

A SPACE

To Call Your Own

The need for territory to defend is widely recognized among orangutans. Certain fish are happiest with a bit of sea to call their own. Children have come to expect their own rooms once they're old enough (and their parents rich enough), and "a place to call one's own" has become an important milestone for single adults growing independent. But one subspecies of human being has been identified which normally renounces its territorial imperative. This subspecies is the American couple.

For some reason, the need for physical privacy is supposed to vanish after the "I do's," along with her or his own stereo, secrets and old lovers' phone numbers. But it isn't the *need* for space which vanishes—just the space.

"I don't have any," says the wife of

If you want to move into his space, do it from the side, not the front.

HIS

one businessman, explaining for herself and countless millions.

"One couch is mine," offers a graduate student who used to have the whole house to himself.

"When I need to be by myself," explains his partner (also a graduate student), who left her own place to move into his, "I walk the dog. Either that or read mysteries."

When twenty-six young married couples at Purdue University were recently asked, "Where do you go when you want to be by yourself?" their collective response was revealing. But oddly

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enough, this survey didn't include the one room where refuge most often is sought: the bathroom.

	Wives	Husbands
Kitchen	50%	8%
Living Room	39%	62%
Bedroom	4%	12%
Nowhere in Particular	8%	19%

In most cases the bathroom is one place where spouses will knock before intruding on each other. As architect Alexander Kira points out, only the bathroom's door has a lock in most homes. As a result, says Kira—who has devoted an entire book to *The Bathroom*—this tends to be our safest haven in the house and a common setting for such relaxing activities as "sulking, crying, daydreaming or simply being alone." Only in the bathroom, people repeatedly tell Kira, can they find "a little peace, quiet and a place to read." He finds this "an appalling comment on the structure of our social relationships. We no longer have any sense of being able to close the door to a room and expect others to knock before entering, as we might have fifty years ago."

Where space of any kind is limited—as in Japan or England—elaborate manners substitute for walls in protecting one's privacy. Social life in Tokyo or London can resemble an extended elevator ride, with all eyes to the front and not even married couples violating each other's boundaries for extended periods of time.

Perhaps because of our wide-open-spaces heritage, we have few such claims to privacy in this country. On the contrary, our commitment is to no privacy. During the past decade in particular, one's right to territory has been set back even further by openness on the rampage—open schools, open marriages, open homes. The thought that walls are antisocial consumes modern architecture. Yet our need for privacy certainly hasn't

waned. Therefore we must be resourceful about seeking solitude in the face of openness. *Personal Space* author Robert Sommer says he has begun to notice lately how plants are being used as substitute walls—a means of creating little “micro-worlds” in which to take refuge. (“Here I am, dear, behind the begonias.”) Stereos as well, the psychologist finds, are being used to create with noise or earphones a sense of isolation unavailable physically. When he sees others taking the headset route to solitude, Sommer wonders if the earphones are actually turned on.

Little research of any kind has been done on the need for your own territory, but what research has been done indicates how strong this need is. A survey of college women who were living with male partners, for example, found that lack of privacy topped their list of complaints. Next on the list was lack of adequate space. Presumably such couples would claim their own space once married. Not so. Married couples do no better at defining their space. Both groups tend to throw all space into a common pot.

The thought that once married you need keep no secrets or space for yourself (the two being seen as synonymous) is difficult to shake. Singer-songwriter Craig Carnelia has even devoted a song to this.

*My lover's in the living room,
And I am in the den.
And that's the way it should be
now and then.
It's good to be away from you,
my own.
To know you're near, yet know
that I'm alone.**

By great effort some couples have become successful refugees from architectural togetherness. An Ohio couple, for example, after bringing a sixth child into their three-bedroom home, simply abandoned the master bedroom to half the kids and built themselves a dome on the back porch. This dome then doubled as a getaway space for anyone who felt a need to get away.

Even some couples with room to spare

*“Privacy” by Craig Carnelia © 1978 Frank Music Corp., 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

find they prefer time over space for solitude. Robert Sommer says that from six to eight in the morning, when he’s the only one up, is his best source of privacy. Though he has a study of his own at home, Sommer hardly uses it. “A cramped little room,” he calls the converted bedroom, adding that he’s always getting into hot water by spreading out his work in the living room.

Personal space research could help allocate room in such a case. Men have been found to work more effectively in larger rooms, women in smaller ones. Therefore, giving the husband more space than his wife might be seen as socially scientific more than sexist (to say nothing of indulging male fears about having anyone getting too close).

Men also have been found to feel more threatened when their personal space is invaded from the front than from the

plan strictly for your own. Rather than claiming space as an afterthought, claim it as your first thought. This could leave you without a bedroom and force you to sleep around (the house). This might prove interesting. Alexander Kira wonders aloud if the fixed bed is actually our best setting for sleeping, napping and making love, or whether we just stick with it from habit. Ditto for closets, which he calls “the world’s worst and most primitive storage space.” Since shared closets are a common battleground in marital wars, perhaps they’d do better as demilitarized meditation chambers with separate chests and poles substituting for closets.

Such revisions of space can be fun to fantasize and even more fun to implement. This has been the experience of New Jersey filmmakers Gay and Phil Courter. Throughout the decade of their marriage, says Gay, both she and Phil

Some women find privacy in imagined space: “I read mysteries.”

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side. Women tend to let strangers come closer head-on. “It appears that males would feel more comfortable than females with adjacent seating, while females would feel more comfortable than males with face-to-face seating,” concluded two psychologists after confirming this sex difference through experiments.

Another piece of research on personal space suggests possible new departures in sleeping arrangements. College roommates who sleep in bunk beds have been found to stay together longer than those who sleep in adjacent single beds. In addition to freeing up floor space, such a vertical arrangement keeps roommates out of each other’s sight for at least several hours a day. This is thought to improve their relationship. Might the same be true of married couples? If so, as an alternative to separate beds (with all their connotations), today’s imaginative young couple might consider double bunk beds.

The means to find space of your own are limited only by your imagination—even where space of any kind is scant. The key is to ignore architects’ needs and

have paid lots of attention to “which space is his, which mine and which ours.” Since they work together at home, this seems particularly important for their mental health. Early on, the Courters devised a system of assigning each space a “boss.” Since it houses his player piano and he decorated it, Phil bosses the living room. Since she’s fussy about how it’s organized, Gay is boss of the kitchen even though she spends little time there. Gay’s also boss of their film company office, where she does spend a lot of time; Phil of the workshop. Blake, four, and Josh, two, each bosses his own room. “That space is inviolate,” explains Gay. “We have to knock before we go in.”

Then there’s the shower. Like many couples, Gay and Phil have trouble getting together on showers. She thinks showering together is sexy; he thinks it’s crowded. In the Courters’ dream bathroom this problem was solved with the simplest of devices: one large shower, two shower heads. “This way we both get what we want,” explains Gay. “I get Phil, and he gets his own water.” □