

A Home is for Dwelling

July/August issue of MADEWORTHY

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Edward Hopper – Morning Sun (1952)

Where we lay our heads down at night and where we wake is the most important place because that's where we dwell. By this I don't just mean our sleeping spaces. Dwelling, as a verb, is how we make these spaces - how we inhabit them affects us deeply. This includes the place we make for feeding our families, the place we make to relax and the place we make for entertaining friends - these everyday experiences can make for very special spaces. Dwelling is a learned process and exploring those ways can be gratifying and fun. But to understand that, it helps to believe that there are lots of ways to dwell. It seems obvious but your way of dwelling is going to be the best way for you.

One of the great purposes of art is that a painting, a sculpture or a poem can change the way we see the world – and ourselves. Since architecture is the “mother of the arts” then it's not too much to ask the same of our homes. Where we live can feed our mind and spirit. Unlike the body, the mind and spirit cannot be overfed. Making a dwelling place is one of the most significant set of decisions in our lives. Even experts in

medicine, law, education, service or business need help thinking through the issues of making a place to live. This place-making really can be a pleasurable experience if the process is well-organized.

It's not too much to ask that where you live is more than a roof over your head. The power of our choices is not neutral. Just about every article on architecture has the Winston Churchill quote but it bears repeating:

"We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."

Living well would seem to be instinctual and for some people it is. Even so, there is an entire industry organized around home-making. In the not too distant past women were generally assigned the task of making a house a home. There were textbooks and even college degrees geared towards thoughtful living. Since some families are double-income both spouses often share arranging the right kind of home. There are more books and articles than ever before on the subject of making a good home yet the need for good living has not diminished. These books and articles are intended to point the way with principles and resources for thoughtful living. These are helpful but it might be good to start from another perspective. Dwelling, as a verb, seems to dive a little deeper than home-making.

It's easy to become so accustomed to a glitch in your home and not realize the level of disruption it is causing. Sometimes the fix can be the simplest thing. Maybe it's rearranging the furniture to make the space feel more open. Maybe it's a paint job. Maybe you need a new house! Who knows? But before solutions are set into place it's a good idea to take stock, in an organized way, of how you experience your house. How each place within it makes you feel.

We sometimes encourage our clients to take a Sensory Inventory of their house. If you have a notebook, or a place on one of your devices, consider setting a few minutes a day aside for a week to inhabit each room (including your outdoor "rooms"). It's best to do this when you have no other distractions so you can really see your home with new eyes. Jot down what you like and what concerns you about each room. Then, on a scale of 1-10, rank how you feel in the room (10 being the best). It's a good idea to include all of your family that live with you in this process. Children have a perspective that is often revealing and delightful. I'd say, make notes about your pets, too – they are driven to the very best spots for them by animal instinct and wouldn't it be nice to keep them in mind?

The Sensory Inventory can be a useful starting point for a dialogue within the family but also with any experts you might bring into the conversation. A design professional should have a method to take you from there. But be careful, coming up with solutions before you've taken stock of things could send you down the wrong path. Taking stock should include sober calculations of budgets, schedules and property values, of course. But if you don't do something like the Sensory Inventory, the best part of dwelling could be lost.