

DESIGN NOTEBOOK
ROOM FOR REFLECTION

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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AD VISITS: MICHAEL J. FOX AND TRACY POLLAN IN MANHATTAN
JOHN W. KLUGE IN VIRGINIA, THE U.S. AMBASSADOR IN ROME



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edges, yet I hope I preserved an essential spirit."

Instead of a full-scale reproduction of a prototypical Japanese lodgingone that would transform sequentially from meditation space to sleeping chamber to writing room-von Sobel wanted a space where multiple functions could coexist. No need to cache blankets in the *tansu* to ready the room for the day. At any moment she may read, meditate, sit before the fire, listen to music, nap or just gaze. (That the *tansu* serves to hide the sound system is another story.)

Honoring the natural world and its

Von Sobel worked with landscape designer Kohei Owatari to create the gardens, which are planted with water lilies, bamboo, miniature papyrus, baby's tears and fern. The iron lantern is Edo period. Impermanence is the core aesthetic. Fragrant cedar poles, tatami mats suffused with the scent of husks and tender rice-paper screens invite the memory of a Japanese country inn. "Everything beautiful we create is from nature, from a piece of wood that we wrest into furniture to a weaving that looks like the veins of a leaf," says von Sobel. "When Andre was in the hospital, I would often look at pictures of gardens in magazines, and the color green would instantly calm me."

Von Sobel worked with landscape designer Kohei Owatari, who was trained at the royal family retreat outside Tokyo, to create a formal sand, rock and bamboo garden in harmony with the interior. Water lilies, papyrus and white jasmine attract passing hummingbirds.

Inside, in its traditional spot abutting the garden, is the tokonoma, or alcove, with its elegant scroll and magnolia and cherry blossom arrangement. Set off

from and raised above the room by two long narrow steps, it is the place where von Sobel lights candles in memory of her son and her recently deceased husband.

"It's luxurious to have a space dedicated to ritual and meditation," she says, "but if this room has any triumph, it's in combining the practical with the spiritual."

The pragmatic bedchamber, with a coffered bamboo ceiling supported by four basswood posts, is a room within the room. For comfort, three tatami, rather than one, have been piled to what von Sobel calls "pea princess" height.

In another Western adaptation, the low cantilevered desk has had a footwell cut into the ground below. "It's the sort found in restaurant tatami rooms made for Americans," von Sobel says. "What can I do? I don't have an accomplished lotus posture, only very short Hungarian legs." *Zaisu*, legless chairs carved in Japan from single pieces of wood, support Western backs unused to sitting on the floor.

The careful positioning of each accessory-from the tea ceremony screen of the wispiest bamboo to the scroll that reads, "I sit at my desk and see the white flowers falling in the wind...."invokes the meditative. Guests are asked to leave their shoes at the door as if to signal their departure from the rushing world.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard referred to fire in the fireplace as "the first object of reverie, the symbol of repose." With chilly days rare in southern California, the archetypal Japanese hearth, usually dead center in a room, is instead carved into the wall. Smooth river rocks and fresh water are placed before it.

The feng shut master who visited found everything nearly perfect. Von Sobel needed to add only the water by the fireplace and a mirror, which she is still searching for.

"All of us who survive the death of someone very close to us receive a gift so that we may go on," she reflects. "This room was a natural income of the spirit. It's not a room where you would want to dance the polka, but it is joyous all the same." 0