

ABOUT SPACE

JOSETTE MURPHY AND THE FINE ART OF COMING HOME

by Amalio Hemmer

Josette Murphy was a highflying young architect for one of the largest and most prestigious firms in the country when she went native. El Segundo brought her home.

Murphy, originally from Maine by way of Costa Mesa, found a little 400 sq. ft. cottage on Grand Avenue that she held onto even as her career took off. She commuted to Santa Monica and even though she loved her newly adopted hometown, she didn't really know it. She didn't know, for instance, that for ten years there was a handsome French-Canadian woodworker who most nights picked his guitar on the stoop of his shop only sixty feet away from her little cottage. She certainly didn't know she'd one day marry him and have two daughters.

What she knew was work. For seven years she made the commute and played the corporate game. The first brick in what was to become her new life fell into place in 2001, when she took a three month sabbatical and accidentally found a new career. She took on a few home design projects for acquaintances and knew almost immediately she'd found her calling.

"I had designed a lot of beige workstations, and I was tired of it," she said. "Suddenly I was doing homes, and I was seeing the difference I could make in people's lives by changing their homes, and it was really exciting. And I kind felt like,

'What the heck was I doing there when this is what I'm meant to do?' This doesn't feel like work at all; this feels like a candy store for a kid."

What she quickly understood was this work had almost spiritual meaning. Almost all of us do it: we live in spaces that are misshapen for the way we actually want and maybe need to live, and we crimp our lives to fit. Murphy discovered she had a gift: she'd spend a little time with a family, look at the space in which they lived, and almost immediately see design solutions that would ease the flow of their lives. Sometimes a wall might need to come down, or a window enlarged, a door added; one way or another, the footprint of a home can often be altered in a simple but fundamental way that better suits its inhabitants.

"I draw out the meaning from their world, and figure out what they are about, and how their house can be about who and what they are about," Murphy said.

She left corporate life and her cottage became her place of business, and she called it: About Space. The business immediately took off, and then she hired her first employee, and one day sent the employee off to look for a screw-gun for a shelf to make her own space fit a little better. Her employee didn't come back with a screw-gun, but rather a French-Canadian woodworker with a screw-gun, who stood in her cottage doorway with a stunned smile the moment they met eyes. In 2007, Josette Murphy would marry Jean-Louis Boudreau, and today, they often work as a team: he makes cabinets and furniture uniquely and painstakingly crafted for people's homes, and she occasionally sings with his country rock outfit, the Main Street Band.

"He just kind of landed in my lap," Murphy said. "To dance with your companion and work with your companion...That is how I have lived my life. I wait to be surprised at what comes next."

Here's a vision, one that involves a small town idyll, a little bit of art and



Josette Murphy and Jean-Louis Boudreau outside About Space. Photo by Jessie Lee Cederblom

a whole lot of artfulness in the living of life: there's some bubbly flowing, a band led by a woodworker playing some Neil Young, and neighbors and new acquaintances flowing in and out of a 70 year old building newly refashioned into a home design headquarters.

About Space, located on Richmond Street, was one of the first businesses in town to agree to become an ESAW venue, and remains one of its signature stops. Murphy was on the original committee formed by Art Walk creator Holly Socrates and still holds those three summer nights a year dearly.

"People are usually all tucked away in our own houses and often don't know each other," Murphy said. "But on those nights, we do know each other, and we are out walking the streets, getting to know each other better...I love this town. My whole town feels like an extension of my home, like an extension of myself."

El Segundo became her home, in other words, because Murphy became part of El Segundo. And it happened in the most El Segundo of ways. "I just wanted to do it my own damn way," Murphy said. "I didn't leave the corporate world angry. I left accidentally. It just sort of dawned on me that there's another way, a smaller way, a softer way, and a kinder way to deliver the same services. Even though I don't make nearly the same amount of money, I have enough, and it feels a lot more human and natural. This is so satisfying because it's just like the artists we are supporting at the Art Walk -- it's just me, doing my thing."

About Space is located at 305 Richmond Street. For more information, see AboutSpaceInteriorDesign.com.