SPARK



SUBLIME STYLESCAPES

//// BEA VALDES COLLABORATES WITH J. MENDEL
//// TOM FORD ON HIS HIT *SINGLE*
//// GLIMPSES INTO A LIFE *GYPSET*
//// INSIDE THE COOLEST HOUSE IN MANILA

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////Words Sunshine Lichauco de Leon

IN TRANSIT

Sometimes, the most innocent of comments can lead you in the most profound direction. In 2004, I had been living and working back and forth between New York City, London and Manila for two years. The length of my trips to Manila was always "indefinite" but seemed to grow longer with each visit. Although I had my own apartment in Makati, it had been furnished in a rush, with pieces borrowed from various friends. It was in spirit, not quite "mine".

One day a friend who had closely watched the rhythm of these comings and goings came to pick me up at my apartment and said, "I know you don't live in the Philippines, but wouldn't it be nice if for whatever time you do spend here, whether a week or a month, you had a place that felt like home, that was a reflection of you?" She continued, "What you have now is four walls with a scattered collection of other people."

My mind wandered off for a second while it tried to digest her thoughtful, well-meaning advice. As far as I could remember, there had been one constant in my life: movement. I had always been in motion, if not between apartments in the same city, then between cities or traveling between countries to visit various relatives or friends. I had lived in San Francisco for the first 18 years of my life but had moved nine times within the city. When I had to fill out a form as a child, I was always terrified of the line that said "address". Change was so much the most normal aspect of my world that I grew up unquestionably dancing to the same rhythm but eventually developing my own unique moves.

I remember that when my mother was not traveling, she would regularly re-arrange the furniture in our apartment. I used to watch her and try to figure out why she did it. As I grew older, I started to wonder: *Did I travel because I never felt I had a home? And did I never have a home because having always traveled, I had no idea how to make one?*

I was not made aware that I was supposed to know where my home was until people started to ask me about it. The attraction of that question to my life was like a moth to a flame. No matter how old I was or what country I was in, whether I had known the person a day or a year, they always felt compelled to ask, *Where did I consider home? Where was I from?* Sometimes, my answer came out in a stutter, other times more fluidly, but never did it reveal much. Eventually, I fine-tuned it into a question that would help me find my own answer. "Well, that depends," I would say, "How do *you* define home?"

I once told someone, somewhat in jest, that I was most at home in airports. To my surprise, I realized later on that I was telling the truth—that I was quite at ease when in transit. At an age when most children were memorizing their own phone numbers, I was memorizing country codes. And when most pre-teen girls were staying home learning to cook, sew, or garden, I was learning to pack a suitcase. At age 12, I could walk into a room full of people speaking a language I did not know and somehow find common ground on which we could communicate. The art of quickly turning strangers into friends was like breathing. I didn't know there were things I was supposed to be afraid of. Growing up with a fearlessness and lack of need to belong to something or somewhere led me to some invaluable experiences. But as I eventually discovered, it also comes at a price.

Although I was absolutely sure I never wanted to live in Manila full-time, I decided to turn my spirit of adventure toward a different direction. I listened to my friend's advice about the importance of feeling at home in my apartment. I truly had no idea where to start but, luckily, the few close friends I had made here seemed to intuitively understand things like color, proportion, texture, and light.

Armed with a team of these "consultants" I could call upon for advice, I took my first big leap–choosing furniture to fill the empty spaces. When someone asked me what my "style" was, I answered with a blank silence. I had lived in an apartment in New York City for seven years but the pieces in it had been a mixture of items purchased from the cousin whose lease I took over and those donated by an ex-boyfriend who had moved to another country. I really had no idea what I liked and realized that I had to discover and define my own tastes.

Although I painfully agonized over every piece I would buy, each purchase was a journey toward gaining the confidence that comes from defining what it is you want. Deciding where to put each piece was another challenge, as I had no innate guide to knowing how to work with such a blank canvas. I simply had *never* thought about the use of space.

The next step truly terrified me–I was strongly advised to paint my white walls. I looked at my friend in shock; deciding to buy a certain lamp was impossible enough so how could I possibly make the commitment to choose a different color for each room? "Trust me," she said, "color will change everything." I finally agreed, comforted by the philosophy that emerged as I examined my own indecision, "For the first 35 years of my life, I have lived with white walls but always understood the world as shades of grey." I wondered if perhaps painting my walls color would then allow me to view the world through a lens of black and white...

This curiosity was enough to lead me and a friend to the hardware store, from which we returned hours later with strips of color

Jan Michellardi



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palettes from pretty much every shade of a color wheel. Placing each group on a different wall, I studied these color strips every day and fell asleep imagining myself as those colors. I learned that painted color on walls changes hue as it dries and gives off a different feeling as the sunlight and shadows hit it at different times of the day.

Eventually, I found my own source of illumination and made a decision. With my office painted in Sundance, my bedroom in La Terra, my living room in Scenic Dessert, and my kitchen in Birds-eye Maple, I learned that earth tones inspired me to breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.

When the crew of painters arrived at my door a week later, so did a new list of things I realized I didn't know. At first frustrated at my lack of understanding, I was soon enlightened as to what moldings and door jams were, and that ceilings and doors require different types of paint than walls do. I also learned after accidentally buying the wrong paint that matte and glossy really are very different things. It was like learning a new language, but one that would eventually teach me to better communicate with myself.

Needing to then enjoy my colored walls in the proper evening light, the next step in my education was to understand light bulbs. I was fascinated as I had been too busy "living" to ever really notice their differences. Florescent and white lights were soon replaced with the warmth of a yellow glow, and I learned to "feel" the room I was in.

I learned to respect my bedroom as a sacred place where my mind, body, and spirit could rest. Having developed what I considered a talent of easily falling asleep in trains, buses, airplanes, and cars, I at first fought against the principle of buying a more "luxury", i.e. higher-priced, mattress. Since I could fall sleep anywhere, why did I need it? I remember the wise words of a friend who insisted that it was the best investment I could make. "A bed is for your state of mind," she said, continuing, "the experience of feeling comfortable, safe, and relaxed is priceless. After all, you spend more than half your life asleep." After debating and calculating the price difference for weeks, I closed my eyes, jumped, and came home with a queen-size pillow top. I now treasure the way my body melts into its softness, and I sleep smiling that I know the difference between a place to sleep and a real bed.

A few months later I woke up and found myself with a particularly springy bounce in my step as I wandered around my apartment, which by then was marked "finished" on my to-do list. As I looked at each piece that I agonized over buying, and scanned each corner I was unsure of what to place there, I was filled with a sense of contentment that comes from looking back and knowing that you made the right choice. The words "I am so happy I decided..." were the first thoughts in my mind as I explored this new creation. Laughing at my own self-discovery, I called up a friend and asked her if she thought it was possible to be in love with your apartment—I was sure I was.

It's been a few years since I built my "oasis", as my apartment came to be nicknamed. To my surprise, I am still in Manila and have lived and worked here full-time ever since. I have come to spend so much time at my "home office" that I sometimes forget to leave it. I had never liked being in Manila for very long—not just because it was a place I never really felt I fit into but also because it was a country where "fitting into a category or group" was given such a high priority. I didn't understand that if you create your own space where you are happy to return to, it does not matter where you are.

Manila has become a bit more "open-minded" in recent years, and I, having found a place to "just be", had become a bit less restless as I had stopped looking outside my walls for my own answers. The shift happened slowly but announced itself with a subtle directness. One day, I got in my car after running errands, and when my driver asked where he should go, instead of saying the usual "Skyland Condominiums," I said, "Home, please...." ////