

FROM  
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Debbie has a quirky and fun personality that finds expression in her furniture and lamps, which are dotted all over her home. Here, a narrow passageway is put to maximum use as a library, work space and entertainment area.



# an expression of talent

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PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY THE DESIGNER

Philippine designer Debbie Palao, who creates furniture, accessories and lights, expresses her individuality in her own home in Cebu – an organic space that reveals her love for using eco-friendly materials.



The living room has a warm and lived-in ambience. Debbie has filled it with antiques and art collected from all over the world and also the lamps she has designed. Her unconventional approach is revealed in the balcony, where she combines rattan, abaca and ceramic with wrought-iron to create a stunning effect.





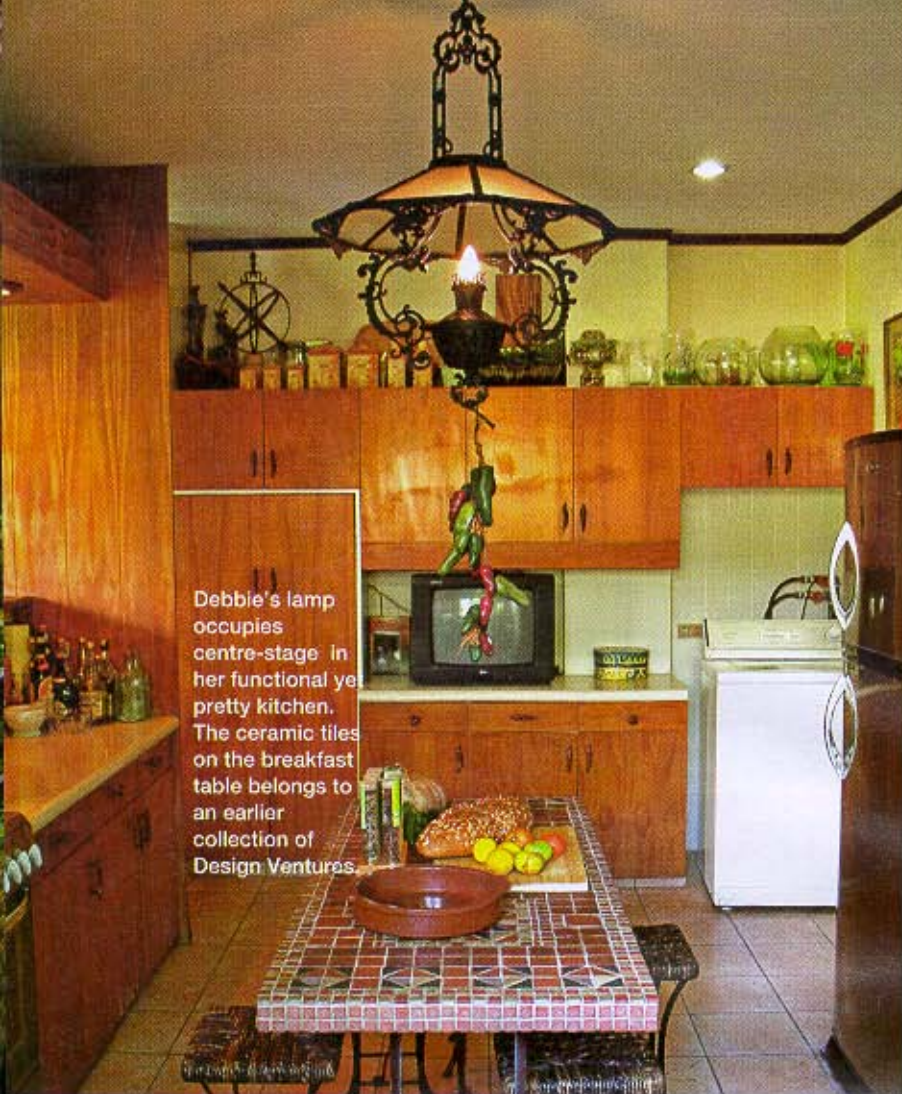
Life provides the way, the so-called twists and turns, so that one finds his or her place as it was meant to be. For after all, life is an adventure filled with lessons to be learned and limits to be tried and tested to achieve that centre, that balance,' says Debbie, reminiscing about her foray into the design world which was pre-determined by destiny. Debbie possesses an inborn talent for drawing. At the age of 13, she created the sets for a high school play with a cast of 60 and one would imagine that she would have followed her heart and

enrolled for a design course. But her lawyer father wanted her to study law, and being a dutiful daughter she did a business course first and was going to then try and get a law degree. But marriage after college changed all that. When her husband Gus went into the furniture business, Debbie took on the responsibility of designing the furniture, and that is when she truly came into her own.

'Designing a product and especially the furniture, took a great toll on me, as I had to learn on the job about the standards, the ergonomics, and the construction. It was the most difficult

three years of my life. What got me through was my discovery of the many natural materials we have and what we can do with them and of course, the excitement of travelling, of seeing many different arts and cultures and then finally, finding myself and our own culture and crafts whose roots are actually fused with the rest of the Asian cultures.'

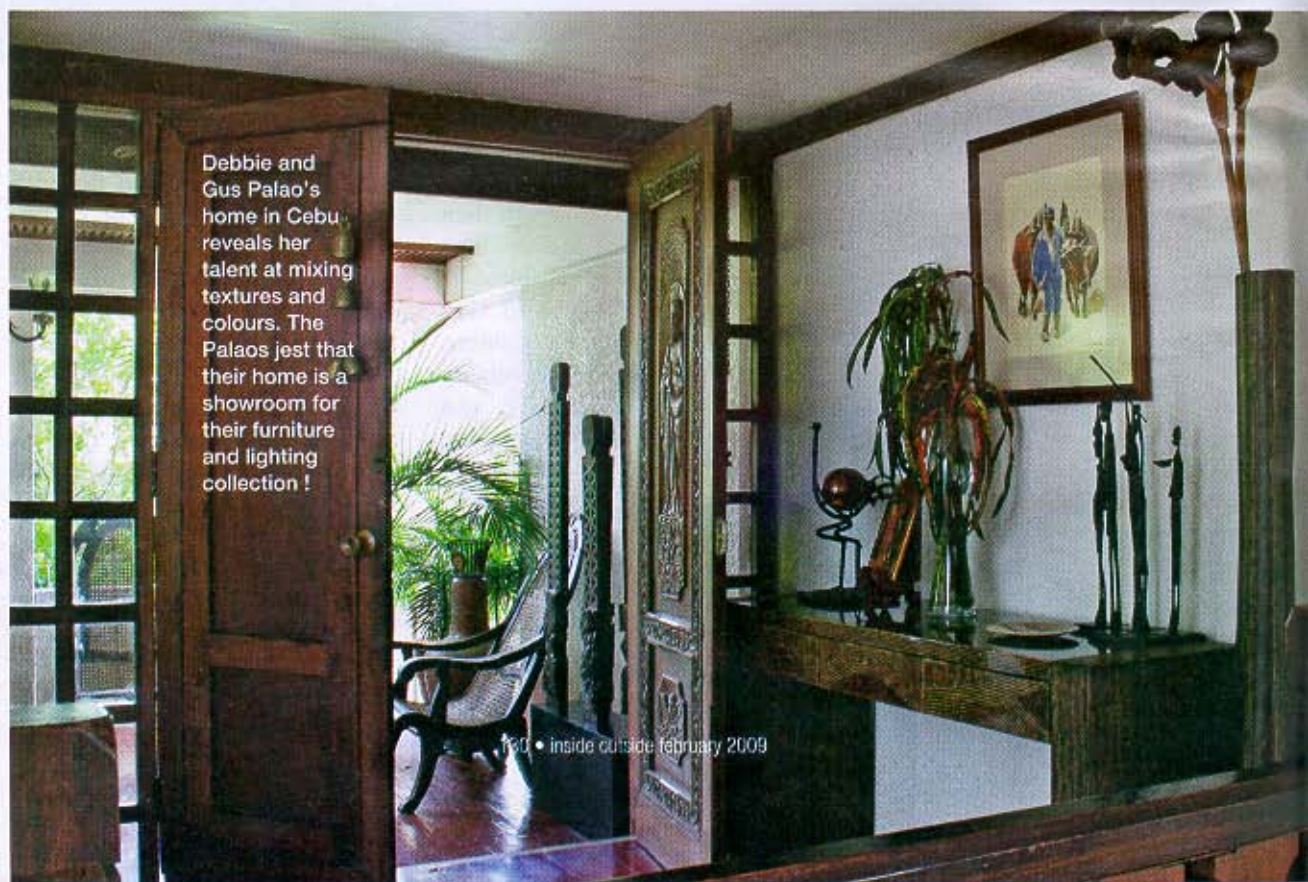
Debbie's firm, Design Ventures, has always been a step ahead as she has created a line with ceramic and mosaic patterned tables, followed by a collection with bamboo inlays, another line using mixed media where wood and iron chairs have



Debbie's lamp occupies centre-stage in her functional yet pretty kitchen. The ceramic tiles on the breakfast table belongs to an earlier collection of Design Ventures.

a woven backing and what she calls her signature line – ceramic tables with wrought-iron legs, which have sold all over the world. Currently Debbie, has been working with rattan and abaca mixed with copper wires for her soft furnishings.

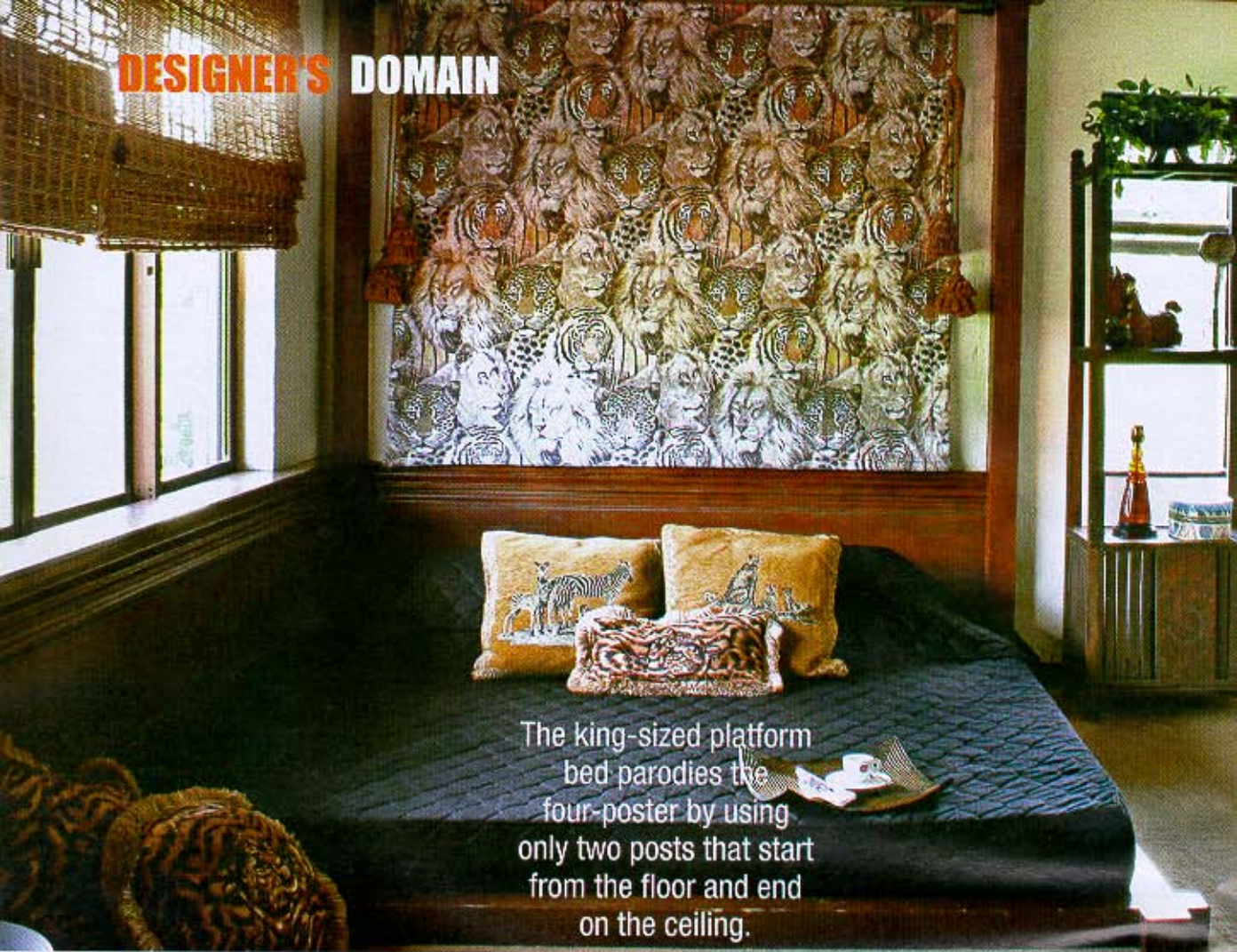
Her home in Cebu is lovingly put together, filled with her latest creations. Debbie finds inspiration in the most ordinary things: for example, the shape of a leaf becomes a springboard for a new shape of a chair or a lighting fixture; her table lamps are coiled with springs, evoking memories of the spiral binding of *Senorita* notebooks from her student days; another lamp which parodies the bottle of Absolut Vodka, is made from laminated plywood strips and resin circles that resemble bubbles; an all time favourite is a unique lamp, shaped like a gourd and covered with copper wires from electric motors; sensual bar stools made from rattan strips suggest the curves of a woman's torso and a two-seater created out of plastic tubing conjures the shape of a cloud – one really feels one is sitting on one!



Debbie and Gus Palao's home in Cebu reveals her talent at mixing textures and colours. The Palaos jest that their home is a showroom for their furniture and lighting collection!

The dining area looks onto a terrace filled with lush plants. The Philippine mahogany dining table is surrounded by wooden chairs with rope backing, abaca waffle seats and woven rattan.





The king-sized platform bed parodies the four-poster by using only two posts that start from the floor and end on the ceiling.

The multi-level house balances Debbie's unconventional designs with a collection of antiques and mementoes from her foreign vacations. The living room has contemporary sofas and chairs, elongated lamps, a copper wire-framed sofa, and her 'Ali Baba stools', whose seats are protrusions of excess bamboo. The room is enclosed by a low ceiling, which lends it a snug feeling. A wall mirror with a gold-leaf treatment, which Debbie learnt in South Africa, enlarges the space and bounces the light around. Taking her Ali Baba theme a step further, a display wall turns out to be a revolving door to the couple's bedroom!

The house has an open space

plan and one can see the kitchen with its ceramic tile motifs from an earlier collection of Design Ventures, while the dining area faces the lush terrace. The dining table has split bamboo inlays with argyle patterns, and the wooden chairs have rope backing with abaca waffle and woven rattan seats. One chair, characteristic of Debbie's quirkiness, has two sloping legs at the back, which contrast with the two straight legs in front.

The staircase is designed to make a statement – with no rails to distract the eye, a giant ceramic-framed mirror to emphasise the height, and an entertainment centre and display area below the stairs to utilise the dead space.

The balcony sports an industrial look with furniture made from surplus construction materials such as plastic tubing and leather. Debbie has converted the basement into a study for her and it's where she can put up her feet at the end of the day and enjoy the greenery outside.

The ambient lighting in the house gives it an ethereal feel. 'We didn't want lights from the ceiling – they are too antiseptic and cold,' says Gus, who has been a pillar of strength to Debbie on their roller-coaster journey. Their home makes a definite impression with its bold play with colours, textures and styles, and is an expression of her own unique, imaginative personality. 