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# How to zone your home and create some calm

A cosy snug with natural furnishings and ambient light can help improve our physical and mental health, says Anna Tyzack

**I**t's a scientifically proven fact: humans thrive in small, cosy spaces. This is not to say we aren't drawn to awe-inspiring, open-plan rooms, explains Lily Bernheimer, an environmental psychology consultant, but that we also like to indulge our inner hermit in a comforting sanctuary. "We need quiet corners to retreat to and replenish energy," she says, in her book, *The Shaping of Us*.

Cosy nooks and snugs, opening on to a bright expanse, featured in homes by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who was fascinated by the way cavemen lived within nature. And they are now a must-have addition to the modern home.

"Post-pandemic, people are more interested in small, intimate spaces to relax, read and recharge, away from the hustle of everyday life," confirms interior designer Rachel Clark of Bazaar ([bazaar-london.com](http://bazaar-london.com)). "We want a small room that is ambient, warm and not at all overwhelming."

The word "snug" conjures up images of a small room in a low-ceilinged farmhouse with an open fireplace and a window seat. Indeed, in many period houses the snug was originally the smoking room, explains Jonathan Bramwell, of property finders the Buying Solution ([thebuyingsolution.co.uk](http://thebuyingsolution.co.uk)), with pelmet curtains, enormous sofas and a wide range of ashtrays.

The modern snug is every bit as cosy as its predecessor, yet more self-consciously zen – a place for wellness and chilling out, and it doesn't have to be a whole room. "I create snugs in bedrooms – a comfy armchair to enjoy the view of the garden or read bedtime stories," explains designer Lisa Burdus ([lisaburdus.com](http://lisaburdus.com)). "I've also created a 'man snug' for the man of the house to play his guitar and watch television away from his wife and daughters."

The designer, Simone Suss ([studio-suss.com](http://studio-suss.com)), meanwhile, recently created

a snug next to one of the floor-to-ceiling glass walls in a penthouse with panoramic views of London. "The view was one of the best in London, but the space was cold and dark; we achieved warmth and comfort with deep reclining chairs, greenery, blankets and outdoor reading lamps," she says.

There's a science to creating a calming space, according to Bernheimer, whose book explores how everyday spaces affect our behaviour. The modern snug thus brings together decades of psychological and architectural research: curved forms, for example, are shown to make us feel calmer than angular ones, and plants can reduce blood pressure and increase attentiveness. There is also evidence to suggest that wood surfaces make us calmer, as does lighting that mimics the rhythms of the sun, while we thrive on the sensory stimulation of texture and pattern.

Smaller, cosier, outlying rooms are also a chance to express our individual taste, adds designer Rachel Chudley ([rachelchudley.com](http://rachelchudley.com)), expanding the eccentricities of our homes rather than unifying the space. "People no longer want to knock down all the walls," she says. Indeed, there are also studies to suggest that open-plan spaces can have a negative effect on our happiness.

If you've already taken down the walls in your living space, it's not too late to create a snug: according to Bernheimer you can carve semi-enclosed calming spaces from an open-plan environment by using glass windows, room partitions or even a trellis or a plant. "Make the most of natural elements like light and views," she says. "Paint walls in colours you love, build your own bookshelves and populate your space with personal touches and glowing lamps."

As Winston Churchill once said:

"We shape our homes, and then they shape us."

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▲ Simone Suss created a snug area next to floor-to-ceiling windows in a London penthouse

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▲ Lisa Burdus's snug exudes warmth with cocooning pinks and blues for depth

## THE EMBROIDERY OF LIFE

Books, ornaments, photographs and paintings immediately make a space feel cosy and individual, says Burdus, but you don't want your room to be cluttered. "Too much order is boring, depriving us of the sensory stimulation we thrive on," agrees Bernheimer, yet

too much complexity can be disorientating and overwhelming. Clark thus recommends introducing clever space-saving storage and higher shelves to ensure there is minimal clutter at eye level. Pattern and texture in the form of rugs, as well as throws, cushions and curtains instil a sense of beauty and calm, particularly if they allude to the repeating patterns of nature, such as rose petals and sunflower seeds, which theorists believe have a positive impact on our mental health. In period homes, traditional cornicing and architraves echo these patterns; for a more contemporary look, use larger scale pattern and rougher textures, such as seagrass, cane and raffia, says Clark.

## COCOONING COLOURS

There may be a reason why shades of green and pink are currently trending for snugs and cosy corners: in the 1970s a shade of pink was thought to be able to tranquillise prisoners (a theory that has not stood up), while humans can distinguish more shades of green than any other colour. In truth, though, there is a dearth of evidence on the relationship between specific colours and our mood and behaviour, although Bernheimer says there is strong evidence that integration of colour along with texture and

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pattern has a positive psychological impact. The architectural theorist Nikos Salingaros goes as far as to say that spending time in drab, minimalist spaces lacking colour can make you experience similar symptoms to those accompanying a stroke, macular degeneration and visual agnosia. "Sensory deprivation feels uncomfortable," he says. When choosing paint and fabric colours, Chudley believes that the most calming combinations are those that mimic nature. "Consider light and shade in the natural environment and apply these contrasts to your interior space." Clark agrees: "Greys and blues add depth and a cocooning effect," she says, while Giancarlo Valle suggests bathing the walls in colour rather than using accents.

## BRING THE OUTSIDE IN

You can use the view from the window as your focal point; studies suggest we feel happier when sitting close to a window. If there is no view, paintings or photos of the natural world can reduce stress within five minutes, according to a study by the American professor Barbara Fredrickson, while house plants can reduce blood pressure and increase attentiveness. Incorporating natural materials into the space is also linked to a sensation of comfort. "Spending time in a room with a balance of wooden surfaces has been linked to a decrease in diastolic blood pressure," Bernheimer confirms. In her Cornish retreat, former *Vogue* editor Fiona Golfar created a snug with a wooden fireplace, a wooden coffee table and sheepskin fleeces on the chairs.

## AMBIENT LIGHTING

A calming space should ideally have natural light from two sides to avoid glare, says Bernheimer, and lamps delivering naturalistic light patterns. To achieve a warm, subtle glow and cosy evening shadows, avoid harsh LED spotlights and opt for dimmable wall lights and lamps, says Suss, with light bulbs designed to approximate sunlight, such as a Calex

dimable gold (£8, johnlewis.com). In a modern space, soft, directional lights with smooth curves and natural finishes create a calming mood, adds Clark.

## DEEP CUSHIONS

As a place to curl up on your own with a book, or watch a film, a snug will need to be well cushioned, says Ed O'Donnell, of Angel O'Donnell (angelodonnell.com) interior design. He likes to introduce traditional English roll-arm chairs with feather cushions with an ottoman within reach. Bean bags are a cheap way to bring extra seating, adds Suss, but if you have the budget, a deep sofa in a soft, textural fabric is a good investment. She, along with other leading design studios such as Banda (bandaproperty.co.uk), Rachel Chudley and Giancarlo Valle, opt for curved sofas in a snug. Don't be tempted to go too small on your sofa, warns Chudley, even if your room is tiny. "If you enlarge one element such as a sofa in a small space, you will eliminate the feeling of clutter."

## A FOCAL POINT

A calming space will have an organising principle or focal point, according to Bernheimer. In Lloyd Wright's designs, this was traditionally the fireplace, and designers such as Suss find many clients still want an open fire or a wood-burning stove in their snug. Stonewoods, a fire supplier in London reports rising demand for all types of fires this year, but in particular the eco-friendly bioethanol range (from £2,400, stonewoods.co.uk). However, a piece of statement vintage furniture or art can provide an equally successful focal point, adds Nicola Sherbon, head of design at Banda, who in her most recent project used an artwork by Tracey Emin to hold the room together. "A vintage pendant light can also give off a calm energy," she says.

## A HUMAN-SIZED SPACE

Our most beloved rooms, according to Bernheimer's research, are small and take the form of a semi-enclosed space separated by French doors or trellised walls. In terms of scale, they are unthreatening, adds interior

designer Giancarlo Valle (giancarlovalle.com), to ensure they feel safe and calming. If you don't have a dedicated snug, Rachel Clark suggests carving out a private alcove or crescent from a larger room, using large house plants and upholstered room dividers (available inexpensively at Maison du Monde, or you can get them made bespoke), which aid sound absorption. Freestanding bookshelves or bamboo or metal screens are other options, while permanent Crittall walls have caught on as an effective way of creating a snug in a terrace house without blocking out the light.

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▲ A new chapter: books and photos can make a space feel cosy and individual, says Edward Bulmer

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► Feel appeal:  
texture in rugs,  
cushions and  
curtains create a  
sense of calm in this  
room by Angela  
O'Donnell



► Loud and proud:  
colour and pattern  
can have a positive  
mental impact,  
especially those that  
mimic nature, says  
Rachel Chadley

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► Use house plants and bamboo screens to create a semi-enclosed space

► Warm welcome: an open fire or wood-burning stove is still a popular focal point

