

## Outdoor Cat Enclosures

**CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains what a cat needs in an outdoor enclosure.**

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Posted: May 30, 2008 2 a.m. EDT

**Q:** I want to design an outdoor cat house, but I need to know more about what cats like for shelter. Do they like to see their world from their shelter, hence the need for several windows? Or do they prefer a darkened, cozy cubby hole with maybe just one window? Do they prefer a small space they have to crawl into, or do they prefer something big enough for them to stand up and move around? Any tips you can give me would be much appreciated.

**A:** Catteries, breeders, shelters and rescue organizations are the most common groups of people who build structures specifically to house cats. Cat houses, if built with the cat's needs in mind and provided that the cats have a lot of interactions with people, can be fun and enriching places for them.

It's important to plan carefully before building a cat building. Make sure that the building isn't too small for the number of cats that will be housed. Overcrowding is a serious problem in some catteries and rescue organizations, often resulting in illness, aggression and other behavior issues. Proper ventilation and heating are important, along with plenty of feeding and watering stations. If possible, build accessible secure and covered outside areas adjacent to the cat building.

Cats like to have litterbox choices. Make sure there are an adequate number of uncovered litterboxes in different areas of the cat building. Plan for lots of structures for the cats to climb and engage in gymnastics on. Cats love accessible rafters, shelves, platforms and climbing structures. Vertical territory should be constructed in such a way that cats have multiple ways up and down. Never build a structure that a cat might feel cornered on. Cats love looking out windows with great views. Combine two of their favorite pastimes -- climbing and gazing -- by placing tall cat trees next to secure windows.

Cats enjoy hiding places and covered refuge areas. Wooden boxes, paper bags and tunnels all help to provide stimulation and can help a tentative cat feel secure. Building covered areas on vertical territory provides places to sleep, more climbing and play areas. Some catteries provide a TV or computer screens that play CDs or DVDs that cater to the feline audience. Puzzle boxes, treat balls and cat safe toys can also enhance a cat's life.

Don't forget the human factor. A beautiful cattery or cat building with lots of environmental enrichment is not enough. Most socialized cats want to interact with people. It is not enough to just feed, water and clean the litterboxes. Most cats love to play, some like lap-sitting opportunities and special grooming sessions with people.

I have clients who have built beautiful and imaginative cat enclosures or buildings directly onto their homes. Installed cat doors allow their cat's free access into both the house and the enclosures whenever the mood hits them. While being built primarily for the cats, they also have comfortable benches, tables and chairs, making it possible for people to enjoy these cat wonderlands alongside their cats.