



The New York Times **Style** Magazine

## Holiday 2011



### ME AND MY MAN SHED *Andrew Dermont* *meets the proprietors of a small plot of dude-topia.*

**I**n a world where even “man caves” — the dimly lit redoubts where men are left to tinker and socialize with other men — are falling prey to D.I.Y. home improvement television shows, two men on the South Shore of Long Island have found shelter for their creature comforts in the most unlikely of places.

“This, I think, is a bit more functional than a man cave,” says Ed Palace, 50, settling into the director’s chair inside the garden shed adjacent to his home in Brookhaven, N.Y., a leafy hamlet on central Long Island. “A man cave is where you go and watch TV or porn or

a ballgame. I can use this for storing my tools and potting supplies — stuff that I wouldn’t bring in the house.”

He reaches for a flask of whiskey. “You want to squeeze off a shot?” he asks.

Palace and his friend Jon Pokorny, 52, use their “man sheds” for storing far more than their garden trowels. Both have constructed their sheds, which stand no wider than a dozen feet, almost entirely out of 15 years’ worth of recycled and repurposed materials plucked from roadside garbage heaps. Palace found his shed, once a chicken coop, alongside his neighbor’s yard and asked friends to help him move the remnants of the ramshackle lean-to into his yard.

“The shed sat there for several years, until my wife started getting a rash about it,” Palace says. “So I had

some friends come over and help me put up the walls. From then on people would stop by on the weekends and bang a few nails.” An insurance broker by day, Palace likes to be outside working the soil during his free time and genuinely needed a place to store his equipment. However, after building a roof, installing a front window made from a dog-scratched glass-pane door, a wood-burning stove and a few comfortable chairs, Palace had a bona fide hangout. “I didn’t use a tape measure, but I did use a level,” he boasts.

Pokorny’s shed, which Palace considers a bit more “tricked out,” is also part chicken coop and features an Oriental rug laid over a floor of red bricks purchased during the demolition of a nearby lace mill. Pokorny, an accomplished craftsman and former owner of a metal fabrication business,

**Down the garden path** Ed Palace built his backyard shed for storing tools, but it evolved into a hangout.



**Manly things** Palace's shed is a repository for all manner of stuff his wife won't let him bring into the house.



furnished his shed with a pair of handmade slat-backed chairs and an oak desk with driftwood legs. A steer skull named "Stinky Boy," which Pokorny purchased during a family trip to Arizona and which his daughter — to the dismay of a few flight attendants — later carried onto the flight home,

“*It's just a nice place to go and think about your own thoughts,'* Palace says. *'It's like a tree fort for adults, but on the ground.'*”

” adorns one wall. A lever-action BB gun from his youth hangs on another wall near a lookout window, in case shedgoers have to fend off an attack from the outside world.

According to James B. Twitchell, the author of “Where Men Hide,” men were yearning to get away long before Thoreau went into the woods. The reason why men like Palace and Pokorny are seeking solitude in their garden sheds may also be an indication of a societal void left behind by the dying union halls and Elks lodges of years past.

“Society today doesn't provide men the kinds of environments where they can behave the way they would like when they're alone or socializing with other men,” says Lionel Tiger, an emeritus professor of anthropology at Rutgers University. He suggests that the circumstances of many men cause them to want to find an outlet. “The man shed is a physical rendition of a larger symbolism also found in macho video games,” he says.

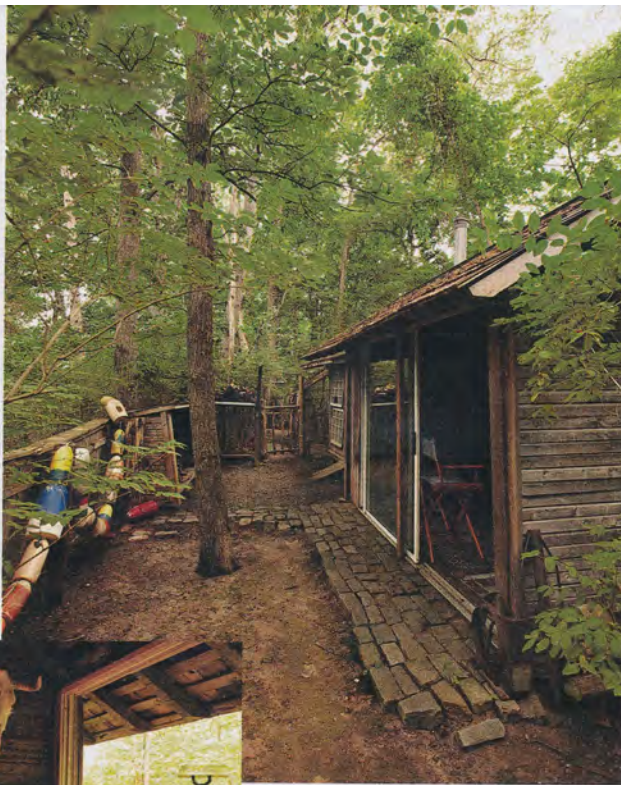
Palace is less inclined to see his shed as a symptom of any issue, though his wife, Elizabeth, does admit her tastes take precedence when it comes to decorating their home. “I sound like a tyrant, but I didn't want a deer head in my house, thank you very much,” she says while gardening in their backyard. She doesn't insist that he keep the shed neat and tidy — “not that you don't, Ed,” she adds, smiling. “Ed takes a lot

of pride in recycling things. He brings home the foil that he wraps his sandwich in for work. It's very endearing.”

“It's just a nice place to go and think about your own thoughts,” Palace says. “I read, I draw, I listen to the ballgame on the radio. It's like a tree fort for adults, but on the ground.” Soon after adding a Dutch door to his shed, Palace became committed to “souping it up” with an eclectic mix of sporting memorabilia, nautical gadgetry and vintage advertisements and signage. His friends have also pitched in, stopping by to drop off old artifacts to add to the shed's ambience.

“So many people come in here and feel they need to add to it,” Palace says. “How do they know that I'll like all this rustic stuff? I am not sure, but about 80 percent of the stuff in here was donated by other people over time.” A friend who used to play hockey dropped off an old ice skate. The local pizza guy contributed two outdated calendars filled with topless women. A neighborhood fur-trapping enthusiast provided a muskrat trap. And a guy

remix



**The perfect getaway** Jon Pokorny's shed maintains creature comforts like a wood-burning stove.

that Palace lets hunt in the area gave him an autographed picture of the former Jets player Marty Lyons and a bottle of whiskey.

While Pokorny's shed is more sparsely appointed, Palace's is filled with years' worth of masculine curios, giving it an aura that lifestyle brands like J. Crew aim for but never quite reach. There is a model clipper ship made entirely out of Budweiser cans — Palace's favorite brew. There are black-and-white photographs of Muhammad Ali, John Wayne, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Ernest Hemingway and a yellowing newspaper cutout of Joe Namath throwing a touchdown pass. "They say he had a bad knee, but look how high he is off the ground," Palace remarks, pointing at the Namath photograph. "Hemingway is one of my heroes because he was always outdoors and pushing things

to the limit." At the helm of a drawing desk sit a pair of nautical lamps that turn on with the spin of a captain's wheel, a corncob pipe, a string of yacht club burgees and a railroad lantern that Palace's brother long ago stole off a train in New Hampshire. "He got scared and dropped it in a lake alongside the tracks. Had to go scuba diving to get it out," Palace says. "Almost everything here has a story."

Palace often spends hours sharing the stories behind the stuff in his shed. Bobblehead figurines of the legendary Mets baseball announcers Ralph Kiner and Bob Murphy call to mind a chance meeting. "I had box tickets to a Mets game years ago, and I was hanging out in the Diamond Club during a rain delay when Ralph Kiner walked in. He ordered a double Red on the rocks and drank it like water — what a nice guy." An old wood-shafted mashie niblick and an antique shillelagh become talking pieces for discussing Palace's grandfathers, one a scratch golfer of Irish descent and the other a vaudeville comedian who once toured with Rudy Vallee.

"The coolest thing is that it's stuff that I've found and accumulated," Palace says. "I've surrounded myself with the stuff that makes me happy over the years. This, I find, is a happy place. People always leave with a smile on their face."

I did. ■

## SHACKING UP

From basic to bespoke, backyard hideaways to suit almost every taste level and price range.



CATSKILL FARMS

Chuck Petersheim designs and builds traditional farmhouses and then uses the construction scraps for small outbuildings like this charming shed. [thecatskillfarms.com](http://thecatskillfarms.com)



KITHAUS

This West Coast company's prefab Modernist modules, including the 117-square-foot K3, shown here, are more Lautner than lean-to. [kithaus.com](http://kithaus.com)



SHED ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

The Seattle firm's answer to a backyard storage shed is this sleek and sustainable steel and ipe structure with sliding doors and a green roof. [shedbuilt.com](http://shedbuilt.com)



OUTDOOR LIVING TODAY

This classic Sunshed is 64 square feet and costs only \$3,398, but you'll have to put it together with your own two hands. [outdoorlivingtoday.com](http://outdoorlivingtoday.com)