



FIGURE X. THE HOUSE THAT BUILT ME.

A visual narrative map illustrating the role of early environmental contexts in shaping memory, attachment, and identity. Drawing from ecological systems theory, attachment theory, and trauma-informed frameworks, the image conceptualizes the home as an internalized structure through which relational experiences, emotional meaning, and self-understanding are organized across time.

|The *HOUSE* that Built Me:

A Visual Narrative of Memory,
Attachment, & Meaning-Making

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Human experience is not stored as isolated events, but as layered, relational, and embodied memories shaped by context, environment, and connection. Across the lifespan, physical spaces, particularly the home becomes imbued with emotional meaning serving as containers for attachment experiences, developmental milestones, and identity formation. This visual artifact, *The House That Built Me*, documents these internalized experiences through spatial metaphor, integrating personal narrative with psychological theory.

Drawing from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, individual development is understood as occurring within nested environmental systems, where proximal settings such as the home play a central role in shaping emotional and relational patterns. Within this framework, the house is not merely a physical

structure, but a microsystem that organizes early experiences of safety, connection, and meaning.

From an attachment perspective, early relational environments contribute to the development of internal working models that influence how individuals perceive themselves and others (Bowlby, 1988). Rooms, objects, and sensory experiences within the home may become encoded as emotionally salient memory cues, linking physical space with internal states of security, fear, belonging, or loss. In this way, memory is both spatial and relational, reflecting not only what occurred, but how it was experienced.

This work is also informed by trauma and memory research, which suggests that autobiographical memory is often stored in sensory, fragmented, and non-linear forms (van der Kolk, 2014). Visual and symbolic representations can therefore serve as alternative pathways for accessing and organizing lived experience, particularly when narrative language alone is insufficient. By externalizing internal landscapes into visual form, individuals may gain distance, coherence, and new meaning-making capacities.

Additionally, this piece aligns with approaches in expressive arts therapy, which emphasize the role of creative

processes in facilitating emotional expression, integration, and healing (Malchiodi, 2020). The act of mapping one's internal world through imagery, symbolism, and spatial organization allows for a multidimensional exploration of self that integrates cognition, emotion, and embodiment.

The House That Built Me can be understood as both a personal artifact and a potential therapeutic tool. It illustrates how environments become internalized, how memory organizes around place, and how visual frameworks can support reflection and integration. By engaging with this map, viewers are invited to consider their own internal "houses", the spaces, relationships, and experiences that have shaped who they are, and to explore how these internal structures continue to influence present-day functioning.

In this way, the house becomes more than a place we once lived, it becomes a map we continue to carry.

**This framework may also be adapted for therapeutic use, inviting clients to map their own relational environments and explore how these internalized structures shape present-day experience.*

References

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