Adventures in Man Land

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Dang, it's tough to be a man. Since the Baby Boomers spent their formative years between bong hits debating if cutting your hair made you a sellout, or if disposable diapers were the end of environmentalism, or if you could wear stilettos and still be a feminist — there have just been so many more questions than answers. Is it better to go with paper or plastic?

And now we have to confront the "man space" thing.

Maybe you haven't even heard of "man spaces" yet. Oh, but you will. Those Boomer confusions are kids' stuff compared to figuring out what it is to be a man — now that is true angst.
We can't decide if a real man is a bloody-knuckled bruise from "Fight Club" or a metrosexual smoothie from Manhattan. Russell Crowe punching a reporter or Alan Alda charming one. Mister Rogers or Mr. T.

Sound Off Santa Cruz!

Do you have a "man space" you want to brag about? Share pictures of your "man space" and add your comments here.

Thus, with ambivalence debilitating anxious males everywhere, some joker had to come up with the idea of man spaces. What they are, apparently, are territories staked out by testosterone. Or perhaps more accurately, by some junior ad exec who is worried that too many tweeners already have cell phones, and that a new sales demographic needed to be created immediately. That part's simple: If there's a need for a man space, it must be filled with manly things.

Man spaces are where the men in a household stake their manly claims. My own man space anxiety was prompted by an inquiry from an editor at Home and Garden Television, who'd been told by another magazine editor about my penchant for smoking cigars in my old Airstream. Seems that HGTV was looking for spaces that manly men had carved out in or near their homes, filled with manly things that oozed manliness.

Or something like that.

In the words posted on the HGTV site: "We're looking for the man of the house who has claimed a space of his own — it can be a basement, an attic, a special room or garage — as long as it's been transformed into a Temple of Maleness, a Mecca of Macho, in short, a 'Man Land.'"

Indeed, I'd made a habit of happily repairing to my 1966 Airstream when whim arose, filling that old silver sphere with clouds of stogie smoke, reading and dawdling [and possibly drooling] my time away. But I discovered that the HGTV editor wasn't really interested in my Man Land's orange/yellow/brown plaid upholstery, or the old 8-track...
speakers attached to the cabinets, or the chiffon-like curtain separating the tiny kitchen from the tinier bathroom.

No, it seems that Man Spaces require large flat-panel TVs, complex audio systems and broad burnishings of chrome, with perhaps a dash or two of neon.

I looked into facing that challenge head on, but the sliced-artery price of flat-panels made me pause. I thought perhaps I could put an ersatz flat-panel in, kind of like the thing you see in Sears, when you open a display refrigerator and see a plastic steak and paper pears. Perhaps I could cover the walls with aluminum foil, or have the couch sections sent out for a tuck-and-roll job in Tijuana, like in the old days.

Tougher yet is that the Airstream is actually owned by Alice, my sweetheart. I'm not sure, but a man space probably can't be governed by the woman, can it? "Honey, go out to your man space now; I want to talk on the phone"

I thought perhaps I could put a bunch of tools in the Airstream, but I'm not all that good with tools anyway; or is a paper towel a tool? I suppose with Alice owning it, my man space is really just my man space when the man, me, is in there. I think.

My lack of manliness became more obvious when I got a Radio Shack catalog that has a burly dude on the cover, with "Build the Ultimate Man Room" as one of the subheads. Apparently the ultimate Man Room has LOTS of Radio Shack electronics in it, with dark cabinets and manly plants. Again, too pricey for me. Instead of carving out a man space, I'd sort of just let one happen. Maybe I could bring our TiVo box out from the house — would that make me at least half a man?

But wait! I did just get a tattoo — isn't that manly? OK, it is of Mark Twain, but I just don't find the requisite snake emerging from the hollow eye socket of a skull all that appealing.

I guess I could go old-skool, and put up calendars with bosomy women up in the Airstream, but so many of today's bosomy women seem to have obtained their womanly appendages in a medical office, not from God's hand. Most of those pornettes have replaced the beauty of the breast with something that looks like it should be pitched on a softball diamond.

I wondered just how far the man-land madness had permeated our society, so I checked Amazon and, yep, you can order "Man Space: A Primal Guide to Marking Your Territory," a 2006 book by Sam Martin. I don't know about you, but "marking your territory" sounds a bit too glandular to me. It did make me wonder, offhand, if one should be in one's underwear when in one's man space.

So, I can't pay for all these man-spacey appointments; I suppose I can't bring those 10-pound barbells in either, since Alice can swing those pups with as much ease as me. I can still do manly things like drink beer in the Airstream, and maybe curse and spit while I'm doing it. Sadly, I
remember that the last drink I had out there was this blood-orange juice and gin concoction, which came out kind of pink.

Manly? Not.

I don't know if I'll ever get this man-space thing down. But now that I think of it, couldn't I just make my car, that bastion of hit-the-road independence, my man space? And dig this, it's a '68 Mustang, too — that's got to rank at least "tolerable" on the man scale, shouldn't it? But then I remembered that it's that sort-of-lime-green color, not studly black or hot red; and the sound system won't even crack the windows, much less blow them away.

For me, man spaces are probably just not to be.

But when the next trend comes around, like solar-powered cars, or eBay carbon-debt trading, or pedal-powered TVs that store energy, I'm in, big-time.

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