

## The inner experience

Homes need a 'place of grace' in which to meditate and contemplate

**By Emmet Pierce**  
STAFF WRITER

November 23, 2008

When Hilary and Sundaram La Pierre feel the need to escape from the routine of daily life and make a spiritual connection, they open their back door and step into their “temple,” a 20-by-23-foot wood-frame structure they built five years ago in their backyard.

Seated on cushions in front of an altar decorated with statues of Eastern deities and pictures of spiritual leaders, they play the harmonium, chant and meditate.

The Encinitas couple is part of a growing movement to combine the serenity of places of reflection or worship with the convenience of home. The concept sometimes is called creating a “place of grace.” The idea is to have a location in your dwelling dedicated to serenity, where there is no television set and the telephone never rings.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune  
Susan Fefferman seeks tranquillity in the meditation room she had designed for her home in Del Cerro.

Users of meditation rooms hold that people need to take time out for quiet contemplation each day to discover what they truly want from life. Fifty years ago, some futurists predicted that Americans in the 21st century would have an abundance of leisure time. Instead, they are busier than ever, their professional duties often spilling over into their personal lives.

Lew Dominy, a San Diego architect, blames technology. With widespread use of computers, cell phones, and BlackBerry devices, we've become a nation of multitaskers. We're capable of staying connected to friends and co-workers around the clock, leaving little time for a good night's rest, let alone quiet time to nurture the soul.

Dominy, who plans to build a new home soon, said the dwelling will include a small prayer chapel for himself and his wife.

“Both of us have a little quiet time each day,” he said. “This is a place you can do it without being interrupted.”

The La Pierres have made rest and contemplation a part of their daily routine. They're members of the Self-Realization Fellowship, a worldwide spiritual organization founded by Paramahansa Yogananda. They stress that their temple is tied to no specific faith, however. People from a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds have visited to reflect on their lives.

“We go in there and sit and meditate,” said Hilary, who teaches yoga. “You will feel the vibration when you walk in because all of the energy that has been poured into it in past years. We named it Jyoti Mandir, a Sanskrit word that means 'Temple of divine light.'”

You don't need to build a temple to escape from the world. In nearby Leucadia, Gita Gendloff, a real estate agent, climbs a narrow ladder in her bedroom each day to reach a tiny, carpeted loft. The simple room is decorated with Hindu deities and photographs from the 1970s, when she lived in India and studied meditation. The small space is illuminated by a skylight.

“You can't stand, you can just crawl, but there is enough room for two people to sit comfortably,” she said. “There are pictures of people who were inspiring to me. I just go up there and sit.”

People meditate “to reconnect with a part of themselves that is real or solid,” she said. “For me, I feel like it is a checking in.”

Although influenced by Hinduism, Gendloff says her meditations are spiritual but not tied to a specific religion or philosophy.

“I was raised Jewish,” she said. “I consider myself universal, not religious.”



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune

Fefferman's meditation room includes an amber salt lamp carved from salt crystal.

Many people in the San Diego region have created meditation rooms in their homes, said Terah Kathryn Collins of Solana Beach, founder of the Western School of Feng Shui. Some rooms are tied to religious practices and others are secular havens from an overstimulated world.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune  
Gita Gendloff of Leucadia has created a small meditation loft above her bedroom for rest and reflection. Spending time there helps her find balance in her busy life.

“People are realizing that to stay balanced and healthy in their lives they need to have quiet time in addition to sleeping,” she said. “They need some deep personal rest time, some introspection, meditation time. More people are getting on a spiritual path. It may be they practice yoga or a breath meditation or they want to study.”

There are many ways to create a “place of grace.” It can be as complex as the La Pierres' temple or as simple as a chair placed in a quiet corner. If you want to spend peaceful time alone, you don't have to wait until you've found the perfect spot and surrounded yourself with meaningful possessions. Meditation can be centered on a single object, said Steve James, a Boulder, Colo., architect who has lectured to home builders on the topic.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune  
Hilary (left) and Sundaram La Pierre of Encinitas enjoy chanting and meditating at home.

“In my case I have a custom-made guitar,” he said. “I set it up in my home in a place where I see it all the time, which makes me pick it up more often than normal. First of all I just like looking at it. I go home after a stressful day, I can sit down and play for 20 minutes, and I go to a different place entirely. I am completely relaxed.”

In San Diego, Meo O'Malley has turned creating places of reflection into a business called Altars Within. Working as a consultant, she comes into people's homes and uses objects that are meaningful to them to create altars. They may consist of religious objects, candles, photographs, or even arrangements of flowers. She said her goal is to “make the invisible visible.”

An altar “is a place of symbols and metaphor,” she said. “It is a visual representation of deep meaning. It could be a piece of wood that is very beautiful, a shell, really anything that speaks to you.”

O'Malley said she began making altars in 1982, after visiting Bali. Most of Bali's population practices Balinese Hinduism, which combines native beliefs and Hindu practices from Southeast Asia.

“They use altars everywhere: in fields, in the home, outside the home, in daily spiritual practices,” she said.

For those who use meditation areas in the home for prayer, the experience can be very different than going to a house of worship, such as a church, synagogue, mosque or temple.

“In a church people typically look for a community connection,” said Dak Kopec, an associate professor at the NewSchool of Architecture and Design who recently designed a meditation room for the home of Susan Fefferman of Del Cerro.

“The church is a support structure,” he said. “A lot of people who are incorporating these spaces into their homes are overloaded on the people factor.”

Well-known local artist and designer James Hubbell said spirituality is hard to define. Nevertheless, he tries to add spiritual or sacred elements to many of the buildings he designs,

“In a home it might be the fireplace or a window seat,” he said. “In a village it could be a fountain or a tree or a chapel. In a modern community, it might be a park.”

Sarah Susanka, author of the “Not So Big House” series of books on design and lifestyle, says having a private retreat, whether religious or secular, is a basic human need.

“We all need a place in our home where we can tune out everything.” Susanka said. “And if you make the place and the time for that kind of stillness, more of the truth of who you are can come to the fore. When you make the place and designate the time every day, it really does transform your life. It is accentuating the potential you have within you.”

---

■ **Emmet Pierce:** (619) 293-1372; [emmet.pierce@uniontrib.com](mailto:emmet.pierce@uniontrib.com)