



Design for Life: Home to Me

By Carol Venolia

Last month, I drove home through pouring rain. I'd been away for several days, and I relished the thought of a quiet evening spent curled up on the couch with a good book and a mug of herbal tea. When I got home and headed for my office to plug in my laptop, I noticed that the papers on the desk looked damp. The carpet squished under my feet. I looked up to see the ceiling sagging and water steadily dripping from its lowest point.

Six weeks later, my quiet evening hasn't happened yet.

While I was gone, a tree branch had dropped onto my roof, opening a hole through which the much-needed rain took an unwelcome path. The ceiling, walls and floor of my office and foyer were soaked. It's been a process of upheaval, helplessness, adapting and ultimately coming to a bright new day. Along the way, I've learned a lot about what home means to me.

Surfing the chaos

My insurance company called in roofers and a dry-out team, who told me we'd have to move everything out of my office. What? I rely on my computer, printer, phone, books, files—and the piles of paper all over my desktop. I shoved it all into boxes and crammed it into the living room. I was adjusting.

As the guys tore out flooring and installed dehumidifiers, I set up a field office in my dining room. To my surprise, I relished the process. What is the bare minimum I need? A flat surface, a phone, my laptop hooked up to DSL, paper and pen. As I created a spare, simple work station, a feeling of focus and sanity returned. When I sat down at the desk, I enjoyed work more than usual. Between bouts of dealing with restoration workers and insurance adjusters, I felt a heady sense of creativity and accomplishment.

Before the branch fell, I'd gotten into a cluttered rut. In my clean, simple field station, I was happy and productive.

But soon a lab test showed that my acoustic ceiling contained asbestos. Because the foyer ceiling connects with the living room, dining room and hallway, we had to move everything out. The heart of my home would be wrapped in plastic with zippered doors, like a scene from E.T. Yes, even my field office had to be dismantled.

As I packed to move into a hotel, I felt my familiar points of reference slipping away. I told a friend how hard it was for me to hand my house key to strangers. "Maybe this is a good time to look at attachment," she said.

Life in exile (at the Flamingo)

If I wanted to stay sane, I did have to do some detaching. I love having a place to call home—where I decide who enters, how it looks and feels, what I do there. But when I can't have that...can I still feel at home? I realized the time-honored truth that home is within.

So I moved my home to the Flam-ingo Resort. Its 1950s Hollywood-style buildings encircle a large courtyard with a swimming pool, lawns and trees—and the price was right for my insurance company. My room had a comforter, a flat-screen TV and floor-to-ceiling windows looking onto oak-covered hills. It was hard to feel sorry for myself. I set up my new field office at the desk and made it mine.

Once again, I became miraculously productive, tackling not only my regular work but also the new job of watch-dogging the insurance, dry-out and abatement people while coordinating the future work of restoring my home's finishes. I could work, then stroll the hotel grounds, watch TV or eat in the restaurant. I had no clutter, no dishes to do, no deferred maintenance beckoning. Room service was fun: Call and order like Pippi Longstocking, then wait for a young man to bring my meal on a tray.

I lived in an alternate reality, at ease and yet not. I was very comfortable—but eager to go home.

More places to call home

Before returning to my gutted house, I requested a mold test. More bad news—and no more insurance-covered hotel stay. So I parked my tiny travel trailer in front of my house.

In my neighborhood, living rooms face backyards, and front porches are rare. In my trailer, I was out in the open. Each morning I'd step out onto the sidewalk. I chatted with the mailman and greeted neighbors on their walks. It was like a new neighborhood.

I experienced my town differently, too. My "office" extended into the whole community. I went to cafes for Wi-Fi, copy places for printing and restaurants for meetings. The wall between my life and my town had come down.

When the traffic and streetlights took their toll on my sleep, I moved my trailer up the road to Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, where at night I could gaze at a vast blanket of stars while soaking in the chorus of frogs and crickets. I was at home there, too.

Living large

It's been a transformative journey. The feeling of simplicity that accompanied my dining-room field office has morphed into the ultimate simplicity of having no office at all. My space has shrunk from a house to a suitcase. My home is wherever I am.

Living without my home has given me new perspective. The smaller my living space has become, the more my world has expanded. I look forward to returning home soon, but a house now seems like a minor thing in a universe of stars.

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