



Dante's New Pad

Inside the Portland home of a young academic.

BY

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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Arielle Saiber in the doorway of her Portland, Maine, home.



A bust of Dante Alighieri overlooks the dining room.



Freshly brewed cups of espressos are a reminder of Naples, where Arielle has gone to study every summer for ten years.

Though her work focuses on Medieval and Renaissance Italian literature and philosophy, Arielle Saiber has long been fascinated by architecture and home design.

As a child she studied the photographs in *Architectural Digest*, her first magazine subscription at age 8, fascinated by the powerful differences little things make in the home. She has often managed to make small spaces more welcoming while studying in boarding school, college, and graduate school, and living in places such as the decaying ghettos of Naples, Italy, where she has gone to study and do research every summer for ten years.

"I grew up all over the world, often living in small spaces, and what you learn is how to maximize space by carefully picking objects that are both functional and beautiful," says Arielle, whose wide smile, infectious energy and eclectic style, must make her a favorite of students at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where she has taught as an associate professor of Italian language and literature for the past eight years.

"A home is like a temple; it's a retreat. It's a place to honor your family, your guests, and who you are," says Arielle, who says she learned to pay attention to not just visual elements, but also senses of smell, sound and texture. "I try to fuse exquisite things I've observed in different cultures and walks of life," she says.

It was the sense of sound—or rather, too much of it—that drove Arielle to find her own home in Portland, Maine. She had been living in a Manhattan-style loft in the city's Old Port, which she loved for its urban design and accessibility to all of the city's amenities, but Arielle who spends a lot of time at home writing was having trouble getting work done because of all the noise. Her neighbors weren't especially loud, but the building's construction carried every little sound.

She contacted a real estate agent and said that she wanted to buy a small, freestanding house in Portland that was still within walking distance of the city's downtown and Old Port—not an easy find. "When I told my real estate agent what I was looking for she laughed at me," says Arielle.

Her real estate agent did find a house but was uncertain about showing it to Arielle at first. The wall colors were dark shades of brown and green, the floors were painted over, and kitchen was unwelcoming with low ceilings, making the already tight space seem even smaller—however, it met Arielle's two requirements: it was a freestanding house and it was within walking distance of everything.

"It was exactly what I wanted, and I kind of can't believe it appeared," she says.

Arielle said when she walked in she could see the potential: it needed a new furnace, but the electric was updated and it was structurally sound. "I just said to myself this is workable because all it really needs is an aesthetic facelift," says Arielle.

She describes it as a "humble house." She has heard that it is one of the oldest continually lived in houses in Portland though documents to prove its status were burnt in one of the city's fires. "There's no doubt it's at least



Large playing cards over the dining room doorway reflect the salmon color on the walls. Arielle's cat, Theodore, is an incredible host when new people come to the house. "He's basically velcro; he's with me all the time and follows me from room to room," she says. Given to her by one of her students at Yale, where Arielle attended graduate school, Theo has been with Arielle for ten years, helping her write her Ph.D. dissertation and two books.

from 1830," says Arielle, "and parts of it might be earlier." She isn't sure who the home was originally built for—its size ensures that it was never a captain's house—but what she has learned has been interesting. "What's kind of cool about it is that the last three owners were women," says Arielle who learned this from an older neighbor who has lived in the neighborhood his entire life. "It's welcomed women for a long time."

Arielle bought the house in 2005 and wasted no time giving it a complete makeover, completing the work in just over two months. She opened up the downstairs rooms, painting them in bright, bold colors punctuated with white trim and black accents, took out the low ceilings in the kitchen and added skylights, stripped all the paint off the wood floors, and insulated a former shed in the back with dirt floors into a mudroom.

Arielle credits a wonderful remodeling team with getting things done fast. Carpenter Fred Johnson, who has since passed away, was a jack-of-all trades, doing big jobs and small jobs and just about everything in between. "He and his three sons worked seven days a week," she says. "They came in and worked hard until they got it done." She also commended plumber Matt Solak of MJS Services, electrician Ken Pelton, and woodworker Brian Lazarus of Opus One in Falmouth, who constructed built-in bookshelves in the living room.

Arielle said what also saved time was her ability to have a clear vision of what she wanted for the house. "I am a bit of a risk taker, which is part of why this got done as quickly as it did. I was willing to take some chances and make choices fast, when necessary" she says.

Once she moved in, she found that most of the decisions worked with the exception of the office, which was originally in the second bedroom upstairs. "It was wrong," says Arielle who ended up putting the office in a small room off the dining room and turned the upstairs room into a combination guestroom and playroom, creating a space for the children of visiting friends to hang out in while their parents visited. "As soon as I changed it, it made total sense," says Arielle. "My office—where I spend most of my waking hours—is near the bathroom, near the kitchen, and there's no bed in sight to take naps."

With the doors gone, the bold primary colors from room to room interact to create an almost crayon-box feel. Standing in the dining room you are surrounded by a bright salmon but also see the bright but mustard-tone yellow of the kitchen and the bold blue of the mudroom.

"I just wanted a happy, strong place," says Arielle. "Some colors feel Mediterranean or Caribbean, but also somewhat Scandinavian. I have noticed in my travels that both cold and warm places use bright coolers, albeit in different ways for different reasons." Arielle says she was a little unsure about the boldness of the salmon shade at first. "When Fred first put it on I was a little freaked out, but as soon as the pieces of furniture came in it unequivocally felt good."



Arielle opened up the formerly cramped kitchen by taking out low ceilings and adding a bright, mustard yellow to the walls.



A chest from Foreside Home Furnishings and a painting by Elise Ansel complement the mudroom's bright blue walls.

Arielle's sense of style and thoughtful attention to detail are apparent throughout the house where the décor is a combination of found objects, often put together in interesting pairings, and a non-cluttered sparseness.

"I didn't try to create a unified style but rather to find pieces that worked together," says Arielle, who blends objects from different periods and cultures, including Americana and rustic European antiques. "I like the quirkiness of found objects side-by-side with antiques," she says, adding, "Similar to what I study and write about: I like the quirky combination of orthodox and unorthodox, high and low, expected and unexpected."

At the front of the house, the living room's wall space is mostly taken up by windows and custom built-in bookcases for her huge collection of books, some of which were made by her grandfather, a Czech immigrant who was a book-builder in New York City. Between bookcases, a piece of horse-head armor hangs above the fireplace, and a lamp of electric coils made by Julia Roberts' character in the movie *Runaway Bride*, was given to Arielle by a friend in the movie business.

In the dining room, a bust of the object of Arielle's main area of focus, Dante, sits on a shelf with tiny bud bases from Fiachre, a garden store in the Old Port. The dining table is an old barn door from Architectural Salvage, another Portland store, which is held up by two sawhorses, and chairs are from a shop in Wells. A Chinese grain basket serves not only as a piece of décor but is also used by Arielle to hold her laundry.

"Every piece in my house does double time," says Arielle. "I've never needed a lot of space, just the right objects in that space."

Arielle's décor also includes unique pieces of local art. A large painting by Stephen Lazzalotta dominates the dining room, and in the kitchen, colorful figures painted by local artist Jess Esch dance on the cabinet's glass panes. In the mudroom, hangs a painting by artist Elise Ansel, who currently lives in Brunswick.

Though Arielle still travels frequently she feels extremely lucky to have found a house in Portland within walking distance of the small city's many shops, restaurants and cafes, where she likes to grade student papers. "I really do love the urban life—love it," she says also mentioning Portland's creative, wonderful cuisine, small-town feel, easy access to nature and the ocean, "and really wonderful people. I fell in love with Maine. I really didn't expect to but I do. It's a calmer lifestyle, which is great for the busy mind. It's wonderful to come home here."



In the hallway, a brightly colored print of Florence by Stefano Ramunno hangs on the staircase wall above a glass table displaying a lunchbox made from a sesame oil container.



Built-in shelves in the bathroom help maximize a small space.