



▲ KIM JORDAN HAS TRANSFORMED HER DINING ROOM INTO A BUDDHIST ALTAR ROOM. LEFT, WHERE SHE CHANTS IN FRONT OF HER CUSTOM-BUILT BUTSUDAN. ENshrined WITHIN IS THE GORHONZON, SACRED OBJECT OF WORSHIP. AT FAR LEFT, BUDDHIST PRAYER BEADS.

EXAMINER / KIM KORNENICH

# Sacred

## PLACES IN THE HOME

BY LYNETTE EVANS  
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

ALTARS AND MEDITATION SPACES REFLECT MIDLIFE SPIRITUAL SEARCH

THEY LOVED through the 1960s, defined the word "me" in the '70s, made money while jogging through the '80s, bought stocks and stair-stepped through the '90s. Now, as the millennium approaches, they're looking for their souls.

Call it part of the baby boom's collective midlife crisis, but the individual search for the soul is definitely a trend in the late 1990s. Sacred is in. Saying so is not to denigrate the movement toward spirituality that is becoming more evident in American culture, but to acknowledge the collective impact baby boomers have even when they pursue their most individual and private lives.

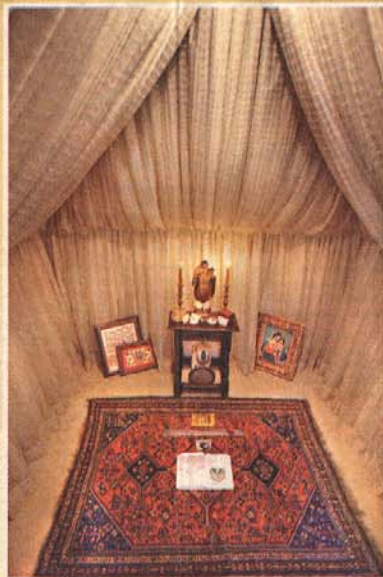
Perhaps we all need an altar — a special place where we can get in touch with our spiritual selves, or with a power beyond ourselves.

### Symbolic environments

More and more, people are looking to create that altar within their own homes, according to San Francisco interior designer Victoria Stone, who specializes in designing sacred and healing spaces — "symbolic environments that resonate

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▶ KATE STRASBURG HAS CREATED A MEDITATION ROOM FROM A CLOSET OFF A BATHROOM IN HER ABERDEEN HOME. DRAPED DIAPHANOUS FABRIC COVERS THE SLANTING WALLS AND PITCHED CEILING. A MEDIEVAL STOOL SERVES AS AN ALTAR FOR HER MEDIEVAL MADONNA. THE ROOM, COMPLETE WITH ORIENTAL RUG, PROVIDES A PERFECTLY QUIET PLACE WHERE SHE MEDITATES MORNING AND EVENING.



EXAMINER / JOHN STOREY



▲ THE CREATORS OF A MODEL "HEALING HOME" IN PALO ALTO, OPEN FOR VIEWING IN MAY, HAVE INCLUDED A SHRINE WITH A STATUE OF THE BUDDHIST BODHISATTVA OF COMPASSION.

EXAMINER / JOHN STOREY

## Sacred places in midlife home

with us on a deep, soul level."

"A sacred space doesn't necessarily mean religious," says Stone, who designed the meditation chapel at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. "It means connecting with our environment on a deeper level; having that awareness of our existence in a context greater than ourselves, greater than our day-to-day existence. Also, I think about 'being' as an inward journey."

"Some people call it soul, some people call it wisdom, some people call it God, but it is that part we cannot see; we need to quiet down and be present with ourselves... be connecting."

Stone believes our physical surroundings can contribute to finding that connectedness. "Certain things contribute to that environment," she says. "It doesn't have to do with style (but) with personal objects and symbols, colors, natural materials that speak to us on a different level; also a place where we can do a ritual, light a candle, (place) a photograph of family... that shows our link to history and community."

Of aging baby boomers she adds: "Maybe it's this mass middle-age crisis, but I believe there is a need on the part of the universe for us to develop our consciousness of who we are on this planet." Even popular magazines, such as *House & Garden* in its January issue, took up the subject, Stone says, "because we are at a place where we are so out of balance in our personal lives, our culture, that we have lost touch with the sacred, have gone to the extreme with the secular. It feels like something's missing."

### Evasive but positive

A physical sanctuary can help in the search for spiritual meaning, Stone says, because "we live in a material world, and the sacred is something that the material world can help us remember. It's a little elusive (but) so powerful because the images and symbols remind us of something significant to us that we can't always put into words."

From the simple crucifix on a bedroom wall to an elaborate altar in a room of its own, sacred places in the home are nothing new. Stone calls sacred spaces "transformational tools" for moving from the secular to the sacred and says

they may be as simple as the traditional Jewish menorah on the door that symbolizes moving from the secular world to the home, which is a sacred place. Home altars and shrines, too, play a role in many cultures and religions.

The Chinese "pay respect to the ancestors who gave us life," says Tony Ng, who used the principles of *feng shui* to place the altar devoted to his ancestors in the living room of his San Francisco home, where it is at the center of family life.

The altar, he says, usually consists of three sections, the top one being the gods' altar, the middle one for the ancestors and the bottom level for the owner of the property. Incense, "the ancestors' food," is burned on the altar morning and at dinner time, "so that while we eat, the ancestors eat." Fruits, flowers and dishes of food — always vegetarian for the gods but sometimes meat dishes for ancestors who may have eaten meat — are also offered. "If the ancestors are comfortable, and if you treat them with respect, they will see that your fortunes are looked on with respect," he says, noting this integral part of Chinese culture has more to do with family than with religion.

"A lot of people have made their fortunes, and they find there's still something missing in their lives," says Ng. "Who better to listen than their god, their ancestors, somebody from the other world? They can't speak back; they can only listen."

Maria del Carmen and Frank Grimmelmann are Catholics who don't go to church often but look on their Redwood Shores home,



EXAMBER/JOHNI STOREY

**Redwood Shores residents Maria del Carmen and Frank Grimmelmann are Catholics who don't go to church often but view their home, left, as their sanctuary, where they have placed objects of spiritual significance throughout**

where they were recently married in a Catholic ceremony, as "our sanctuary, and it's sacred." Grimmelmann has moved her childhood crucifix and a Madonna she bought for her husband in Italy to the dressing room where "we can look up and connect with our spiritual sides," she says. Other objects of spiritual significance to the couple are placed throughout the house, including a Tree of Life wall sculpture over the fireplace and a marble sculpture in the hallway off the master bedroom that symbolizes birth. The sculpture "is not a traditional Catholic symbol," she admits, "but, to us, it's sacred because it is significant to life."

### Chapel inside the house

"My family in Mexico had a chapel inside the house," says Grimmelmann. "We've incorporated and modernized it by breaking away and embracing our artwork. We look at it and ponder over it, and it takes us to that inner space to meditate over our inner selves. Our home is filled with the essence of who we are."

The enclosed entryway outside the front door is Grimmelmann's place "to go to, to sort out my thoughts." The entryway is protected by a Chinese *feng shui* mirror, perfumed by roses and climbing vines and filled with the sounds of

water from the wall fountain — a very catholic retreat, indeed.

Kim Jordan has converted the dining room of her San Francisco home into an altar room where she chants for three hours every morning.

"This room is extremely important to me because I spend so much time in it," says the publisher of *Inside Magazine* who has been "a serious Buddhist" for 22 years. The massive custom-built altar, called a *butсанд*, was made by carpenter Don Peterson to house the sacred scroll, called the *gohonzon*, that Jordan chants to.

"It's a significant part of my life, so my gohonzon has its own room,"

she says. "Otherwise, (there's) only a small *tansu* next to the altar where I keep my candles and incense. This is not just a casual room; this is the central feature of my life."

Buddhists "all over the world have their own gohonzon in their home," Jordan says, noting, "there are Japanese who spend \$100,000 to \$200,000 on their *butсандs*, with electronic doors." The scroll "represents our innate Buddha nature (and) we generate a positive life force from chanting."

Jordan thinks America's fascination with Buddhism, alluded to in *Time* magazine three months ago, is because "the baby boomers are becoming introspective. People have reached an age where they've acquired the material things. They have reached a place of vacancy; they don't feel real happiness. Buddhism is about happiness," she says.

### Private meditation space

For Kate Strasburg, an oddly shaped closet off her bathroom has become a private space for meditation. Here the co-director of Healing Environments in Palo Alto has placed a medicinal stool to serve as a tiny altar for her medieval Madonna. She covered the slanting walls and pitched ceiling with a diaphanous material and put a small oriental rug on the floor where she — with her cats — meditates morning and evening, seeking "a still point as the stresses of the world swirl around me."

Along with Traci Taraoka, Strasburg runs the nonprofit Healing Environments, through which they create models and teach health care workers how to enhance the healing qualities of patients' surroundings. Because visitors to the center expressed interest in adapting the organization's ideas to their own homes, Strasburg and Taraoka have turned an empty five-room cottage at 525 Lincoln, Palo Alto, into a model "healing home." The home includes a model "sacred space" in the master bedroom, with an ancient Indian shrine housing a statue of the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, as well as spiritually evocative items and furnishings throughout.

The cottage, which will be open to the public from May 8 to 17, reflects the philosophy of Robert Serdello, which Strasburg quoted in her upcoming newsletter: "The house is more than a box within which to live; it is a soul activity to be retrieved from the numbness of the world of modern objects."

## Principles to remember in creating your sanctuary

"Most of us find it hard to make time in our lives to become deliberately self-reflective," says Clare Cooper Marcus. "We've heard about the value of relaxation or meditation, but haven't yet fit it into our lives."

In the final chapter of her 1995 book, "House as a Mirror of Self" (Conari Press), the Berkeley author suggests: "One way we can assist ourselves is by creating a special place in our home that is designated for quiet meditation or contemplation. You can think of it as your sanctuary, your personal sacred space. Set up a small table and arrange on it a special selection of objects that seemed to 'speak' to you when you picked them up — a shell, a rock, a pine cone, some pebbles, a piece of driftwood.

"Perhaps you'll want to add a small vase of flowers, a candle, and some incense. You could think of this as your personal altar, or if this word jars you, use a different term — sacred table, meditation corner. Whatever its name, this is a place just for you. And whether you spend five minutes there each day

or an hour, it is a place for you just to sit and to be; no agenda other than being quietly by yourself, breathing deeply, being conscious of images and feelings that arise, and then letting them go."

San Francisco interior designer Victoria Stone, who specializes in designing healing and sacred spaces, offers five principles to use in setting up one's own sanctuary:

► Honor nature and its cycles by filling a niche or wall vase with seasonal flowers.

► Incorporate personal objects that have meaning for you — family pictures, found objects, a love letter, a favorite trinket.

► Create a place for retreat and renewal. "Bathrooms are the sanctuaries of the future," she told a group of interior designers recently, and, indeed, in a household filled with family, your bathroom may be the only private place.

Regardless of where it is, Stone says that retreat should incorporate beauty ("a major part of traditional shrines") and stimulate all the senses, including the sense of smell, which "takes us places";

sound, because "energy movement is stagnant in a room without sound," and adjustable lighting, because "light is so symbolic of spirit." The sounds of water are universally pleasing, she notes.

► Use color to create mood and stimulate or relax emotions: Black and white connote matter and spirit; red is aggressive (use sparingly in a place of retreat); orange is friendly; yellow is cheery; green is healing; blue is relaxing; indigo "connects us to a higher realm" and violet helps reduce stress.

► Create a balanced and harmonious retreat using the principles of the Chinese philosophy of *feng shui*. She suggests using symbolic shapes — the spiral, which symbolizes change, rebirth and evolution and is "the universal image of life"; the circle, which is "sacred in every culture and a symbol for wholeness, harmony, mother"; the triangle, which is "about goals, upward movement"; the square, which does not exist in nature but "is man imposing himself on nature"; and the cross, which is

"about relationships, the intersection between two things or people."

"Design is an incredible tool for transformation," says Stone.

This view is echoed by Kate Strasburg, who writes in the upcoming newsletter for Healing Environments in Palo Alto that "Design can serve as a code for a deeper or larger reality."

Among the items one might incorporate into an altar, she suggests something of great age — preferably a family heirloom that will have personal meaning — that will "place our concerns in a proper context"; handcrafted items "reminiscent of an earlier age when time was not at a premium, when the rhythms of life were tied to the earth"; items of symbolic importance and personal possessions with meaning; flowers for their "transcendent beauty" and other natural objects that speak of nature and life's cycles. Music is also important, and Strasburg makes special note of Lauren Pomerantz's CD "Tree of Life," with its Kabbalah-inspired "Angels Within."

— Lynette Evans

## Model home 'speaks to soul'

Most model homes show off their floor plans and bathroom fixtures, but one in Palo Alto in May will be "a model of how design can speak to the soul as well as to the eye," according to designer Kate Strasburg, co-director of Healing Environments in that city.

The Healing Home, a five-room cottage, will be open to the public at 525 Lincoln, Palo Alto, from May 9 to 17. Hours are from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily and Thursday evening until 9. Tickets are available at the door, and the suggested \$10 donation will go to support the work of Healing Environments, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the creation of healing environments for people with life-threatening illness.

— Lynette Evans



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A model "healing home" in Palo Alto prominently features a Jungian sand tray.