

THE FOX HAVEN RETREAT CABIN

Make a Room of Your Own

I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other.... Only those are the true sharings which rhythmically interrupt periods of deep isolation. —RAINER MARIA RILKE

SUSAN MUDD OF THE MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN, GROUP, Citizens for a Better Environment, was relating to a conference of city planners and environmentalists one of the more surprising points researchers discovered when they asked the question, “Why don’t people ride the bus?” They found: “Women love their cars because it’s the only place in their lives where they can think, sing, cry, control the music, and talk to their kids one-on-one, undistracted.”¹

The automobile currently serves not only as a dressing table, a dinette, a telephone booth, a home theater, and of course as a form of transportation, but it is also the modern boudoir. I wondered whether Henry Ford or Virginia Woolf ever anticipated this development. In 1928, about a year after the 15,000,000th Model T Ford rolled off the assembly line, Mrs. Woolf composed

and delivered a speech that would later be titled and published as *A Room of One’s Own*, in which she discussed the effect her own, sudden inheritance of a modest but guaranteed income had had on her own writing, and predicted, “There will be women Shakespeares in the future” just as soon as women have the freedom of reliable income, and a simple room they can retreat to, that is theirs alone.

Wondering whether the word “car” can be found on the pages of her book, I reread *A Room of One’s Own* and was struck most of all by the paragraphs, as long as my forearm, built of sentences that snake through layers of images, creeping down the page, decorated with a few commas, terminating at the half dozen periods allotted for each chapter, and I recalled a conversation I was lucky to have with the venerable

author Jane Jacobs,² who said that the main change in writing in the last forty years is that sentences have become so short, there’s hardly an idea per sentence, rarely more, a situation she attributed to the speed of computer word processing: Handwriting and typing encourage the author to think out a full idea before she begins to compose, while word processing leads to just throwing words on the page, and sometimes

“It is a cottage of quite a peculiar kind, for it is only ten feet square and less than seven feet high, and as I did not decide to fix it in any definite place I did not choose the site by divination as usual. The walls are of rough plastered earth and the roof is of thatch. All the joints are hinged with metal so that if the situation no longer pleases me I can easily take it down and transport it elsewhere. And this can be done with very little labor, for the whole will only fill two cart-loads, and beyond the small wage of the carters nothing else is needed³.”

—Kamo no Chomei, Japanese hermit, circa 1210

neglecting to return to fix them up later. Word processing shortens sentences. But I think our modern brevity is especially a product of the time/space conundrum: indeed I thought, reading *A Room of One's Own*, “Who has the time anymore to read, much less write such long sentences?”

So even though we have more than one bedroom per person, and many of us have incomes as reliable as incomes can be, it's still very common to hear adults complain, “I just don't have space for myself.” How will we find this space that we crave?

Making a Retreat WHEN WALLS MAKE A SPACE LARGER

Women complain widely of the no-space phenomenon, and this chapter is prejudiced toward them, but men also suffer. Architect Ross Chapin echoes the opinions of many when he laments, “The mod-

ern house which has neither basement nor attic is a prescription for divorce. Men used to have a workshop to escape to, but now there's nowhere to go.” Some people blame the open plan, which gives a strong sense of open space by allowing people to live in a small area while they look out on most of the rest of the house, but sacrifices the intimacy of tiny rooms, and requires subtle understanding between people if they want to share the space and engage in different activities. Most North Americans need strong visual cues—doors, or walls, and distance—to be able to take time alone.

So, some people are retrofitting their open plans, or houses with many rooms but no room for the self, by physically creating a room of one's own. “ROOOs” usually share the following characteristics:

- They allow the inhabitant audio control, or as Kathleen Dean Moore says, “Control to choose which voices we will hear.”
- They have a focal point—a large window or a tiny “Zen” opening, a desk, or a shrine—that directs the inhabitant to look inside at an image, or outside at a view, but, conversely ...
- ... they are hidden, or semihidden, and it is difficult for the inhabitant to be seen, even if she is able to look out.
- They provide security for the inhabitant—security for possessions, and a shape and small size that makes the body feel safe and protected. They may be cloistered, and so assure the mind that what will be seen in the location is predictable.
- They require or encourage a ritual when approaching or settling into the place.
- They are often beautiful.

The private car fills these qualifications to a surprising extent: it is, almost by definition, on the edge of things, since it exists to provide passage between edges; the stereo provides audio control; tinted windows allow looking out, but not in; the trunk in particular is very secure, and there are locking doors on the cab; the pattern of finding keys, opening the door, buckling the belt, adjusting the mirrors provide a ritual of settling down into the space; and designers, restorers, and some drivers work to make them beautiful. But perhaps you don't want to live in your car.

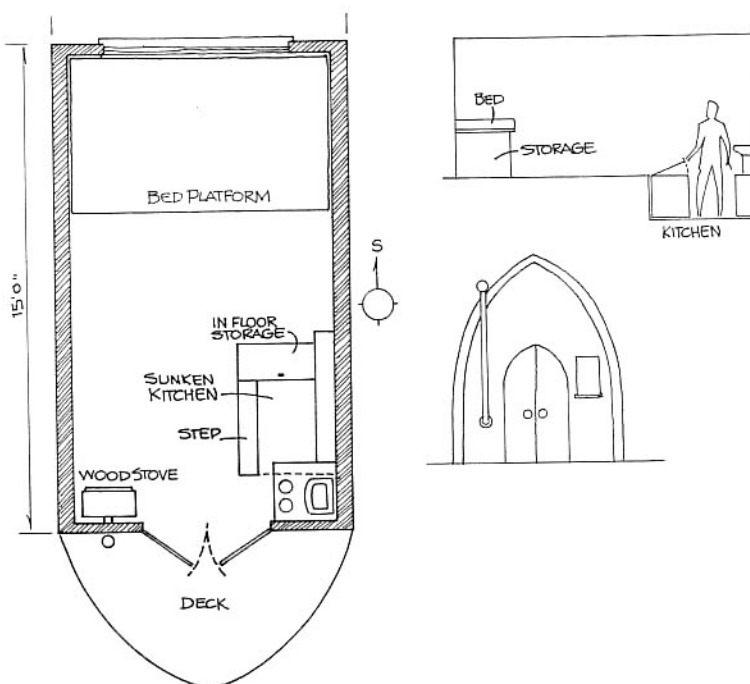
A final quality of the ROOO is debated: is it a static location, or a

set of materials that can be easily moved and erected? For some, a particular location where they return regularly, either on a whim or as part of a particular ritual, provides the sense of place that settles their mind. For others, a ROOO that is mobile like a car works fine.

SHALL WE RUN AWAY?

Kamo no Chomei hid his cottage “deep in the fastnesses of Mount Hino.” He retired to “the shrilling of the evening cicada” and was inspired by nature around him toward metaphor: “the snow as it piles up and melts seems like an allegory of our evil Karma.” Architectural theorist Ann Cline compared eastern mystics, who embraced nature as inspiration, with medieval Christian monks who rejected nature as a distraction from God, and with some eighteenth-century English gentlemen who, instead of escaping to a small hut of their own, installed bearded, old men—“ornamental hermits”—on their estates. “Nothing, it was felt, could give such delight to the eye as the spectacle of an aged person with a long gray beard and a goatish rough robe, doddering about amongst the discomforts and pleasures of Nature.”⁴

Modern westerners have mostly embraced the eastern view of nature as inspiration. But what about the “ornamental hermit”? Plenty of weekend getaway cabins see their owners just a few times a year. Is it worth it to have a ROOO if you never go there? And what of the environ-



TWELVE RESIDENTS OF A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY IN LAMA, NEW MEXICO, ROTATE USE OF THIS 140-SQUARE-FOOT HERMITAGE AMONG THEMSELVES, AND RENT IT OUT TO VISITORS. BECAUSE THE AREA IS DIVIDED INTO THREE DISTINCT SPACES, AT FOUR DISTINCT LEVELS: RAISED BED, SUNKEN KITCHEN, AND WOODSTOVE/LIVING ON THE “MAIN” FLOOR, THE AREA SEEMS LARGE AND IS VERY FUNCTIONAL. THERE’S AMPLE STORAGE UNDER THE BED AND A PANTRY/CABINET SUNK INTO THE FLOOR NEXT TO THE KITCHEN THAT KEEPS MILK AND CHEESE COOL DURING MOST OF THE YEAR. AN OUTSIDE DECK IN FRONT MIRRORS THE INTERIOR SPACE AND FACADE.

mental impact of so many of us building our ROOs out in nature that, as Kathleen Dean Moore writes, “No matter how far you go, ‘there’s no away away’”?

Is there a way to find this space without leaving home?

The Home Refuge A CORNER OF THE GARDEN

Anyone with a yard has room for a tiny retreat, a hammock hung in a tree, or chaise lounge behind a screen.

Architect Rick McDermott was asked by client—a doctor in charge of a ward of babies born prematurely—to design an addition to his house, and to landscape the gardens. Rick thought about the demands of his client’s occupation and decided to give

him a gift: a simple place where he could rest, undisturbed. His crew installed a comfortable bench on the edge of the larger backyard garden, enclosed by vines and bushes that allow in winter sunlight, and open to a narrow view of a small pond. “We wanted to give him the opposite of a hospital environment. He can read there, or he can just sit. As long as he gets out there, he will relax.”

“Getting out there” is usually the main challenge; giving yourself a specific comfortable destination can help. Tony’s T-Houses offers simple wooden structures, made of Douglas-fir and redwood, with a durable fabric roof that people typically place in their backyards for use as a meditation,