches covered with big, off-white canvas pillows, with more decorative accent pillows bearing traditional ethnic motifs from the islands. The floors would be light-colored bamboo and harmonize with some palm trees in raw sienna pots. I asked them to choose some photos from their happy vacations in Hawaii, which I had framed and displayed on the colonial-style, low cabinet that I chose to replace the immense TV unit. The television was hidden inside the cabinet, along the back. With the touch of a button, the owners could slide the TV up from behind the cabinet without getting off the couch. I put some floral-scented candles on the coffee table, with fragrances that would remind them of the Hawaiian vegetation. But what could I do with the hockey trophies and photos? I couldn't just pile them in boxes that would end up stacked in the basement. I finally thought of placing a long console table between the back of the main couch and the wall behind it to display these souvenirs. In this layout, the husband would literally have his athletic past behind him when he sat on the sofa and the new, revitalizing atmosphere in front of him.

My clients were thrilled with the results. When I left, the family was together and smiling. Two months later, I received a letter from the ex-hockey player. He had found a new career. He confided in me that when we met, his depression had affected his couple so deeply that he was thinking about divorce. Since then, he and his wife had reconnected and their ties had grown stronger. His daughter had also been impacted by her parents' despondency, but was feeling much better and had brought her grades back up to their previous, excellent level.

I don't claim to be a magician, but this story illustrates just how much our home environment

influences our morale and well-being. It's proof that our home is a living reflection of our personality and our state of mind. In this case, the house was a museum set up to preserve a past that was holding the ex-hockey champion back, keeping him from moving on with his life. He wanted to transform his living room, and he contacted me. It was the first step in freeing himself from his past, and I was able to help put it behind him.

### *Takeaways*

The living room, as its name indicates, is the nucleus of your home. More than any other room, the living room needs to make you feel happy to be alive and in control of your existence. If that is not the case, look for the reason. Examine the room in detail using all your senses to discover the source of your discomfort. Then, make a positive change in your decor. Fill it with the colors that express your personality. Create a revitalizing atmosphere with materials, objects, and smells that make you feel good. You'll see that the effects are as beneficial as a healthy diet or a vacation.