

Breathing Rooms

Clean out the house with the help of a self-storage center and you'll never miss a thing.

BY Elyse Mall Klayman

The kitchen table from your first apartment. Your grandmother's rocking chair. Your college notebooks. You can't live with them, but... well, you know the rest. Of course your house would look, feel, and function better if you could empty out the garage, the basement, and the attic, but you're too sentimental to part permanently with the bridesmaid's dress from your best friend's wedding or your teenager's bassinet. "There's a bit of a pack rat in all of us," says Cris Burnam, president of StorageMart, which has 40 self-storage facilities in 11 states. "We Americans love our stuff." Which may help explain why it's never been easier to clear your house of stuff without having to give it all to Goodwill.

There are now about 35,000 self-storage centers in the United States, and they're not as bare-bones as they used to be. Banish outdated images of dingy warehouses behind barbed-wire fences in the middle of nowhere (or of Jodie Foster finding a corpse in a rolled-up rug in *Silence of the Lambs*). Many facilities are now in retail hubs or near the center of town, with well-lit hallways, piped-in jazz, high-security keypad systems, surveillance cameras, and even conference rooms, Internet access, and free coffee. But if you just need a place to stash stacks of *National Geographics* or junky bikes you're saving for the beach house you hope to have someday, you can still find no-frills, garage-style storage.

Even if you're not a hoarder, a self-storage center can save the day if you want to off-load bulky seasonal gear (fishing rods, tents, skis, snow tires), move abroad for a short time, declutter a house you're trying to sell, or stow personal property during a divorce. Before embarking on a major home renovation last spring, Lori Zemsky, a mother of two in Chappaqua, New York, put most of her family's belongings into two storage rooms at the Katonah Self-Storage Center, a new \$5 million facility in Bedford Hills, New York. Designed to evoke a late-19th-century train station, it's air-conditioned and clean, so "nothing's getting wet, nothing's getting too hot," Zemsky says. Her husband, Paul, rented a high-tech wine locker to keep his most valuable vintages aging safely, and since the center is just a 15-minute drive from their home, says Zemsky, "he thinks nothing of stopping over there to pick up a bottle." Margie Snekenberg of Danbury, Connecticut, visits her Katonah locker frequently, too. Although she rented it for keeping treasures, like the 19th-century dry sink that she plans to put in the

retirement home she's building, she also stores staples, such as paper towels, which she buys in bulk through Amway.

Here's what you should consider when figuring out where to stash all that extra baggage.

Make sure it's safe.

Even a clean, well-lighted place will be creepy if nobody's around. Many of the newer facilities have staff on the premises at all times; some have a manager who lives on-site. The office should be near the entrance so the door can be monitored. At Storage1-2-3, in Hyde Park, New York, a swipe card with a PIN is required to enter the building. New customers at Jay Sundher's Hollywood Storage Center, in Los Angeles, get fingerprinted, and references are both required and checked. Seven TV screens monitored at the front desk track 37 cameras placed throughout the site. "You can come and go as if it's your own garage," says Sundher, "but it's a whole lot more secure." While customers at most centers are still expected to put their own locks on their units, many of the top-of-the-line facilities connect all the lockers to the main security system. Even if an intruder makes it past the gate without showing proper ID, an alarm will sound if he tries to open a unit.

Know your rights and responsibilities.

Although most storage centers claim to be fireproof and waterproof, you may be asked to sign a waiver stipulating that your possessions are insured. Check that your homeowner's or renter's policy includes items stored off-premises. Most do, but if yours doesn't, you'll need to get additional coverage,—or take your chances. Find out how and when your security deposit will be refunded (or forfeited) upon termination of your agreement. The contract should also spell out the length of the grace period you're allowed before the contents of your locker can be auctioned if you forget to (or can't) pay your monthly fee. If you change your address or phone number, be sure to notify the facility in writing.

Consider Convenience.

Make sure the hours of operation are liberal, and ask if there's a charge for accessing your unit. Find out whether staff will be around to give you a hand with something heavy, help put up a shelf, or lend a ladder.

Run the Numbers.

Rates vary greatly depending on where you live, the services available, and the size of the unit. In a climate-controlled facility, a 10-by-10-foot unit costs \$60 to \$300 a month in California, while a 10-by-20 runs roughly \$65 in Vermont and \$400 in the New York City metropolitan area. A five-by-five footer averages \$35 a month across the country. Smaller lockers—if you want to store a couple of air-conditioners in winter, say—aren't in great demand in rural areas, so they can be quite cheap.

Pack Properly.

Make sure you pack and pile your possessions carefully so when you retrieve them you find them in usable condition.

- Whenever possible, put items in clear plastic boxes.
- Clearly label boxes, and create aisles with the writing facing out.
- Group boxes by category: all the winter clothes here, all the boating gear there.
- Don't stack boxes too high, and put up shelving for maximum efficiency.
- Pack books flat to protect spines.
- Don't place boxes on concrete floors; use pallets or skids to prevent moisture absorption.
- Fill out empty pockets in the boxes with packing material, and don't overload them.
- Don't store candles, perishable foods, fuel, toxic materials, liquids, spray bottles, or aerosol cans.
- Engines should be drained of gasoline; a refrigerator or freezer should be thoroughly dry, its door left slightly ajar.
- Wipe metal surfaces with a few drops of machine oil to retard rust.
- Protect clothing with garment bags, along with a few blocks of cedar.
- Curtains and drapes should go on hangers inside wardrobe boxes or be carefully folded in a cedar chest.
- Heavy linens, delicate Christmas ornaments, and vintage dresses should be wrapped in acid-free tissue and placed in archival boxes to prevent brittleness.

Create an inventory.

People often forget what they've put away, even the most cherished relics. Make a detailed list of your unit's contents, and keep it in a logical spot at home. If you put some of your grandmother's mementos into a storage unit when she moves to a nursing home, a list will keep you from hunting for something she's asked you to retrieve that was already given away. Barbara Hemphill, coauthor of *Love It or Lose It: Living Clutter-Free Forever*, offers the Taming the Paper Tiger Software Kit, which includes a program for creating an alphabetical listing of a storage room's contents (\$150, www.thepapertiger.com). "Even if you're young," she says, "you don't know what's going to happen in life. It's terrible to leave your kids a disorganized mess. You don't want old grocery lists mixed in with the stock certificates."