

Sacred space

Solace from the pressures of work, finances and family can be as close as your own home.

By Dominic Cadden.



Liska Turner has created Jane Austen-style nooks (left) and putting greens (below) for clients looking for a place to retreat.

We're told to stop; slow down. Close the door on the world. Cease being a mother; father; partner; social dynamo or workplace warrior and concentrate on the most important relationship: with yourself. Sounds great but exactly which Pacific atoll do you need to be airlifted to for this to happen?

A growing number of people are staking a claim to their own sacred space within the home. It's not as kooky as it sounds: as children, we instinctively created our own place. A lean-to cubby house became a palace of dreams. In teenage bedrooms, we blasted out the nagging of the adult world with music and guarded those few square metres with our lives. As adults, our space at home is shared and often compromised by the opinions and expectations of other people; the workplace is often an open-plan office that squeezes out personality or privacy.

Liska Turner, 40, has made it her business to restore a sense of space (www.aplaceforspace.com.au). Turner lost her baby, Lily, at 24 weeks and gave birth to Lily's twin brother at 25 weeks. She returned to work in recruitment sales part-time but was soon made redundant. Her whole world had been turned upside-down.

"I needed to stop, get in touch with myself and live more in the present," says Turner, whose husband, David, has also introduced his own domestic refuge. "That's where the idea came from – we need a physical place to go for an emotional journey. Our lifestyles don't encourage mental nothingness so the nervous system can rest. You need a tangible space for that." →



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Turner's role is more mediator than interior decorator, using an initial hour-long consultation to help clients work out their requirements. Turner asks them to bring along anything that inspires or has significance for them, then she tries to get to the root of why the client feels they need a special space and what they hope to achieve from it. Once a plan is made, Turner sources items for the client to check and purchase. This could be anything from colour-coded photo frames or giant cushions. Finally, she spends time with the client, laying out their private spaces so everything has a place.

The idea of a sacred personal space is often less about square metres and more about the feelings it evokes. Turner helped one client with a dream of becoming a writer find her space at a desk inside a cupboard. Although tiny, the space evokes Jane Austen, history and gentility with fabric on the walls.

For others, the need for some place to withdraw from the world justifies greater expense. Roof Space Converters, a division of The Attic Group, began

operating 15 years ago but has seen a marked increase in business recently, with nearly a quarter of the company's business in 2007 being for study rooms, retreats or hobby rooms.

"Most people come to us for one extra room, often a home office," says Robert Stewart, the Victorian manager. "That might cost about \$80,000 but when they learn that for an extra \$40,000 they can have a bathroom and another room, they often take the extra space for some kind of retreat." Their refuge-style spaces can range from a library to a private place for parents to watch TV.

Turner, however, insists if you look hard enough, you'll find your space, whatever your budget. "It's about making a place the key to your soul."

Lucille Rogers, 36, a full-time mother, sold the family home last September and, failing to find another place to buy, she and her family decided to rent. "We haven't really unpacked, so I don't have all the usual things I associate with home around me, particularly framed photos of my kids and our extended family," Rogers says. "I felt as if

I was in limbo and I wanted to create something that was going to be a space away from this chaos where I could feel tranquillity."

So with Turner's help, she made her own special nook. "We have an outdoor patio area, which we use as the family eating area, but in the back wall I've created a space of my own, centred around a day bed. I loved the idea of being outdoors but indoors and I face out to the pool, so I can look at the water. I need a sense of the world around me and the water is calming."

She and Turner talked about music and candles but "I feel I need to be disciplined about silence and solitude. It's important for me to switch off and think about something I like to do rather than thinking about everyone else's needs. When the patio doors are shut, the kids know that's Mummy's time".

Graeme Cowan, 49, moved into a townhouse in Gordon in Sydney's

North Shore 18 months ago. Divorced and alone, he set up the spare bedroom for writing. After the success of his book, *Back From The Brink*, a collection of interviews with prominent Australians diagnosed with depression, he felt he had a calling to show that people can overcome "the black dog". For this he needed a room that was creative and suited to looking after his own mental health.

The room he'd put aside for this was a huge mess, a complete contrast to the rest of the neatly laid out house. It was filled with notes, sources and files he dared not challenge or destroy. Yet this was also the room he used for meditation every day.

"I'd read a book on the concept of flow – some people call it being in the zone – and I wanted an environment that was conducive to that," he says. "Part of flow is that when you're doing something that you feel you're meant to do, you don't feel like there's a break between work and pleasure."


With that in mind, he filled the room with images of places he'd enjoyed, such as the Himalayas and Mount Everest, family pictures and scenes of nature. "It was also important to put up mementos that recognised what a big year I'd had with the launch of the book because they provide validation for what I'm doing." Cowan feels Turner's opinion helped him cut the cord with much of his clutter and now most of his books are stacked out of sight in a wardrobe.

David Turner, an accountant, knew the "candles and sandals" approach that appealed to many of his wife's clients wasn't for him. He wanted a putting green. "When I'm on the golf course, I don't think about day-to-day pressures or worries at all."

Much to David's amazement, Liska agreed to squeeze a putting green into their small Naremburn backyard. They found a company called Pro-tech to design the green, which is made from artificial grass packed with sand. The green has slopes to make it more challenging and is big enough to allow for 15-foot putts in a few directions and a bit of chipping.

With the pressures of work and two children, David says the putting green became important to him. Now he uses it five or six times a week. "Coming home from work and seeing my two children [Tom, 5, and Ella, 3] is the best part of my day but it's a bit like being back on the job again," he says. "After 8.30pm I can relax, so I go outside and have a putt for 20 minutes or so. No one is talking to me, and as I get more relaxed, things just come to me. I don't think I'd have those thoughts if I was watching telly."

While the green has no doubt helped his golf score, that's nothing more than a side effect, David says. "The real benefit is using that quiet time, that mental nothingness, to connect with the energies, God, the universe... whatever you want to call it." ●



Fabric-covered walls in the study helped provide Jane Austen-style inspiration for one of Liska Turner's clients.