

The Smartest Home Offices in Town

Imagine working in an environment suited to your personal tastes and professional needs, one with all the amenities and comforts of home. Sound impossible? Not at all. Here are six people who have managed it.

By Karen Feld

What most of us wouldn't give for a job that offers free parking and flexible hours, involves no commuting and eliminates long lunch hour waits in crowded restaurants. Imagine, too, working in an environment suited to your personal tastes and professional needs, one that holds significant tax deductions with all the amenities and comforts of home. Sound impossible? Not at all.

Every day, as thousands of area residents converge on metropolitan business districts, a smaller group representing a variety of fields climb up or down steps in their own homes to begin the business day.

Home offices are not for everyone, nor are they particularly innovative or novel. A quick tour through the studies and drafting rooms at Monticello and Mount Vernon show that founding fathers saw some merit in working from home base.

Today, Washingtonians who combine home and office see distinct advantages in this arrangement. The six offices featured below not only reflect the individuals' professions, but their personalities as well.

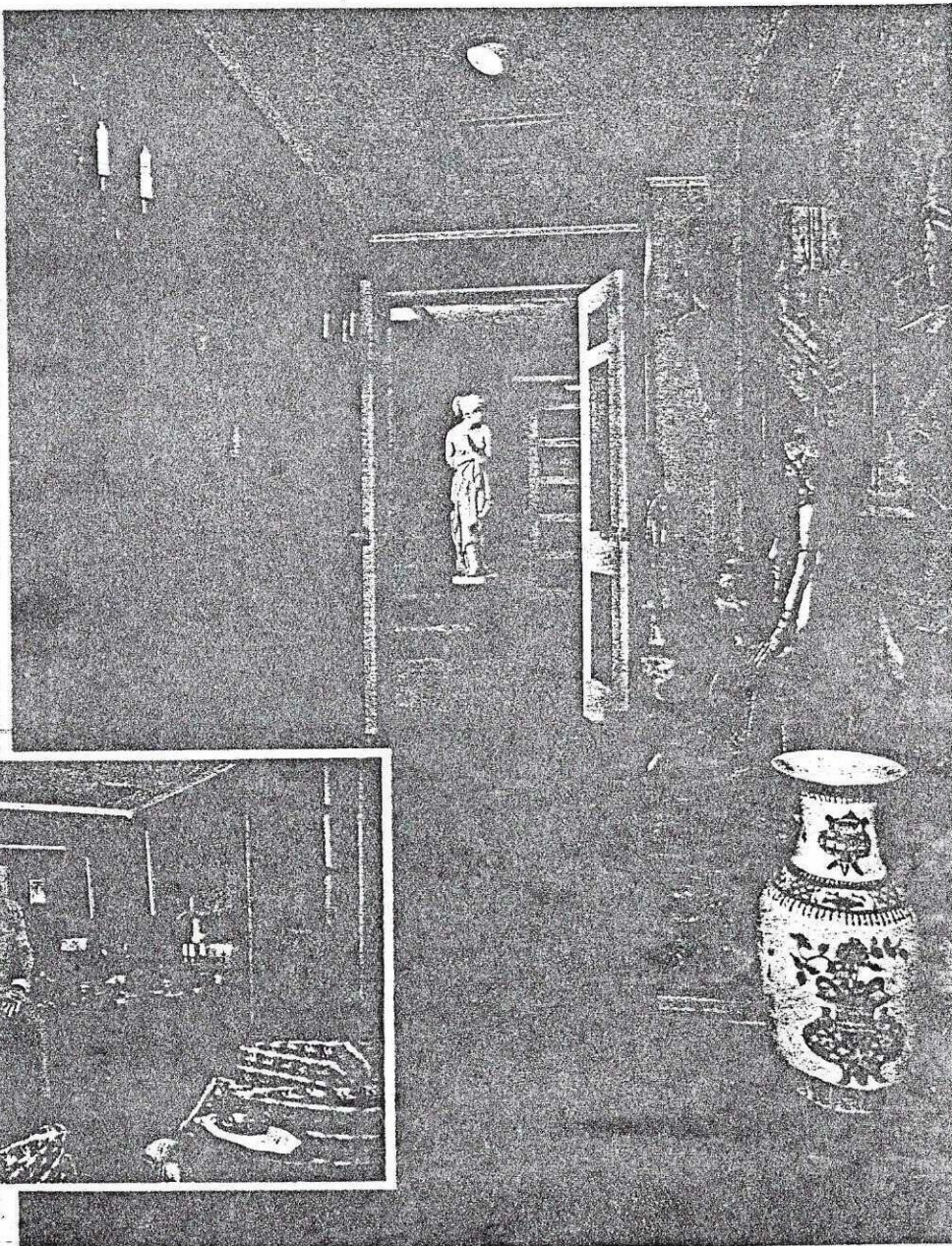
Examining One Man's Space

Dr. Clyde Litton, a noted plastic surgeon, uses the basement of his ornate, gray-brick, Kalorama townhouse as a tea-room office, including reception, examining and consultation rooms.

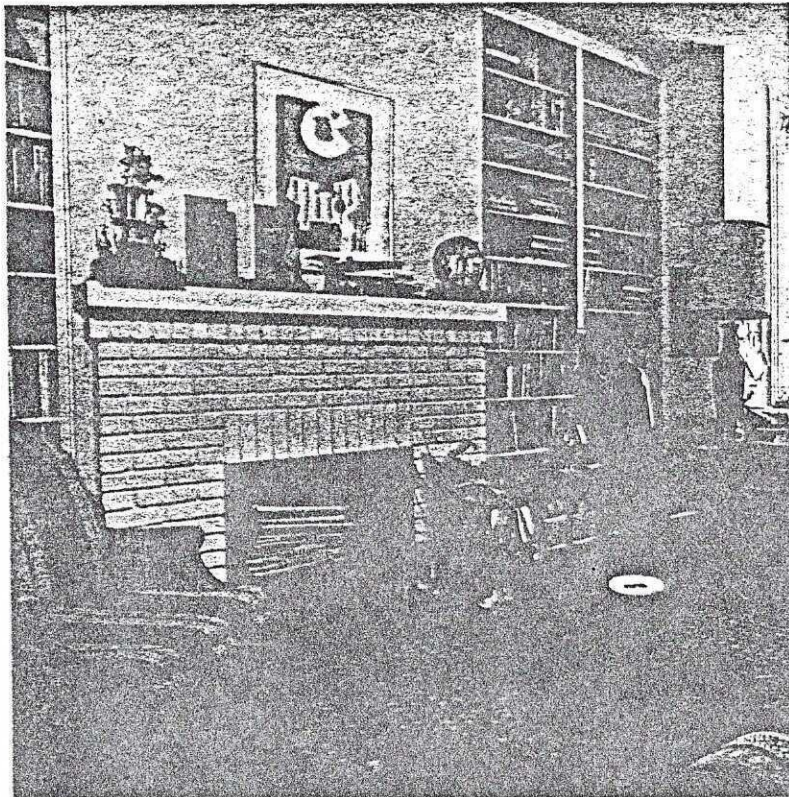
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A home office is especially convenient for Dr. Clyde Litton, who says he can provide better service to his patients there.

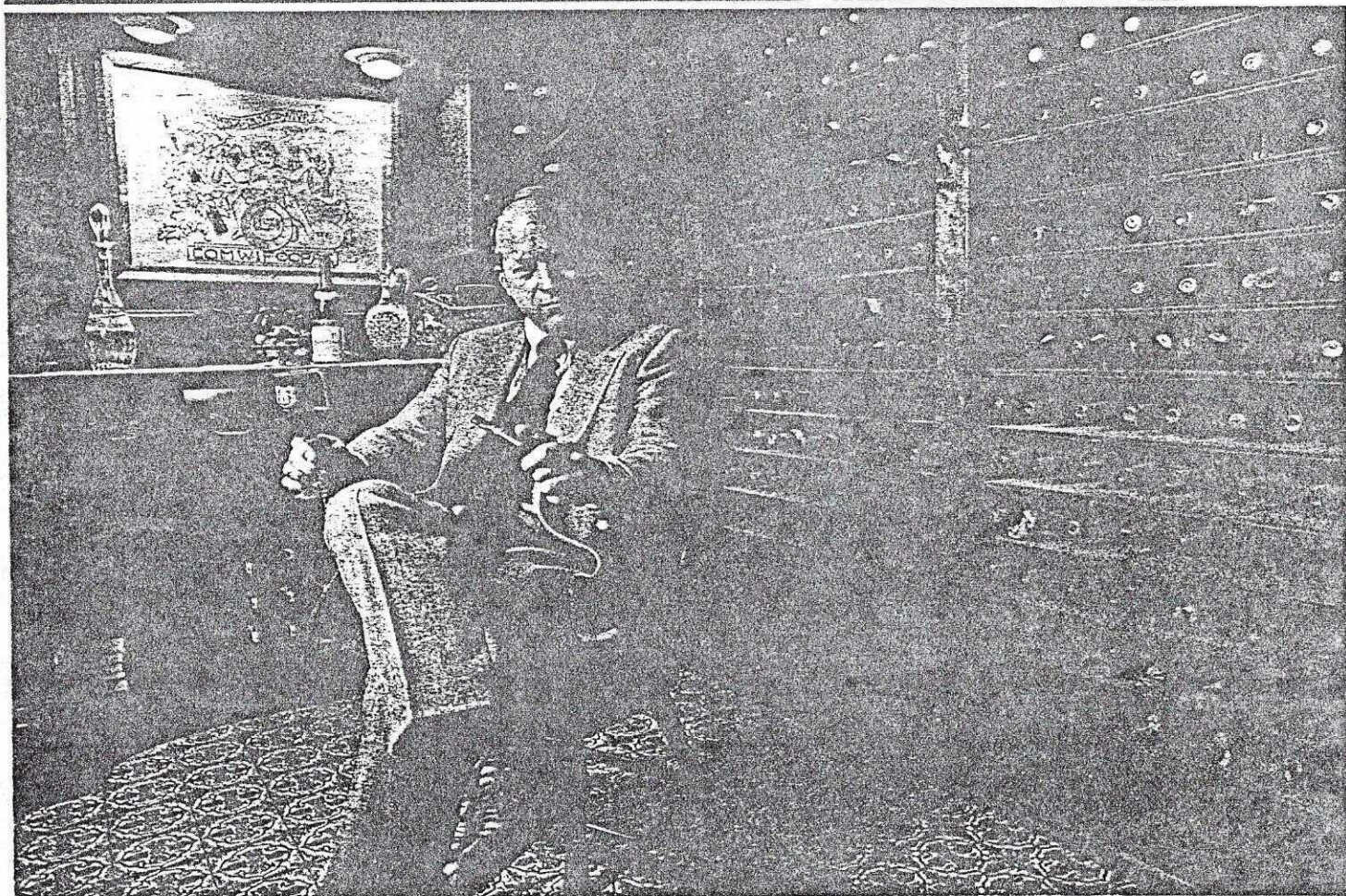


John Bowden



Public relations counselor Jeanne Viner (above) says she gave little thought to decorating her home office, describing the result as "relaxed but professional."

Creating a unique psychological landscape for himself, writer Charles Turgeon (below) constructed a wine cellar/office in his home.



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"It's convenient for me. I can give a patient better service because I'm here more often," says Litton. "It provides a comfortable atmosphere and a better approach than a professional office building," he continues. "People don't want to be seen."

For maximum privacy, Litton occasionally takes high government officials and other VIPs upstairs. The physician concedes that although he maintains separate entrances to his home and his office, "you lose some degree of private life," but he sacrifices that for the privacy of his patients.

An avid collector, Litton has decorated his office with antiques, many of museum quality, brought back from various lecture tours throughout the world or purchased at auctions. He takes great pride in weaving a story around each object and in sharing his collection with his patients. "I'm an obsessive buyer," he admits. "But I always find a place for a new acquisition."

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At the entranceway to his offices are elevator doors with French door handles, an eighteenth century Florentine mirror and a Portuguese water jug. Passing through a second set of doors and down a long, gold-carpeted hallway, visitors can view a seventeenth century Chinese painting, Chinese candelabras, a seventeenth century Burmese buddha from Bangkok, a leather-bound collection of seventeenth century books found in various French flea markets, and finally, a sculpture of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of beauty.

Litton pauses to examine the profile of the sculpture, as only a plastic surgeon would. "Many of these Greek mythological figures were sculptors' conceptions of what they looked like, but our bone structure has changed over the years," he notes with a professional eye.

Eclecticism gives way as patients enter the reception area filled with a melange of Oriental: a hanging lantern from Tokyo, a jade screen, a Chinese opera mask, ancestral paintings, an operating incense burner, a Korean table, Chinese woodcarvings and a nineteenth century Chinese urn.

Vietnamese temple dolls and a white faced buddha from Thailand again draw his professional interest. "Look at the serene expressions," he points out. Providing the only occidental note in the room is a brass shoeshine box, like those often found on the streets in Turkey.

A collection of nineteenth century, clipper ship paintings and two old ship's lanterns hang behind the desk in his private office. It is in this office that he often works late into the evening, writing papers and preparing lectures. Says Litton commenting on the convenience of his office, "I



wouldn't work that late downtown."

A Library Of Wines

Charles Turgeon, a writer, lecturer and wine consultant, has a very different type of basement office in his Rockville home. Initially, he and his wife Fran, who also works at home, shared office areas on the first floor. As the volume of their work grew, Fran moved to an upstairs bedroom and Charles set about redesigning the basement:

Eight years ago in an effort to create a psychological landscape and to literally immerse himself in his subject matter, Turgeon began constructing a unique office. Today his thousand-bottle, wine cellar serves a dual purpose — both as a wine cellar and as a work space, where he writes about food and wine.

In constructing the wine cellar office, Turgeon had to consider what was ideal for both the wine and himself in terms of lighting and temperature. For this reason, he placed high intensity lights over an old Sicilian sideboard, choosing incandescent lighting to best show the color of the

wine. The lights can be adjusted to four different intensities, all of which are slightly brighter than a traditional wine cellar.

The room also has its own air-conditioning system. "Since both the wine and myself are more comfortable cool — cooler than the rest of the family — I typically keep the temperature at 64 degrees," says Turgeon. "Fifty-five degrees is generally considered right for wine, but that's colder than I want to type at. Sixty-four is a good compromise. At that temperature, I'm not losing wines."

The 360-square-foot cellar is uniquely constructed from pine with half-inch plywood for sheaves. Instead of bins found in traditional wine cellars, Turgeon indexes his wines by type using a grid. And Turgeon's concept maximizes every bit of space. Each of his bins holds a dozen bottles with wire strung between each bottle. When individual wines are removed, new wines can be plugged in anywhere, then indexed in his card catalogue.

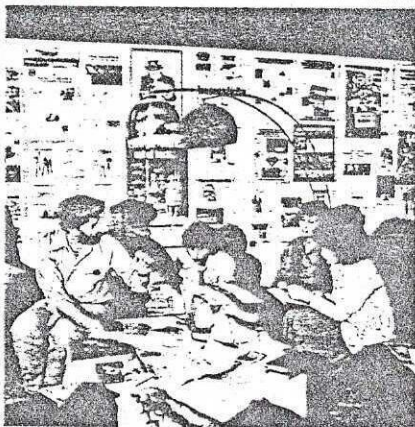
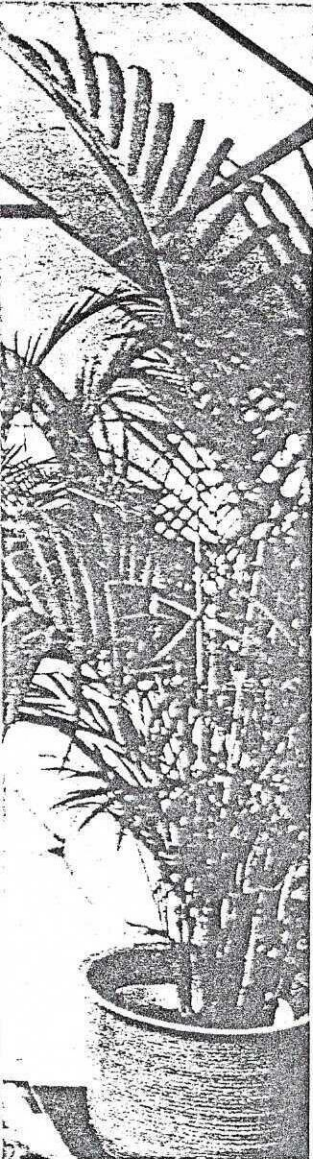
"Wines are my library," says Turgeon, who works at either a round

table in the center of his "library" or at a desk made from a door laid over two filing cabinets. Above the desk is more wine storage, a row each reserved for his three sons and two godsons, to which he adds a bottle a year. In the far corner are wines from

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his own backyard vineyard. Next to the desk is a four-drawer, wooden, filing cabinet left to Turgeon by his mentor Stanley King, president of Amherst College. The cabinet originally belonged to King's father when he was chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in the early nineteenth century.

Everything in the office is utilitarian. In keeping with Turgeon's interest in the grape, the floor is a hard-wearing tile with a blue grape motif. The



Fan windows, surrounding a working fireplace, give a light, airy feeling to CPA Robert Low's home office (left). Stan Cotton (above) usually dresses in blue jeans — whether he's at his drawing board or consulting with clients.

been interested in elegant old buildings," says Passonneau, an architectural disciple of Walter Gropius. His life at home revolves around the kitchen with its twenty-foot, arched windows overlooking a beautifully landscaped swimming pool. Often his coworkers lunch together informally at a round marble table in the kitchen or on the terrace by the pool to discuss the day's work. Since he often works from early morning to ten or eleven at night with a short dinner break, a home office suits his hours.

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Commenting on his offices as an extension of his professional philosophy, Passonneau is pensive. "I'm caught between two worlds," he says. "The kind of work I do has to be done through complicated organizational arrangements. I have mixed feeling about the formality of the structure of the big organizations." But Passonneau, who competes for large projects with firms housed in more conventional office space warns, "You have to be independent enough to make your own way. Business has to come to you. If you need a facade, then this isn't the way to do it."

Working In Jeans

Jeanne Viner has converted the entire second floor of her century old, five-story, Victorian townhouse in the Sheraton-Kalorama section of northwest Washington to office space. As a public relations counselor, she represents clients ranging from local ventures like Independence Federal Savings and Loan Association on up to large national corporations such as Fannie May.

"It's the nature of my business and my own nature that when a client is in need, that's when I work. Sometimes I come down here at 11 p.m. and do my best work," explains Viner, who says she feels safer commuting to another floor of her townhouse rather than driving to work in another part of town.

The public relations counselor also found that when she maintained an office outside of her home, reference books, typewriters, and dictation equipment got duplicated. "Also a home office is a way to avoid commuter traffic jams," Viner points out. "It's convenient."

"It's a pressure business. We rise and fall on the product we turn out. This is an image business, but the important thing is what you deliver," she maintains. "I can wear 'sincere clothes' when I have to see clients," but otherwise she prefers to work in jeans.

So in 1964, Viner incorporated her office into her home, describing the result as "relaxed but professional." Access to the second floor office is through the living room. Two large

rooms are outfitted with desks and office equipment. A sitting area around a fireplace provides filing space. Ten rows of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves housing an extensive reference library run up and down both sides of the fireplace, covering the entire wall. The opposite wall, paneled in cork and used as a bulletin board, also helps to soundproof the office. Radiator tops have become counter space, and additional desk space is concealed in a closet.

"The office grew like Topsy," laughs Viner. "It wasn't decorated." A picture hangs on a pipe, furniture is a conglomeration from her previous office. Photos of her children hang on the wall by her desk, including those of her son and daughter-in-law, actress Deborah Raffin. Next to her desk is a collection of ceramic angels beating drums. "People say public relations people are drum beaters," explains Viner.

A Nifty Tax Break

The lack of commercial activity and small town feeling attracted Robert Low, a 33-year old CPA, and his wife to the Mount Pleasant area of Washington where they own a large 1908 Georgian revival house on Park Road. Low, who was in financial management, decided to make a career of public accounting. When he went into business for himself two years ago, the accountant converted the third floor attic, some 1300 square feet, to office space.

"The main advantage of a home office is financial, the significant tax deductions," says Low. "My costs for owning this house would be the same if I had my office here or not. The fact that I can deduct any of these office expenses means I'm money ahead."

Most of Low's clients live within a one-mile radius of his home office, and therefore find it convenient. "There's more of a sense of a personal relationship with my clients," says Low. "Many of them are self-made men and 'hippie-turned-entrepreneur types' who aren't impressed by K Street offices," he adds. "I deal with a few people on a relatively extended basis."

Low uses a side entrance to the house for his office, so there is minimal interaction with the living quarters. However, clients get a quick glimpse of the first and second floors as they follow signs up the steep stairs to the third floor office. The work space contains a large 900-square-foot room where two other CPAs and an office manager work, as well as Low's private office, a bathroom, kitchen, and supply closet.

The reception area in the middle of the large room doubles as a conference area, housing a complete tax library. Fan windows surrounding a working fireplace at one end allow sun to stream through the windows in the winter, giving the room a light feeling. For comfort the office is air-conditioned in the summer.

Low's private office features a stained glass window that was a gift from a client and a Vienna Regulator Clock dating from the 1880 chimes behind his desk. A number of contemporary graphics, antique furniture, and a turn-of-the-century Washburn mandolin add visual interest to the office space.

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office has no phone, since he doesn't want to be disturbed when writing. The rest of family activity is confined to the first and second floor of the house, away from his office.

"Any time you work at home, you make yourself vulnerable to both the pressures and pleasures of home," explains Turgeon. "Kids want help with their homework for instance." But the writer considers his dark, wood-paneled cellar "a reasonably quiet retreat. Everything here represents what I need to do in my work or reminds me of work that was done," says Turgeon.

The \$100,000 Office

Joseph Passonneau, a prominent architect and urban development and transportation engineer, has applied the same principles of redesigning and allocating space in his home office that he used in recent projects at Farragut Square and the Chicago Crosstown Expressway. When Passonneau and his family moved to Washington eight years ago, he converted the furnace room of his circa 1868 Georgetown townhouse, part of Cooke's Row on Q

Street, to an office. Currently he uses only 600 square feet for his basement office, but that space can be doubled if needed.

First appliances were moved from the furnace room to what was a bomb shelter, the room completely stripped, and the walls sandblasted. He put in a new ceiling, lighting, and heating. Passonneau also installed double French doors which open out onto a double driveway, providing a separate entrance. Since function was his primary goal, he put tackboard on the wall for hanging sketches and filled the room with drawing tables. Separated from the architectural office by a brick partition is an elaborate shop for constructing models and a viewing room used for client consultation.

Economics was the initial reason for Passonneau's home office. But now he says, "It was a delusion. The house is valued at \$400,000 today. I use one-quarter of it for my office. That's a \$100,000 office, discounted at ten percent. A \$10,000 a year office is not cheap."

His house reflects his interests and more casual lifestyle. "I have always

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But a home office does have its drawbacks, as Low has discovered. He claims that the biggest obstacle in working at home is that of trying to educate both his wife and neighbors to respect his office hours and "Do not disturb" sign.

Anywhere, USA

Stanley Cotton, a successful public relations/ad man, who calls himself "a producer of alternative communications," says only three of his twenty-five years in business were interrupted by a need for a conventional office, which he set up in the Watergate. "In my business, the alternatives to not working at home are frightening," says Cotton. "I don't think it's possible for me to be creative in a structured, controlled atmosphere."

Cotton's business is that of a troubleshooter. "If I didn't deal with rare and desperate clients, I'd be forced to have a conventional office. Part of my image is that I don't have a conventional office and don't do conventional things. My kind of clients don't care." Among these are Emerson's restaurants, Seacoast Towers in Miami Beach, Coventry, and various others around the country.

Because troubleshooting requires much travel, Cotton thinks of his office as being "Anywhere, USA," preferring hotels and motels which he says are very much like a home atmosphere. He claims that he has had 1325 "branch offices" in the last 25 years. All the ad man requires is a telephone,

a portable typewriter, tape deck, lots of paper and pencils, and 24-hour room service.

Cotton, usually dressed in jeans, a work shirt, western boots, and a hat to suit his mood, has designated a four-room suite on the first floor of his Potomac home as his office. The largest of the four is his eclectically decorated "thinking room," including a

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fireplace, a pinball machine ("It's therapeutic," explains Cotton), and a hat stand holding his collection of headgear: hard hats, ten-gallon hats, baseball caps and shrine hats. Chocolate sofas are arranged in an L-shape around a coffee table outfitted with a typewriter, and a tape deck and mike so that he can listen to copy. Close at hand are a projector used to screen projects and an old steamer chest from Calabasas doubling as a file cabinet, with grocery store ledgers from the 1850s resting on top. "That shows intergrity," Cotton grins.

Book shelves and cabinets, which he built without a plan, fill one wall. "Each shelf is different, depending

upon the size of the wood I had," says Cotton. His antique can collection is displayed here: a Log Cabin syrup can, a 50-year-old furniture polish, a tin of turn-of-the-century rose powder, Union Leader smoking tobacco. An authentic, nickel, cigar can holds a plant. Posters of ad campaigns cover the walls, drawing pads are scattered about, and storybooks are stacked against the baseboards.

Cotton begins his workday at noon and continues until midnight. When an idea comes to him, he goes into his adjacent production room where he has all the necessary tools to produce layouts, including drawing table, type and files for new concepts, photography, and clients. He estimates that 85 percent of his time is spent in this room.

The third and fourth rooms serve as his archives, where he enforces a no admittance policy. A life-size Batman cutout adorns the door. "After all, everybody needs a hero," explains Cotton.

For heavy thinking, weather permitting, Cotton uses a portion of his wooded yard as an outdoor office. Adjacent to the hammock where he sits is a working pay phone (a legal extension). Also close by are a wastebasket and a night-light employed when the dedicated ad man works late hours.

Aside from economic considerations — "I couldn't afford this much space if I had to rent it," notes Cotton — and the convenience since he works late hours, other advantages for Cotton include free parking, no rush hour

traffic, as well as savings on gas and mileage. His schedule is arranged so that he has one appointment day a week in the city. He also points out that a home office cuts down on dry-cleaning bills, eliminates waiting for a lunch table, and removes the possibility of rent increases. Since business routines are conducted casually, he can work and enjoy the company of his collie/shepherd mix at the same time.

He also points out the advantages for the rest of the family. "Your wife can keep an eye on you. You're more available for the kids to hit you up for cash. Of course, these same things can be drawbacks. Privacy is essential."

Cotton, whose 18-inch long business cards read "I'm in it for the money," is not conventional. And neither is his office. The only thing conventional is the mortgage on his home. But more importantly, his office works for him.

The wide range of options available in home offices is staggering, but it is essential that work space be separated from the living area. In planning a home office, generally function comes first, design later. After all, what value is an office if it doesn't work?

If you like the flexibility of working late hours without commuting and have the self-discipline to do so, if you opt to wear last year's jeans and have Fido at your feet, if you won't miss brainstorming with colleagues and office parties and if you don't mind having to convince people that you really do have a legitimate job, then a home office designed to suit your needs and personality might be just the environment for you. ☆