

## *Independent scholar*

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### *The writer's huts*

#### Abstract:

Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own" explored and advocated the importance of economic and intellectual independence for women to foster their creativity and allow them to achieve their full potential as writers and artists. Assuming a contemporary Anglophone writer has some level of financial independence or support, this paper explores the reasons why having a room of one's own – namely a rough, rustic, and remote hut – in which to write has an enduring allure as an inspirational place for writing.

#### Biographical note:

Malcolm Holz is a veteran urban and regional planner, seasoned building and urban designer, independent scholar, conceptual, minimalist sketch artist, and practising musician. Malcolm's personal, professional, and philosophical passions are planning, designing, building, and dwelling in small places which inspire creativity and reflectivity.

#### Keywords:

Dwelling, place, creative writing, writer's place, home, hermits, mountain hut

## A poetic dwelling place

I have spent over forty years studying, researching, reading, writing, drawing, teaching, coaching, planning, designing, building, and developing *small* places. In addition to the experiences of 17 years growing up in several huts on the small family farm at Kings Creek, Clifton, my passion for the small was inspired and embedded in my psyche (purpose, being) by some simple introductory words discovered in the works of Christopher Alexander during my years as an undergraduate.

From the day I read (in one sitting, so compelling the writing) Christopher Alexander's (1979) *Timeless Way of Building*, I confess, I was hooked. This book's companion, *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al., 1977) – 253 precise hypotheses (patterns) for planning and designing places at all scales, from districts through dwellings to doorknobs – cemented an ongoing obsession with building small, notably the potential for making profound, poetic, dwelling places:

In an ordinary English sentence, each word has one meaning, and the sentence too, has one simple meaning. In a poem, the meaning is far more dense. Each word carries several meanings; and the sentence as a whole carries an enormous density of interlocking meanings, which together illuminates the whole.

The same is true of pattern languages. It is possible...to put patterns together in such a way that many many patterns overlap in the same physical space: the building is very dense; it has many meanings captured in a small space; and through this density, it becomes profound.

It is quite possible that all the patterns for a house might, in some form be present, and overlapping, in a simple one-room cabin.

You may think of this process of compressing patterns, as a way to make the cheapest possible building which has the necessary patterns in it. It is, also, the only way of using a pattern language to make buildings which are poems. (Alexander et al., 1977, pp. xli-xliv)

Yi-Fu Tuan clarifies in differentiating space from place, towards an idea that, further to Alexander et al., (1977), the one room cabin – aka the hut – may be one of the most poetic places of all, the place a poet, novelist, playwright, script writer, or songwriter may choose over any other place to write:

Place has a history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning. (Tuan, 1979, p. 387)

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994) considered how we might attribute meaning to the hut via the “hut dream ... which is well-known to everyone who cherishes the legendary images of primitive houses. But in most hut dreams we hope to live elsewhere, far from the over-crowded house, far from city cares ...” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 31).

Henry David Thoreau may qualify as one of the most renowned hut dreamers, spending two years of life in the woods, a mile from any neighbour, in a very small (fourteen-square-metre) house which he had built himself, on the shore of Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. (Chapnick, 1977).

George Bernard Shaw’s writing refuge was a six-square-metre wooden summerhouse, a hut built at his home in Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire, on a revolving base so that it could be moved to improve the light or change the view. (Walker, 1987, p. 137).

Roald Dahl’s four-square-metre shed was organised as a place for writing with everything in reach of the chair he didn’t want to move from, and Dylan Thomas wrote in a thirteen-square-metre bike shed study perched on stilts on the cliff above a boathouse in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, where he spent the last four years of his life.

In the same way different writers are likely to have different reasons for choosing a hut in which to write, in *Hut in the Wild*, Dianne Johnson (2011) points out that a hut is likely to mean something different to someone from Switzerland or France than it does to an Australian. However, Johnson (2011) suggests, like Bachelard, that there may be something more universal, even archetypal, about the hut, as:

- a rest from being on the road, refuge from the weather, time-out from the hurly-burley, a return to the womb of our fantasies, to the nest of our well-being,
- a symbol of temporality, a place where the meaning of hardship, self-restraint and frugality may be made,
- a place of simplicity and intricacy because the hut offers the potential for accessing the muse – the creative self, and
- a place for treasures, adventures, and memory, like the cubby, a place of transitory respite somewhere along that long journey through the wilderness that was our childhood.

(Johnson, 2011, pp. 11-90)

These examples suggest there may indeed be something about the immediacy, intensity, and/or intimacy of the (creative writing) experience when retreating to such small, simple, rustic, and – even symbolically – remote one-room structures/shelters, detached, separate rooms of the writer’s own, even if a temporary dweller.

For some, the short stay writer's retreat has become a commercial as well as creative proposition. For example, the builders of the Bothy Project (2024) provide creative residencies in bespoke small-scale, off-grid spaces to explore creativity, landscape, and living simply. The design of the bothies – available for practitioners in visual arts, craft and design, music, literature, and performance, as well as thinkers and researchers – was inspired by traditional mountain shelters.

Significant in an exploration of writers' experiences of writing in a hut, Adam Sharr (2006) points to the *placing* of philosophy in Heidegger's own retreat above Todtnauberg in the Bavarian Alps. According to Sharr, "die Hutte", as Heidegger called it, was more than a physical location – to escape the stuffy, stifling atmosphere of his academic environment in Marburg (and possibly Freiburg) – it was, for over 50 years, a relatively rustic place of poignant emotional and intellectual sustenance "in the changing climate of the locality, the building's sense of interiority, the distant view of the Alps, and the spring alongside." (Sharr, 2006, p. 3).

This (romantic, poetic) image of the hut may be the intrinsic driver of the contemporary obsession with tiny houses (a movement, no doubt, as most are built on wheels, and are technically speaking, caravans) (Queensland Government, 2016). In many cases, as seen on Oprah (2007), the things on wheels which sparked the recent revival in the tiny, look, feel, and probably smell like a real house. Indeed, many present as a miniature, rustic, cabin in the woods, or cute, miniscule, fairy tale cottage. The ongoing rush on the tiny house (like the push to the greenfield suburbs?) might be due to pragmatic factors such as housing affordability – the smallest possible being the house of last resort – but I suspect there are deeper forces at play; the hut dream.

### **The hermit's hut**

Pivotal in these "hutopian" (Finlay, 2024) considerations, is Gordon Campbell's (2013) study of hermitages, albeit as aesthetic indulgences in the garden. Nonetheless, Campbell (2013) positions most hermits in oft self-built huts of various forms, arrangements, types, and styles.

Possibly the most extreme of hermits is that poetically recorded by Alfred Tennyson, "St. Simeon Stylites" (see Thorn, 1992), who initially shut himself up in a hut for one and a half years, then on the slopes of a mountain for several years, and finally, for over 30 years, dwelt on a one-square-metre platform on top of a pillar 15 metres above the ground.

The irony is that St Simeon was sating solitude, however his excessive austerities were so intriguing that t/his lifestyle only served to attract others (see France, 1998, p. 23). In both contrast and similarity, Peter France (1998) references the efforts of Thomas Merton, the most publicly visible Christian contemplative since Simon Stylites:

Merton was the hermit celebrity of his time; he sought solitude but had no commitment to obscurity. The story of his search throws light on every aspect of the hermit's life – emotional, practical, psychological, and spiritual... (France, 1998, p. 163)

Anne Cline (1998) explores these relationships between the hermit's existential purpose of the hut and the architectural expression of the hut to suit this purpose. Poignantly (given my own age), Cline (1998) cites a reflection of Kamo no Chomei's (c. 1200) hut purpose:

Now that I have reached the age of sixty, and my life seems to evaporate like dew, I have fashioned a lodging for the last leaves of my years. It is a hut, where perhaps, a traveler might spend a single night; it is like the cocoon spun by an aged silkworm...it is a bare ten feet square and less than seven feet high...I have added a lean-to on the south and a porch of bamboo. On the west I have built a shelf for holy water, and inside the hut, along the west wall, I have installed an image of Amida (Buddha)...When as chance has had it, news has come to me from the capital, I have learned how many of the great and mighty have died since I withdrew to this mountain...Only in a hut built for the moment can one live without fears. (Cline, 1998, p. 16)

In *Solitude: a return to the self*, Anthony Storr (2005) explores solitude and its role in the lives of creative, fulfilled individuals. Storr considers: the uses of solitude (notably the potential for solitude to assist in overcoming bereavement and depression); the positive impacts of enforced solitude; how the hunger of imagination is often best fed in solitude, and notably how solitude can lead one to a coherent and wholistic understanding of one's self:

... the capacity to be alone is a valuable resource. It enables ... (one/us) ... to get in touch with their deepest feelings; to come to terms with loss; to sort out their ideas; to change attitudes. In some instances, even the enforced isolation of prison may encourage the growth of the creative imagination. (Storr, 2005, p. 62)

In *Hermits: the insights of solitude*, Peter France (1998) says:

The human impulse to take off and live alone is an ancient one and societies down the ages have varied in their responses to it. From the earliest times there have been people who felt at their best in company and others who felt happiest on their own. (France, 1998, p. vii)

Echoing Storr (2005) who acknowledges that the majority of poets, novelists, composers, and, to a lesser extent, of painters and sculptors, are bound to spend a great deal of time alone (Storr, 2005), France (1998) references individuals from ancient Greek philosophers including Socrates through to relatively contemporary philosophers – Thomas Merton – who also chose to spend a great deal of time alone, as hermits, typically in very remote locations in rough and crude buildings far from social contact of any kind. France (1998) suggests that most hermits were/are in pursuit of self-sufficiency, spiritually, philosophically, and at times physically.

In the (extraordinary) story of the last true hermit, Michael Finkel (2017) suggests a taxonomy into which France's hermits might be categorised – protestors, pilgrims, and pursuers – all of whom are in some form of retreat – to escape, to reflect, to create:

... you can take virtually all the hermits in history and divide them into three general groups to describe why they hid... protestors are hermits whose primary reason for leaving is hatred at what the world has become ... (for) pilgrims – religious hermits ... the connection between seclusion and spiritual awakening is profound ... (and) pursuers seek alone time for artistic freedom, scientific insight, or deeper self-understanding. (Finkel, 2017, pp. 79-84)

In a primarily Anglophonic context, where time has become so commoditised, where does the writer find time to write? The writers retreat an obvious resolution. But, like Shaw, the beauty of the hut is that its diminutive size and basic construction renders it possibly the most affordable of all places in which one could write, even if in some sporadic discomfort. For example, She Sheds in Australia offer a DIY kit for a shed – including a creative space – about the same size as Shaw’s writing hut (Walker, 1987, p. 137) for \$7,000AUD (She Sheds, 2024).

### **The mountain hut**

There is a growing body of literature supporting the belief that being in green and blue spaces – parks, woods, forests, mountains, creek or riverbanks, seashores, and the like – is beneficial for people’s physical and mental well-being (World Health Organisation, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2021). Reported health benefits include, reduced obesity, lower blood pressure and extended life span (Wolf & Robbins, 2015).

The benefits of access to and being in nature are arguably heightened in mountainous locations. It follows that writers would search out such places to write from physical/sensual through aesthetic/spiritual perspectives, and whether dwelling in the very short or long-terms, living the hut dream in a writer’s hut of one’s own, even if dwelling only for a night or two.

### **Conclusion**

The rough, rustic, and remote hut has long been an attractive place for Anglophone writers; I suggest, for the following reasons:

#### ***Isolation***

The isolation and associated quietness of even a symbolically remote hut situated in the backyard of a suburban plot, is where writer’s such as Shaw and Dahl found focus, an ability to concentrate on writing without distractions. Even the idea of escaping from the busy/mundane aspects of daily life to a hut carries an allure of adventure and a break from routine, a change of scenery which can inspire the creative writer.

#### ***Introspection***

Writers such as Merton sated the solitude of a crude and isolated hut to engage in deep self-reflection and introspection – an unbridled exploration of deep inner thoughts and emotions – providing the source for our work.

#### ***Immediacy***

Like the sense of solitude and serenity – i.e., the absence of noises and disturbances (per Woolf, 1929) – the hut is often designed/expressed as an epitome of simple, minimalistic living. A decluttered space can lead to a decluttered sense of being, allowing, if not enforcing, the writer to focus and write.

### ***Intimacy***

Like immediacy, where everything inside the hut is in proximity, the typically diminutive size of the hut can also evoke a sense of intimacy, notably in the warm, womb-like embrace of a fire-lit alpine hut. The contrast in finding comfort in a shelter from the storm of other commitments, can engender the sense that nothing but the writer exists in the hut, and we are free to write with intense focus and in immense flow.

### ***Imagination***

The hermit's hut is a classical poetic image, the solitary writer seeking refuge in an isolated setting, the stuff of myths and legends. This tradition, this possible archetype, seems to endure in the imagination of writers who are time poor, but who can afford to indulge in such romanticised fantasies particularly whilst in temporal writer's retreats.

### ***Immersion***

Another theme is the writer's desire to be immersed in nature, including a beauty – an atmosphere, terroir, or spirit – which can be inspiring and invigorating; as it was for Heidegger, scenic landscapes and changing weather patterns can help conjure creativity.

### ***Timelessness***

Being free of the constraints of time – limits, deadlines, meetings, appointments – is a key for me. The remote hut is notably often disconnected from a world where time has been commoditised to the second. Apart from the classical poetic image, the remote hut in the wild can engender a feeling of genuine timelessness, enabling a time-less writing experience.

Not every writer will find the writer's hut – as considered in this paper – to be conducive to their creative process; different writers thrive in different settings, even in the heart of a city. (Crikey, 2012). Ultimately, the enduring allure of the writer's hut lies in its real, or more so imagined, ability to provide a poetic place in which to write, poetically, creatively.

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