

# Somewhere to hide

Safe rooms offer secret refuge in times of crisis

Christopher Mele  
The Journal News

**W**HEN TOM GAFFNEY gets done refinishing a bathroom, it looks the same as it did when he started. But look beyond the porcelain fixtures and tiled floors and you'll find the equivalent of a mini-fortress.

The walls, floor and ceiling have been reinforced with steel plates and bullet-resistant Plexiglas. The door, similarly outfitted, has a four-point system that locks into the jambs, floor and ceiling. The room has a fire suppression system and an oxygen tank. A secret compartment in the medicine cabinet has room for a gun and cell phone.

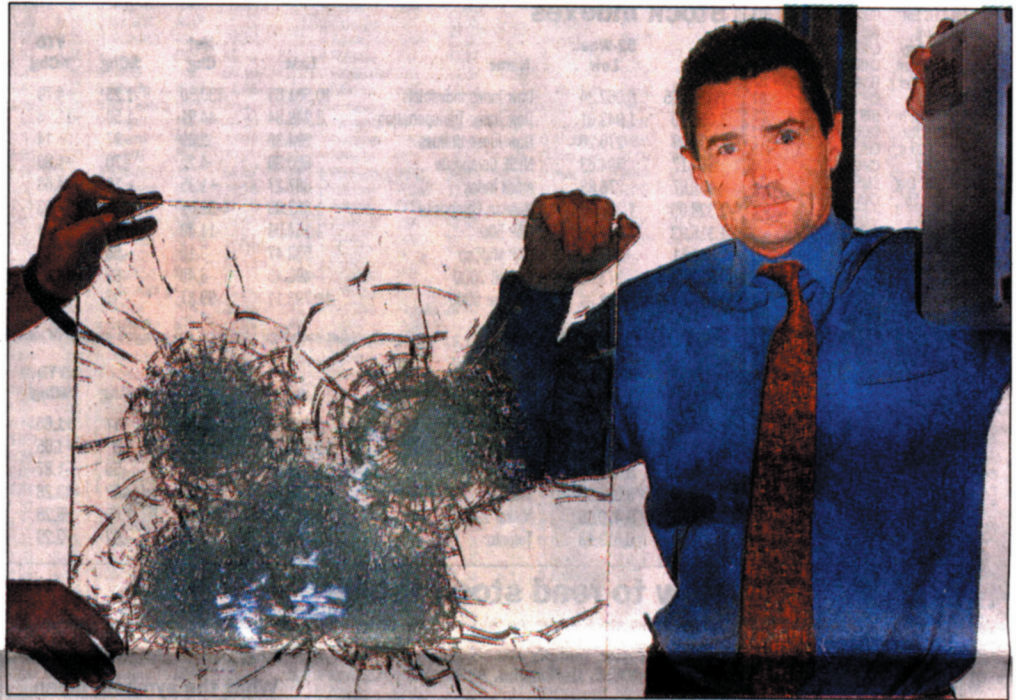
It sounds like a specially designed commode for James Bond. But, in reality, this is a so-called "safe room," the likes of which are in high demand by corporate executives, foreign dignitaries and the well-to-do.

Rooms like these are at the center of a Jodie Foster movie, "Panic Room," in theaters starting March 29. A divorced woman and her daughter are caught in a cat-and-mouse game inside their brownstone after three burglars come looking for a stash of cash. They hide in a "panic room," a secret refuge designed to protect occupants from intruders and would-be kidnapers.

Demand in the safe room market became "huge" after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, said Gaffney, president of Gaffco Inc. The Mount Vernon company manufactures and installs bullet resistant systems combined with high-end woodworking.

Before Sept. 11, the company built 25 safe rooms a year. In 2002, Gaffney expects to construct 200. "It's just gone off the rack," he said. "We're getting calls we never got before in our lifetime."

Master bathrooms at the homes of clients are converted to safe rooms because they're most accessible in the



Stephen Schmitt/The Journal News

Tom Gaffney, president of Gaffco Inc. in Mount Vernon, holds a section of bullet-resistant glass that had been shot five times with a .44-caliber Magnum. The bullets did not penetrate the glass. Gaffney said demand for safe rooms has gone through the roof after Sept. 11. He expects to build 200 safe rooms this year; before the terrorist attacks, the company built 25 a year.

event of a nighttime break-in. The bathrooms have fully functional indoor plumbing and to the naked eye appear to be nothing extraordinary. But it's not every bathroom door that can withstand the blows of a sledgehammer.

Gaffney, who's built about 150 safe rooms in residential and corporate office settings over six years, noted that Gaffco's roots were in building check-cashing stores in New York City. "We learned a few tricks along the way," he said. Depending on how lavish the bathrooms are, costs can range from \$30,000 to \$100,000. "It all depends," he said. "I can build the Bat-Cave."

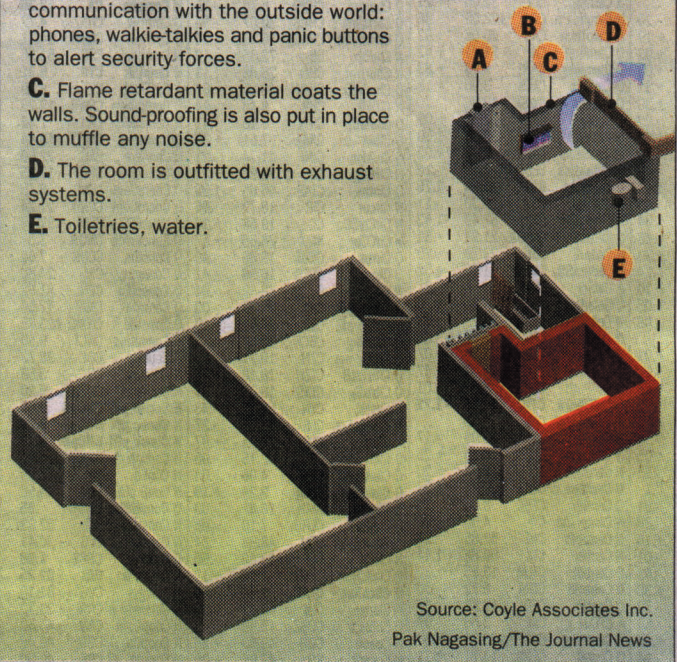
Although Gaffney's handiwork doubles as a bathroom, Nanuet security consultant William Coyle of Coyle Associates Inc. designs and builds safe rooms that are concealed. Think haunted mansion movies with sliding bookcases, false walls and faux fireplaces that open to hidden rooms.

"You don't write a sign that says 'safe room,'" Coyle said. In one case, he built a safe

## A look inside a safe room

The rooms, hidden behind the walls or fixtures in a home, are reinforced with steel plates and bullet-resistant glass. An intruder can't see the room, but the occupant can watch what's happening on video monitors inside.

- A.** Layers of hard steel lattice sandwiched around bullet-resistant glass.
- B.** Safe rooms have multiple forms of communication with the outside world: phones, walkie-talkies and panic buttons to alert security forces.
- C.** Flame retardant material coats the walls. Sound-proofing is also put in place to muffle any noise.
- D.** The room is outfitted with exhaust systems.
- E.** Toiletries, water.



Source: Coyle Associates Inc.  
Pak Nagasing/The Journal News

Please see SAFE, 4D