

# The Case Against Man Caves

The only feature more requested by prospective buyers on HGTV real estate and renovation programs than an open-concept floor plan is a “man cave”—a room dedicated to the hobbies (usually alcohol and sports) of the man of the house. This is a malignant trend, both a symptom and, in turn, a cause of a juvenile, individualist masculinity that undermines family life.

There is, of course, a long history of specifically male spaces in the family home; workshops and studies come to mind. So the man cave is neither unique nor problematic just for being an isolated male space. And while one might say that booze and sports represent a degradation not just of masculinity but of humanity from literature and craftsmanship, we won't pursue that line of argument here.

What differentiates the man cave from these more traditional male spaces is that workshops and studies are designed to accommodate a particular, elevating interest. These rooms are only isolated inasmuch as the activities proper to them are best pursued without distraction. With the man cave, however, the isolation from the family—the escape—is the *primary* purpose of the space. The man cave, therefore, is the image of the traditional male space without its substance.

Of course, a workshop or study could become an escape—a place to hide from family duties or to indulge selfish habits. But this would be a misuse, or abuse, of a space set aside for humane recreations. By contrast, the man cave by its very name announces that it is for *me*. Whatever happens in the room is merely an artifact of *my* desires and *my* personality.

The implication is that the rest of the house—the joint bedroom and the nice kitchen and the kids' messy quarters and the other TV room—cannot adequately serve me and my precious

individuality. (Women, apparently, are not such fragile snowflakes that they need their own room to express themselves. After all, she has the kitchen, right?) Worse, the man cave implies antagonism between the father's masculine identity and his family identity and duties.

Setting aside a space *specifically* as a masculine escape from the family signals that masculinity and family life are in tension. Whereas the mother can actualize her full identity in family life, the father, by this logic, can only do so away from family life. This reinforces two damaging notions: first, that the father's "natural environment" is not in the home participating in communal life, and second, that the family is nothing more than a group of individuals pursuing their own self-interest and self-actualization—and that those interests and identities, especially between the father and his wife and children, are necessarily in conflict.

Both of these notions corrode the cohesion of the family, whose strength as a social unit emerges from and depends on the effacing of the self in the service of community. Otherwise it's just a bunch of strangers living together.

To be sure, the family cannot be the alpha and the omega of a man's identity. But neither can it be so for a woman. We all have interests and hobbies and little sanctuaries, physical or psychological, that give us respites from the exigencies of family life and that inform our self-understanding. That's natural and good. But these aspects of our individual identities should not be placed in conflict with the family identity. After all, personality is most fully expressed not in isolation, but in community.

This concept is especially important for men, who are acutely tempted by the wider culture to a self-destructive individualism. Whereas traditional male spaces signal that masculinity can be expressed through development of elevating personal interests, the man cave signals that masculinity is

expressed through escape into a self-made, self-indulgent preserve. This is a corrosive masculinity that dissolves family solidarity and ultimately (and ironically) one's very sense of self.

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