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Safe rooms replace bomb shelters in the 21st century

Panic Mode

By Clara M.W. Vangen

Since the events of September 11th, Americans, as a whole, seem to be feeling a bit less safe in even their most familiar surroundings. For Thomas Gaffney, president and founder of Mount Vernon, NY-based Gaffco (www.bulletproofing.com), helping building owners feel safe is what his business is all about.

Gaffney's company has been installing "panic rooms" – more commonly known as safe rooms – for the past 15 years. Since the events of September 11th, together with the release of the movie *Panic Room*, starring Jodie Foster, Gaffney has seen double-digit growth for his company and doesn't make light of how hectic his life has become in the past nine months.

"People feel very differently about security. If the combination of those two events hadn't happened, I doubt that we would be talking today," he says.

Gaffney's company began building safe rooms for financial institutions (banks, check cashing stores, post offices) in the New York City area – businesses needing protection for personnel and data. It evolved into off-track betting parlors (OTB), more post offices and banks, government facilities, medical institutions, gas stations, and corporate facilities.

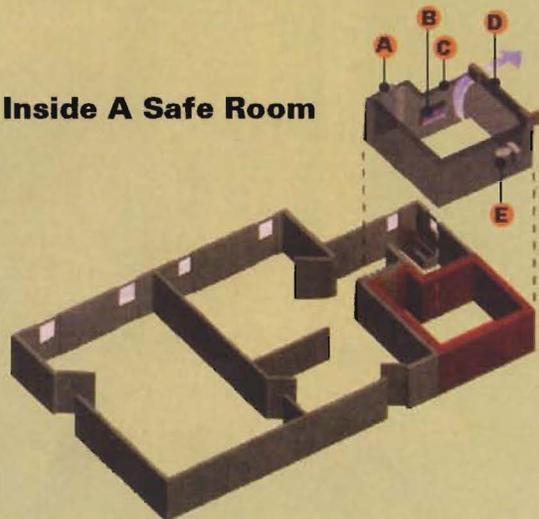
Gaffney explains that, unlike in the movie *Panic Room*, safe rooms are intended to be occupied for only minutes up to an hour. "In a life-threatening situation, a person normally needs protection for a very short period of time, say 30 minutes. The other extreme would be World War III. In reality, needing a safe room for a weekend probably wouldn't happen," he says.

Safe rooms vary considerably, depending on the need of the building owner. In financial and gaming applications, needs might include bullet-resistant doors and glass, Plexiglass bandit barriers, deal trays, package passers, voice communicators at teller windows, and drive-through services to assist in separating personnel from would-be criminals.

In a corporate setting, Gaffney's company might use an existing closet or lunchroom as a safe room, designing a variety of life safety and security elements into a facility.

Beginning with the walls, floor, and ceiling, reinforced steel

Inside A Safe Room



A Closer Look

Typically invisible to an intruder, safe rooms are more than just a hiding place until authorities can arrive. In addition to having a bullet-resistant, forced-entry barrier, occupants of a safe room can watch what is happening outside of the room via CCTV camera and video monitors located inside of the room.

Following are a few other safety features that standard safe rooms offer:

- A** Layers of steel lattice sandwiched around bullet-resistant Kevlar.
- B** Multiple forms of communication with the outside world: phones, walkie-talkies, and panic buttons to alert security forces.
- C** Flame-retardant material to coat the walls. Sound-proofing is also put in place to muffle any noise.
- D** Exhaust systems.
- E** Toiletries & water sources.

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— Thomas Gaffney, President and Founder, Gaffco



Gaffney began offering customers state-of-the-art, bullet-resistant architectural millwork products to address the aesthetic needs of corporate customers, such as L’Oreal, Salomon Smith Barney, Chase, and Trump.

plates and bullet-resistant Plexiglass are installed to prevent weapon penetration into the space. One single door, similarly outfitted, features a four-point locking system that bolts into the jambs, floor, and ceiling as an effective bullet-resistant, forced-entry barrier. The room would also have a fire suppression system and an oxygen tank. Gaffney advises clients to add a secret compartment in the room to house a gun and a cell phone or two-way radio.

Safe Room amenities can include:

- Ballistic wall systems.
- Plexiglass bandit barriers.
- Bullet-resistant doors.
- Bullet-resistant windows.
- Laminated glass.

- Package passers.
- Voice communicators.
- Deal trays.
- A bomb detector.
- A body scanner.
- Architectural millwork.

We’ve come a long way from the days of door-to-door bomb shelter salesmen. Increased personnel and data security, at a time when many people are feeling vulnerable, will either prove to be smart thinking or panic impulse. I’ll bet my money on smart thinking. **B**

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