

A ROOM OF HER OWN

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

Susie Harris-Leblond in her creative space she calls The Drying Room.

Whether you love, hate, or have never even heard of the 'she shed' trend that has launched a thousand Pinterest boards, there can be no doubt that women thrive when they claim space for themselves, their passions and ... whatever they darn well like. These five inspiring women did just that.

The gardener

SUSIE HARRIS-LEBLOND is a horticulturalist and flower farmer who sells fresh and dried flowers and flower arrangements.

Plants have always been my thing. I trained in horticulture and garden design at the Royal Horticultural Society of London. That's where my husband and I fell in love. We'd known each other as teenagers, but the chemistry only happened after we became flatmates in London. After living there for several years, where I worked as a gardener on two estates in Kent, we had kids and decided to move back to South Africa, to his family's farm in Cape Town.

After that, I put gardening on the back burner, picked up a camera and became a portrait photographer for about seven years. I loved it, but eventually I felt a calling to return to plants. That was about three years ago, and I've been growing flowers ever since.

After



ABOVE: Susie in front of The Drying Room on the family's farm in Constantia, Cape Town. LEFT: Susie makes dried-flower wreaths, among others; follow her on Instagram to see more: the_drying_room

of things and store them here without my husband moaning about the fact that there are dead flowers all over the house!

This room has restored me in ways I hadn't

anticipated. Once I started to decorate it, to play in it, I began to access a state of flow that can go on for hours; I totally lose track of time. Ideas surface; inspiration comes more easily; I begin to get excited... It's like I've got my creativity goggles back on – and then everything looks different. Nothing is mundane; it's all magical. It's an amazing feeling.

It has allowed me to reclaim my creativity, to prioritise art and beauty over pure function, which is essential for my mental health. If I ignore those things, I'm in deep trouble.

I had no plans to use this room until the day a massive storm flattened my flower crops. I was devastated! Many of the flowers were still intact, even though the stems were broken, so I began to collect them and place them in a spare shed, which was just a neglected space at the time. When I realised I could dry the flowers, I started to look around the farm, wondering what else I could forage for drying. As it turns out, there was a lot! And The Drying Room was born.

Today, this space is my shrine to nature. I get to collect all kinds

I'm so much nicer to my family, and I don't take things personally because I'm just so much more relaxed.

I think it's extremely important for women to have a space to themselves. We are very quick to lose ourselves in the various roles we play, and put ourselves on the back burner. It's taken me a while to give myself permission to take up space, and then to make it beautiful, and to be able to step into that space without feeling guilty. It's a space that I feel is 100% mine. I don't have to answer to anyone here; I can make a mess; I can experiment. I don't have to explain anything or ask anyone's permission.

I like not being observed or interrupted. Sometimes I just sit and think, or not-think, or tinker... Or I sweep the floor and listen to a podcast. It's a meditative space: I often play soothing music and burn incense. It's a real luxury to be able to step out of mom life, and farm life, and all the things that women generally juggle.

My advice for women who want to take more space for themselves? I feel it's quite important that you don't ask permission or apologise.

The entrepreneur

LESLEY WATERKEYN is an entrepreneur, founder and CEO of multiple organisations, including Over the Rainbow, a mentorship and training programme for entrepreneurs (read more about that on page 82!).

'It's been incredible how the energy and creativity of my business have begun to thrive, just because I prioritised a space for myself.'

In the centre of my house, right outside my bedroom, is where my home office used to be. And as a busy entrepreneur, I was always waking up with ideas, always on the phone, talking, WhatsApping... especially in the morning. I'd go straight from bed to my office and start the day's meetings.

It was a lifesaver in the beginning of lockdown, but a year down the line it was really impacting my family – my husband in particular. There was nowhere in the house for anyone to get away from my work.

When my husband – who looks after the kids and home – and I had a chat, I realised I'd have to find somewhere else to work. I could have gone back to the office, but it was a bit of a ghost town, as lots of people were still working



Lesley Waterkeyn's late father left her this desk and she had it restored. 'It just feels so special in this space,' she says.

Before





Lesley also uses her new workspace to catch her breath when she needs it.

After

from home – it wasn't an energising environment any more. Plus I loved the convenience of working from home... You can skip the traffic and really maximise your day.

One day I was walking around the garden – on the phone, of course – and found myself standing in front of our old garden shed. Our gardener used it to store equipment, but we had space in the garage for all that... And I just had this eureka moment: this was my new office!

I felt so charged by the idea, I immediately sprang into action. I contacted my decorator friend Leigh Wishart of Leigh Wishart Interiors, dove headfirst into Pinterest, and got such a kick out of exploring how to execute this. And it literally took about six days.

I had to put in some electricity, and it needed a floor and some glass doors, but the structure was solid. We gave it a lick of paint, and Leigh found a lovely, bright, cheerful wallpaper, which just makes me so

happy. Best of all is that I now had somewhere to put the desk my dad left me when he passed away a few years ago. I had it restored, and now it's the hero of the room.

Of course I had to add a little gin bar in the corner, and my espresso machine... It honestly feels like my own private queendom, just a few metres from my house.

It's been incredible how the energy and creativity of my business have begun to thrive, just because I prioritised a space for myself. There's a mindset shift that happens when I put my laptop under my arm and walk across the garden to a new space, a space I don't have to share with anyone.

Thanks to my she shed, I no longer irritate my family (in fact, I think my husband is a bit jealous). I'm a much better person for it. And I don't just work here – it's where I escape to meditate, to journal, to catch my breath... with a G&T in my hand. Cheers!

The artist

AMY-JANE VAN DEN BERGH is an illustrator, printmaker and cofounder of The Printing Girls, an all-female collective of South African artists who work in print.

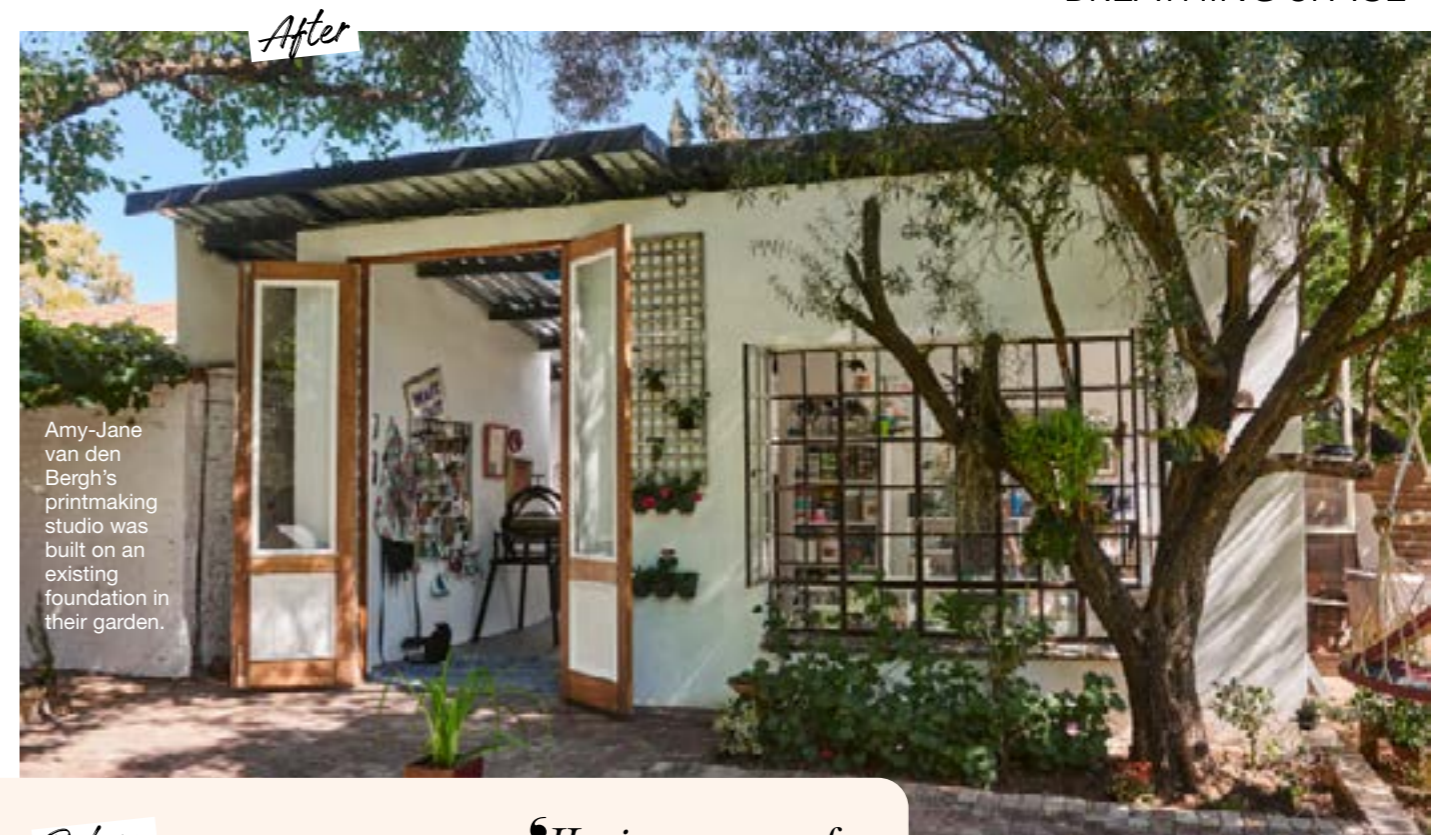
MY studio has always

been a room inside a house, and when my husband and I moved into our Pretoria North home in 2019, my studio was slap-bang in the middle of it.

I have a lot of heavy equipment (for printmaking), and I sometimes use toxic chemicals, which was okay initially because I could just close the doors, open the windows and let the room breathe. But when I got pregnant we realised that having a room full of chemicals and potentially dangerous equipment was not going to be a good idea with a baby in the picture.

We were also in the process of making the house more open-plan, so there was no longer going to be room for my clunky, smelly art-making equipment. I considered renting a studio but then, since we were renovating anyway, we decided to build one on a small foundation that was already on the property.

I got these beautiful old barn doors for a steal from a neighbour who was emigrating. My husband lovingly restored them, and now they form the entrance to the studio. Because they're so tall (about 3 m), the roof slopes down from the front, which gives the space a unique character.



Amy-Jane van den Bergh's printmaking studio was built on an existing foundation in their garden.

After

Before



“Having a room of my own outside of the home really helped me to snap out of post-partum depression and anxiety... Being able to leave the house and escape into my studio for a few hours a day and just immerse myself in my art lifted me out of a dark place.”

If I didn't have it, I think there would've been very little left of who I had been – I'd be consumed by chores and errands and general mom stuff. But just knowing it's there if I need it gives me a huge sense of comfort and support.

Having a room of my own outside of the home really helped me to snap out of post-partum depression and anxiety. During the last few weeks of my pregnancy I was confined to bed, which was awful and stressful, with all the building going on. And any mother will tell you, those first six weeks are so overwhelming, it's insane. Being able to leave the house and escape into my studio for a few hours a day and just immerse myself in my art lifted me out of a dark place. I started to feel like myself again.

Now, every day from 8 am to 10 am, and 5 pm to 7 pm, my husband watches our son – we call it 'Dad o'clock' – and I run to my studio, put on my earphones and lose myself in creativity.

This space has saved my sanity.

Amy-Jane has all her artist's tools at hand in her studio.



‘Bella has brought me back to basics and reminds me how life was growing up in the ’70s and ’80s.’



Zeldia Gassner with her daughter shortly after buying Bella.



adventure together: we sold flowers, plants and related goodies at a local market. That first outing was scary, but since then I’ve learnt how to prepare better, and what sells best at which markets.

I’ve received hundreds of offers to buy Bella, but I’ve turned them all down. Above all else, she has given me freedom, literally and figuratively. Through her I get to express my love not only of flowers but also of preloved clothes, to meet interesting people and to have new experiences. Bella has been a gin bar, a matric dance ‘limo’, a delivery truck and a fundraiser.

In 2020, our adventure pretty much came to a halt with Covid, but we look forward to new beginnings as things get back to normal.

She has brought me back to basics and reminds me how life was growing up in the ’70s and ’80s. Things were simpler then and we got by with a lot less. We all need to be reminded of that.

bellasignora.co.za

The vintage truck driver

ZELDA GASSNER left a corporate career, restored a vintage Volkswagen Transporter that she dubbed Bella (her ‘she shed on wheels’), and now runs her own business – with Bella at its heart.

I’ve loved flowers since I was a child. To me, they symbolise love, beauty and happiness. As a girl I spent hours in my mom’s rose garden and often won prizes for my arrangements. I’m inspired by people who do what they love for a living. A few years ago I came across a business in Nashville

in the US that sells flowers from vintage VW Transporters. Classic cars are also a passion of mine, and the idea of selling flowers from the back of a vintage truck was just irresistible. It inspired me to take the plunge. Until then, I’d worked in HR. It had allowed me to have a good life, but it was stressful, it wasn’t my passion, and I felt such a strong call to find a more fulfilling way to live.

Within a few months I found a partially restored 1971 VW Transporter in Cape Town. She arrived a few weeks later and I began the process of converting her. When she was done, I was beside myself with excitement! I decided to call her Bella, Italian for ‘beautiful’.

In 2018, after I left the corporate world, Bella and I started our

The community businesswoman

RENSHIA MANUEL is the founder and owner of GrowBox, a business that sells ready-made box gardens.



Apart from being a seedling-shelter-cum-office, Renshia Manuel’s shed is also a space to catch her breath before and after her work day.

After

discussions in private, and it’s a great spot to prepare for the months ahead. They say women are good at multi-tasking, but a busy mind needs quiet to reflect sometimes. You need the space to plan ahead and decide on your next step. I am a mother of four children living in a one-bedroom home so, as you can imagine, this seedling-shelter-cum-office is an invaluable space to reflect and enjoy some quiet time before I have to dive into work or home life.

Being able to sit and enjoy some solitude is refreshing and inspiring at the same time. It gives me time to think, meditate and, most importantly, plan. With life being so crazy lately, I hardly get time to plan – most days I’m just reacting. Having my own space has given me time to prepare for an unpredictable future. ❖

Before



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