



# Sacred Spaces

Making room for the soul sometimes requires a special personal place. Here's how four individuals created their own soulful dwelling spaces.

BY CAROLYN POGUE

PHOTOGRAPHY (FROM LEFT): MARNIE BURKHART/MASTERFILE;  
MARNIE BURKHART/MASTERFILE; MARNIE BURKHART/MASTERFILE



I remember sitting on the edge of the bathtub trying to calm myself before I unlocked the door and returned to my children, their friends and the arrested dinner preparations in the kitchen. I remember the sudden silence descending on the household as the children realized that I was missing. They would tiptoe down the hall, place their little fingers under the bathroom door and wiggle them. "Mom?" my four-year-old would whisper. "Are you in there?"

In my memory, the few minutes it took for the kids to perform that ritual

trip to the bathroom door was equal to the time it took for me to do some deep breathing and regain my sense of balance. Years later the neighbourhood kids remember this periodic scene with amusement.

It was funny, but on another level I was instinctively reaching for a private place – in a sense, a sacred space to escape to. I needed a peaceful oasis in the midst of my chaotic life: working, running a household, juggling children's dance lessons and ball games, and tending to community committees. I needed a space where

I could go to be "between the lines," where I could literally take a deep breath and listen to my own heartbeat.

That was years ago, but my days are still full to overflowing with activity, deadlines and meetings. Over the years I have created a sacred space in the bedroom I share with my husband. It's in a corner near the window. I go there first thing in the morning to prepare my thoughts before I start my busy day.

The need to reconnect with ourselves has become more pressing for all of us. And no wonder; the world ▶

has changed quickly in only one generation. Our love affair with technology means that we're always at the mercy of instant contact. Cellphones jangle on buses and on the street. We learn about global disasters instantly. The information highway has no speed limit. Even children feel the pressure of our fast-paced world; many are on tranquilizers to help ease the stress at home and at school.

This increasingly chaotic world is making us sick, according to Dr. David Swann of Calgary. A member of Physicians for Global Survival, Swann has thought deeply about the connection of health to mind, body and spirit. His experience working in medical clinics not only in Canada but also in Africa, the Philippines and Iraq has given him a global vision of health issues. He believes our current hurried and hassle-filled lifestyles are increasing our risk for strokes, heart attacks and mental illnesses such as depression. He stresses that these diseases can be life threatening. "The big issue in our society today is stress," he says.

We could all use a sacred space to restore some balance to our lives, to slow down mentally, physically and emotionally. Creating such a sanctuary doesn't have to be difficult, expensive or time-consuming.

Start by using your imagination to set this special place apart from the rest of your house or apartment. That's easier if your sacred space is a separate room. Wendy Mortimer and John Jesteadt set up a separate meditation room in their three-bedroom town house in Toronto eight years ago. "It's a place we can step into when there's a difficulty or problem in our lives that we're seeking a solution for," says Wendy. "It's a calm space where we can sit quietly and empty our minds; where we can be still and allow inspiration to come from that place of stillness and emptiness."

If your sacred space is a corner of a room, you'll need to find some physical or psychological division. There are several possibilities; you could, for example, hang a curtain or use a pleasant defining aroma. I sometimes light a scented candle or use incense in

my sacred space. This sends a signal to my soul that this space, even though it's only a corner, is different from the rest of the room. It sends a signal to others entering that space, too. Visiting children, for example, know by instinct, or by learning, that there is something different here; they approach quietly.

Your special space should also be comfortable, especially if you'll be spending more than just a few minutes in it. Wendy put two of her plushest sofa cushions on the floor of her meditation room. She also installed the thickest, most foot-pleasing carpet she could find. She and John each picked out a cherished piece of clothing or bedding that stays in the room. "Mine is a favourite blanket that I throw over my shoulders if I get cold," she says. For his part, John chose a wall hanging with different coloured threads depicting a lotus flower. "It represents the opening of the heart," he says.

A sacred retreat should be filled with items you find inspiring and comforting. Wendy and John have covered their meditation room walls ▶



PHOTOGRAPHY, RACHEL WEILL/BOTANICA

A physical retreat, such as a garden, can be just what the doctor ordered to keep you healthy in body and soul.

with artwork they designed and painted themselves, and the room is dotted with various statues of figures they find inspiring (among them Buddha, Diana, the moon goddess, and Quan Yin, the goddess of compassion). In my own corner at home, I have placed articles that remind me of people and places dear to me: the rug that I bought in an

Indian market; the white stone bear a Cree friend gave to me; the little statue of a laughing Buddha that my father gave me; the seashell from my husband; and the beautiful stones I collected on my many walks.

While Wendy and John use their space to meditate, you can use yours to reconnect with yourself in whatever

way works best for you. In my own small space, I might pray, write in a journal, draw a dream symbol or read from sacred writings. Sharon Woodhouse, an emergency room nurse at Alberta Children's Hospital in Calgary, uses her sacred space in a corner of her kitchen to "ground" herself. She does this with the four

## EASY STEPS TO SACRED SPACES

Your sacred space should be comfortable, separate from the rest of your home and appeal to all your senses. Here are some easy tips to help create that special place.

### PICK A SPOT YOU LIKE

Your sacred space doesn't have to be a room; it can be your garden or balcony – anywhere you feel comfortable. (If your garden is your sacred space, you may have to move it inside during the winter when it's too cold and uncomfortable.) And it doesn't have to be large; it can be just a small corner of your house, as long as it's free from distractions.

### MAKE YOUR SPACE SACRED TO YOU

When designing your sacred space, remember that it's *your* space; it should be pleasant and relaxing for you – don't worry about anyone else.

### CALM YOUR SCENT-SES

Fill the space with scents that you enjoy and that make you feel content. Chamomile, lavender, vanilla, jasmine and rose are all scents that most people find relaxing. Karl Lohnes, an interior designer and design advice columnist in Toronto, says it might be as easy as opening the window to let in fresh air or adding a bowl of fresh-scented lemons to the space.

### COLOUR YOUR MOOD

Colours can have a great impact on your mood, according to decorator Holly Dymont. "They can stimulate you, make

you calm, make you happy or make you depressed," she says. Muddy colours are more likely to bring you down. Green tints are associated with the calming and healing effects of nature. Blue is mentally relaxing and helps you to sleep. Lilacs have a spiritual connection and would fit well in a sacred space. Lohnes recommends "layering" the tones of a single colour you choose, some lighter, some darker. "This creates a monochromatic room. It makes it easier on the eye, so when you walk into the room nothing is jumping out at you."

### SURROUND SOUNDS

A lot of people overlook the importance of sounds, says Lohnes. "They will be relaxing in their beautiful bathtub with the kids yelling in the background" instead of putting on some relaxing music. If you really can't visit your sacred space when the kids are asleep or playing with their friends, there are tricks you can try to tune out excess noise: add a thick underpadding to your carpet, for example, or put pillows around the border of the room to help absorb sound.

### KEEPING KIDS OUT

The best strategy is to make it unappealing to the kids. Give younger children a more exciting play area to discover. Older children should be mature enough to respect your space. Let them know when you want to be alone in your sacred area. Be sure there's someone in charge of the younger kids.

### EN-WRAP-TURE

If your sacred space is a room with a window, get drapes that are the same colour as your walls "so they blend into the room and soften things around the windows," says Lohnes. When the drapes are closed, it creates a cocoonlike effect. "The whole colour is enveloped around the room," says Lohnes.

### KEEP IT LOW

Whether it's cushions, mats or beanbag chairs, keep all furnishings in your sacred space low to the ground. This will help maintain a serene environment. "Tall things in the room have vertical lines, which create energy going up and down," says Lohnes, adding that this can impede your relaxation. Mirrors hung lower on the wall than usual could also enhance relaxation and reflection.

### MAKE IT YOUR OWN

When creating a sacred space, be sure to include things that reflect who you are. But these items should also have a calming effect. If you're religious, you might want to include symbols that reflect your faith. You could also put in a photograph or painting of a nature scene that calms you. Many people find water relaxing, so a portable gurgling fountain might be just the addition. Not only does it create a soothing sound, but the refreshing, relaxing image of water might also wash away your troubles.

– Amber Toutant

elements: water in a fountain her son gave her; earth holding a beautiful plant; fire in a candle; and air carrying incense smoke around the room. Everything sits atop a buffet by the window. "It's a sunny spot where I love to sit and watch the bird feeder out the window," says Sharon. Other items, such as family photos and gifts from friends, help to make her feel whole, too, she says. A mother of three children, aged 16 to 23, Sharon works nights, so her schedule often allows her time alone in her sacred space while her children are out or asleep.

Music can enhance the sacred atmosphere of your special place. Sometimes I listen to a calming CD or play an ocean drum (a flat drum containing loose beads to simulate the sound of waves); usually I prefer silence.

Colour can be another important element of a sacred space. Wendy painted her meditation room an "intense" sky blue. "It gives me the same feeling of joy that I get when I'm out walking on a bright sunny day," she says.

Adding elements of nature can also enhance the calming effect of a sacred space. Lorraine Sinclair, a Cree cultural teacher who lives in Alberta Beach near Edmonton, brings the beauty of the outdoors to her sacred space located in her office at her home in the country. The room is filled with special shells, moss and driftwood that she has collected and placed on a wooden table. Candles, a water fountain and white "fairy lights" enhance the atmosphere of tranquility and peace.

Sacred spaces can offer more than a place of tranquility; at times of crisis, they can actually be healing. Last year Lorraine became seriously ill with cancer. Her treatments necessitated spending one week each month at her parents' home in the city. It was there that her sisters, brother and a friend gave Lorraine the gift of sacred space – an unused bedroom that they painted her favourite colour: purple. "They even painted the ceiling purple," she says.

"Then they placed everything I love in that room: photographs of my grandchildren, nieces and nephews. They created an altar with the traditional medicines, angels and stones, and added books, a dream catcher and relaxing nature music. It was like a shrine to my life. They made me want to live by surrounding me with love."

A physical retreat, such as a garden, a room or corner of a room, could be just what the doctor ordered to keep you healthy in body and soul. Just think of it as a prescription to sit in a peaceful space and meditate, pray, read, paint, write or just reflect. But whatever your external manifestation of tranquility, you are free at any time to cross the threshold in your mind and enter another sacred space – the one within.

#### ON THE NET

Do you have a sacred space? Where is it? What's in it? Share your spaces with us by visiting [www.canadianliving.com](http://www.canadianliving.com).

**"And now here is my secret, a very simple secret; One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye" (The Little Prince)**