



Rachel Melvald.

Shrink on Site

Los Angeles psychotherapist Rachel Melvald offers her services to architects and their clients. 'The design process is a major stressor,' she says.

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In the short comedy film *One Week* (Edward F. Cline and Buster Keaton, 1920, Joseph M. Schenck Productions), newlyweds played by Buster Keaton and Sybil Seeley are given a build-it-yourself house as a wedding gift. A jealous ex-rival has fiddled with the numbers on the packing crates, however, leaving the couple to face one dilemma after another as they try to assemble their new home.



In the film *Friends with Money* (Nicole Holofcener, 2006, This Is That Productions), Christine (Catherine Keener) and David (Jason Isaacs) are remodelling their house. Even before the project is done, they've separated and put the house on the market. Their last argument is about whether to consider the neighbours' protests.

In

Los Angeles, when an architect tells a client to 'see a shrink', it isn't necessarily an insult. Rachel Melvald is a licensed psychotherapist with over 15 years' experience, and she also studied at the Southern California Institute of Architecture and UCLA's School of Interior Architecture. Last year she launched Psychitecture, a practice that enables her to offer her cumulative expertise to architects, designers and their clients. She's prepared to advise them on everything from blueprints and interior decoration to ideas for building private art collections and methods for reducing contractor-induced anxiety.

In their attempts to avoid designer-client conflicts, professionals such as Marcel Wanders take note of Psychitecture and reach out to Melvald to learn more. I do the same and meet with Melvald in her West Hollywood office to talk about Psychitecture's origins, techniques and objectives. In other words, friends and family, I'm finally seeing a therapist.

Did you have a eureka moment while creating Psychitecture?

RACHEL MELVALD: At one point during my practice as a therapist, I noticed many of my clients turning to couples therapy while remodelling their homes. I should really conduct a study about how separation and divorce rates

go up during a remodel: every issue a couple has ever had comes out when they try to remodel a home together. It's a major stressor.

What are some common stress points?

Trying to coordinate schedules – yours and the contractor's. Working out timelines and budgets. A couple's different aesthetic wants and spatial priorities. It's not sexy. It might come down to one person really wanting air conditioning and the other not wanting to spend the money it costs.

How can you help the couple – and the poor architect caught between them?

I problem-solve with the couple and support them in creating a harmonious design process, not a confrontational one. I help them hone in on a shared design vision, which facilitates the process with their architect. When I was first considering Psychitecture, I was working with a client who was building a house and wanted advice about how to develop his art collection. That became a perfect case study as I began working with his architect in trying to establish my client's real desires and aesthetic preferences.

What do you mean 'real' desires? Is the assumption that most people are unaware of their aesthetic preferences?

'I help clients

The psychotherapeutic process is a matter of massaging ideas that someone already has to help unlock their bigger vision of a dream life. Whether it's subconscious or conscious, there is a connection that ties together space, art, meaning, your upbringing, and what you've experienced in your social constructs. Part of my job is getting people more in touch with that connection. Psychitecture isn't about going deep tissue – I don't want my clients to feel that they're under a microscope, but I do want them to feel empowered about their aesthetic – what it is and what it can become.

What is your own aesthetic?

My current preference is more mid-century modern, but I would never project that onto a client. I want to know what speaks to the person I'm working with.

What are some of the factors that shape a person's design preferences?

There's a good book called *The Poetics of Space*, by Gaston Bachelard, which takes a phenomenological perspective and looks into the subconscious of our attractions to space. For example, from an evolutionary perspective, our survival instinct might drive us toward a wall in a corner versus the centre of a room. The psychology of space often asks the question: how do we feel safe – in architecture, at home, in

hone in on a shared design vision'

a public space? The answer to that question may help us to design architecture that can be experienced in more favourable ways.

'Safe' can be a dirty word in design, though – as in 'the architect's ideas were all safe'.

Well, design is often discussed in terms of the irrational: metaphor, myth, the unconscious, and passion for why we love what we love. But there are also rational and scientific reasons for our preferences: the biology of our experiences in space. The nervous system reacts *physically* in space, and that refers to the somatic experience, which is pivotal to the trauma work I've done.

In working with people who have experienced trauma and can't deactivate from it, I've come to understand that healing requires knowing what the body feels like in space. In psychology today, healing is very much about mending the mind/body split. I think that has to happen in design processes too. When I look at someone prone to panic and anxiety, for example, I know that encroachment might not feel good to them in a certain space. I want people to notice things like 'my body feels good in this room' or 'I would like a window here, because it allows me to escape a sense of oppression'.

That seems very personal. Have you observed any widely shared preferences?

What we consider to be 'very modern' contemporary architecture sometimes makes people feel overexposed or vulnerable. But if you look at someone like Frank Lloyd Wright, his work really embodies the sense of safety I mentioned earlier. I think many people are attracted to organic forms that fit their natural environment.

A good design answers any number of questions. What is intimacy? What is boundary? Where do we feel vulnerable? What do we want to escape? On a bigger scale, a healthcare centre or school needs to address these questions with regard to the psychology of healing and learning. That's where I hope a designer might reach out to me. The client, in that case, is the population using hospitals and schools – it's so important.

Is LA a good launch city for Psychitecture?

It's perfect. People here are as open to maximizing their wellbeing as they are to design.

So, what is a typical Psychitecture session like?

First I get a sense of what my client's psychological and visual needs are. The client and I work on unearthing them. I then either work with the architect one-on-one or with the client and the architect collaboratively; the aim is a design that communicates the client's spatial and visual needs. I'm called upon at various stages of the design process. It might be before

any blueprints are made or maybe not until the focus is on interiors. The specific stage affects how we talk. Because there are egos involved on all sides, I want everyone to feel supported and empowered. Usually, the architect and I are both working toward averting crisis; nobody wants an unhappy client. That said, while I have to be impartial, I still retain a sensitivity to the architect's design plan.

How do you help an architect who feels the design is being compromised?

Right. Occasionally a client is more interested in minimal expenses than in artistry. If an architect ends up completely sacrificing the design because the client is not able to listen, then I might just tell them that their partnership isn't a good fit. Among other reasons, I'm there to understand the designer's boundaries and to communicate those boundaries to the client. I can't always push the philosophy of Psychitecture on someone who just wants to flip a house. What I'm trying to do is still pretty niche. It's an emerging discipline and philosophy. I'm interweaving the textures of psyche and design, but that only works when everyone involved is intent on achieving a single vision. —

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