



Chickens on his staircase, above, are a tongue-in-cheek reference to Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz's Puerto Rican childhood. Kathryn Ireland brought an English country vibe to a California home she once owned, below.

Taking it with you

How to bring the touchstones of your heritage into your home — without turning it into a theme park

By Judy Heavides
TRIBUNE NEWSWRITER

We are a nation of nostalgists, traveling from home to apartment to condo to townhouse, searching for that comfort we call home.

Along the way, we collect the trappings of who we are: an Evening Star quilt sewn by an aunt from Alabama. Unlabeled pottery your Polish grandmother used at special family dinners. Beaded pillow covers embroidered by a cousin in India.

Each beautiful. Each a nod to our roots. How, though, do pieces of your life find a home in a contemporary condo in the city or a split-level in the suburbs?

Well, since a class of clients, say interior designers Kathryn Ireland and Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, and try redefining your roots subtly without losing an intact imagery of the place.

"You can do that very subliminally," says Noriega-Ortiz, who was born in Puerto Rico but now lives in New York. "Look back into how you grew up, how you lived, where you lived. There are certain things from your environment when you were growing up that you can translate in your homes."

Noriega-Ortiz's book "Emotional Rooms" argues just that, but he refrains from filling interiors with palm trees and seashells. Instead, his designs are very open, the rooms light and airy. Fabrics are transparent, colors are the Caribbean.

"Because I grew up in the warm weather, I grew up with a lot of light, and rooms feel very light, not heavy," he says. "Had I grown up in the Rockies, for instance, it would have been heavy."

Floating fabrics diffuse light. "It's very tropical, and it makes (it) feel like mosaics setting even though you're not using mosaic—nothing," he says.

And his passion for sea shells paid off: "The color of the seashell where I grew up was a sea foam color — it was not blue — so I used that sea foam color quite a lot," he says. "I paid online rooms that color, but very very light just to give you the feeling of beach."

He also knows to mix metals with a bit of whimsy: A stuffed



PHOTO BY MICHAEL GORMAN

Interior designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz is the author of "Emotional Rooms."



PHOTO BY THERESA JACOBSON/COURTESY OF KATHRYN IRELAND

Tips from the pros:

Infuse your space with subtle references to family and heritage.

Keep familiar faces nearby: With paintings and portraits and photographs, says Ireland. "That's something that makes you feel like home whenever you're from."

Leaveen with contrast: Choose details that remind you of your heritage, then mix them with pieces that have a different feel.

"Things that are heavy go with things that are light," Noriega-Ortiz says. "Keep things that are clear next to things that are dark, like maybe a light table with a slipcover chair."

Let curtains tell the story: "You can tell where you are by window treatments," Ireland says. "Straight-up with simple prints in Italy and Spain, in England, it's much more elaborate — you have patterns and fancy frills on your poles."

Use color as a reference: In a neutral room, Noriega-Ortiz painted a pillar hot pink, a colorful shout-out to Mexican author Laura Esquivel, who penned the apartment. "If you grew up in Switzerland where the lighting is probably blue, you refer to that," he says.

Unify with fabric: If you have an inconsistent collection of furniture, "Keep the fabric at the same color, (and then) it's really easy to put them together," Noriega-Ortiz says.

chickens and rooster sit in the entrance hall of his apartment. "People walk in, and they start laughing and say, 'Why do you have that?' And I say, 'I made you laugh. Well, there you go. I grew up with chickens and roosters. There they are.'"

Across the country and halfway around the world from the England and Scotland of her youth, Kathryn Ireland evokes England in a warm, subtle way.

"I decided some years ago, if I couldn't get my children to move with me to the West Country — Dorset, Somerset which I love — I'd have to move it to me," says the Santa Monica-based textile and interior designer. So she purchased a hefty oak first Aga cooker (a traditional cast-iron range that hails from Shropshire) for the kitchen in her Spanish-style home.

"The first thing I do in the morning is put my barbers up against the Aga," she said laughing, about the stone-baked for its radiant heat. "I've got a lovely contemporary kitchen, but anyone that comes in says, 'Oooh, I love it! I'm in England.'"

For more, Rugs, Fabrics, Each has the power to define a place in the world, she says. "If I look at a room,

there's something in a room that will tell me where I am, where I've come from."

So Ireland uses wicker Lloyd Loom chairs in her home — "In the '30s, you saw them in old steam boats... They're just a little bit English" — and richly patterned fabrics in her interior designs, including the Wallace Nordberg-designed house that is the subject of her latest book, "Creating a Home." "I completely resonated it for myself, and ultimately add it to Bruce Wilbur's house," she says. "It's a little bit of traditional, little bit of English, a little bit of France, and it's very much California. It's a very much Spanish."

Remember, "fabrics" helps incorporate the odd piece into a home design, suggests Noriega-Ortiz, who prefers to think of furniture as sculptural objects.

"One big mistake is to look at furniture as a period. It's like, I have this Shaker chair, and I have this modern chair and this Danish modern whatever," he says. "Think of a chair as basically a horizontal surface with legs; then you're looking at it as a sculpture; then it's much easier to start putting things together."

jen@trib.com | trib.com