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# PSYCHOLOGIES

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A peaceful, private space can seem an unattainable luxury. Yet sanctuary is within all our grasps, says Viki Wilson

Photographs by Anders Gramer

We should all have our own private retreat. Somewhere we can close the door on work, family, lovers and friends. Somewhere to curl up and read, write or just be. Somewhere to reconnect before venturing out into the fray once more. Often, our homes lack such a place. Spiralling house prices have left us living in smaller spaces and a sanctuary, rather than just a functional home, is something we can only dream of. Yet our yearning for personal space is not a luxury, but a basic human need.

'Privacy is a basis for the development of individuality. It supports

healthy functioning by providing needed opportunities to relax, be oneself, vent emotionally, escape from the stresses of daily life and to cope with loss, shock, and sorrow,' says Professor Stephen Margulis, author of *Contemporary Perspectives On Privacy* (£18.99, WileyBlackwell). According to Professor Irwin Altman of the University of Utah, we instinctively mark out three levels of territory in our mental map of the world: primal, secondary and public. The primal territory is our bolt hole, our sanctuary. Be it our garden shed or just our side of the bed, it's our corner of the world over which we must exert control. Subsequent studies ▷

## SPIRIT

◁ by Altman reveal that if this primal space is invaded we become defensive and aggressive.

In our sanctuary we feel at peace – with ourselves and with the world. This can be traced back to the relief we felt when our mother met our needs when we were little. 'When we cry as a baby it's a matter of survival. Our heads are bursting with stress and we rely on our mother to contain that,' says psychotherapist Virginia Mallin. Once we feel safe, we are able to be still, and attend to our inner world. As Christopher Forrest McDowell, author of *The Sanctuary Garden* (available from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)), wrote, 'sanctuary is where we perform the job of taking care of our soul'.

**✿ The third space**

Until now, men have most often asserted their need for this space, being more likely to claim the study or the shed as their private domain, but now, with women spending equal time in the workplace, as well as juggling family, friends and domestic work, our need for sanctuary is stronger than ever.

'We have an obsession with finding personal space because we've lost touch with that space in ourselves that used to be at peace,' says Mallin. 'In the past we lived in far more crowded conditions, but we had the mental space to cope. Now we've filled that space with technology and stimulus that feels chaotic if it's out of balance.'

Our personal bolt holes are unlikely to be particularly spacious. 'Few of us have the luxury of an entire room we can claim as our own,' says psychologist Donna Dawson. 'But there will always be a small corner that you can adapt.

For example, my husband's space is the chair at the end of our kitchen table. He has his things there, which no one would move. When he goes there, we do not disturb him.'

We can find sanctuary outside the home too. In urban environments, this is dubbed the third space – many of us have our favourite seat in our local café or library, or retreat to the gym to unwind. For Carolyn, 32, the woods near her home offer sanctuary. 'Not far from my house is a tiny, hidden chapel and just below it are some steps,' she says. 'That is where I go to meditate. Just thinking of it makes me calm.'

We can rapidly learn to dip in and out of a state of sanctuary throughout the day. 'First, abandon the misconception that we need a long time to find peace,' says psychologist

In our sanctuary we feel at peace, with ourselves and with the world

Martin Boroson, author of *The One Moment Master* (£6.99, Random House). 'With practice, we can tap in to a deep well of silence at any moment, no matter how noisy it is. Just set an alarm or timer for one minute, close your eyes and allow your mind to settle into your breathing. When the alarm sounds, stop.' It's hard to overestimate how helpful this technique can be.

Ideally we should support our mental relaxation by carving out a physical sanctuary. 'If we feel that we have control and order in our one, special place,' says Dawson, 'we can project that feeling into the rest of the world. It's illusory, but it helps keep us sane.'

### My sanctuary BEL MOONEY



When Virginia Woolf wrote 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' she didn't go far enough. What every woman needs is some room of her own if she is to avoid going mad.

Children who make dens understand the need for privacy. When we grow into adults with homes and families the need is more acute. Your home may be an extension of your personality, yet it's still shared space. A sanctuary is somewhere to withdraw – a place personal and special. I was lucky because I always managed to claim one room as a study. I would fill it with personal memorabilia, often crowding out the actual work space.

No matter – it was mine. When the children were small I installed a strange 'soft' sculpture of a witch-like woman,

which they found quite scary. I knew that Lil (as I called her) would keep them out when I wasn't around.

When my marriage ended and the children were grown up, I moved to a smaller house and all was well – until my future husband moved in and I began to feel my space shrinking. So I invested in a conservatory and then, from an outhouse next to it, we created my new white room. In these rooms, I work harder than ever, so it would be a lie to say I find rest within my special space. But surrounded by symbolic and meaningful things – pictures, plants, sculptures of angels and birds in different materials, a carved Chinese monk, a stone head of Buddha – I feel supported in my perpetual quest for peace.

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