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Forget Chequers and the Palace of Versailles. The next time Gordon Brown or Nicholas Sarkozy need a bolthole in which to recharge their batteries or a place for a private pow-wow, they might find themselves lured to a new retreat amid the pink rocks of the Nevada desert.

Donna Vassar, part of the Vassar education dynasty, has launched plans to build a \$300m (£150m) private getaway for stressed-out presidents and prime ministers who want to "reconnect with their unique purpose in life".

The Universitas Leadership Sanctuary is intended as part monastery and part conference centre where the most powerful men and women on the planet can get away from it all with a combination of reading, contemplation and even a spot of gardening.

To remind them of their role as leaders of the planet, the sanctuary will be built in the shape of a four-storey globe on the shores of Lake Las Vegas, a privately-owned lake in the south Nevada desert where temperatures can reach 50C at the height of summer.

Vassar, whose family established the liberal arts college of the same name in New York State, has unveiled plans which include libraries, contemplation spaces and debating chambers. She intends to recreate a monastic existence which means entourages of press officers, policy advisers and secretaries which routinely support world leaders will be banned. There will even be a garden to provide food for the sanctuary tables, raising the prospect of future world leaders tilling the soil together while ruminating on the direction of the latest round of world trade talks.

"The Universitas Leadership Sanctuary will be a centre specifically created to embrace and challenge leaders," says the vision document which Vassar has published. "Together we will create an individual journey leading to the highest place within, enabling leaders to reconnect with their unique purpose in life. They emerge - renewed, with clarity, and reflecting true transformation."

Speaking through a spokeswoman, Vassar said visitors would be encouraged "to keep things informal in order to submit to the relaxing atmosphere".

Leaving cares behind

Vasser hired Douglas Patterson, the London-based artist and architect to work on the plans, after she saw a mansion he built in a Mogul style on the Caribbean island of Mustique. Before the commission to design the Sanctuary, Patterson travelled to study the life and architecture of Buddhist Dzongs (monasteries) in Bhutan and the Christian orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos and Meteora in Greece.

He is now working with Laurie Chetwood, an architect who made his name designing eco-friendly supermarkets for Sainsbury's. "This will be a place for people to leave their cares behind and get back to what they are all about," Chetwood said. "The building is approached by a labyrinth which means the leaders will leave their cares and their entourages behind both metaphorically and literally.

"The place is designed to strip away the layers of protocol that build up around these kind of people and help them get back to clarity. They can also use the place like a monk might. There will be libraries and a garden to produce food, although I can't quite see Gordon Brown going out and tilling the land."

The main globe building will be on four levels. The ground floor will house a library and the first floor a debating chamber, while on the second floor will be technology to help make the building energy efficient. At the top, under a dome of glass, will be the spiritual heart of the development - the contemplation space where leaders will be encouraged to sit in silence.

Simple quarters

The world leaders will have simple quarters next to the globe where they will be able to eat and sleep during retreats lasting a weekend or longer.

It is not the first attempt to bring world leaders together in a different environment to the conference halls and meeting rooms of the United Nations, Davos and Camp David. In late 2006 President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan opened the Pyramid of Peace in Astana, his capital. The 77-metre-high building, designed by Lord Foster, includes a 1,500-seat opera house. At its apex it is crowned by a meeting space decorated with images of doves especially designed to host conferences of the leaders of the world's religions.

Vassar has set up Destination Universitas Foundation, a New York charitable foundation, to raise money for the project, which she estimates will take two and a half years to build. She is travelling the world to meet potential donors and has told them her mission is "to create better balance in the world by transforming leaders".

A spokesman for Lake Las Vegas resort confirmed that late last year the foundation expressed an interest in buying a 65-acre plot in its development

which already includes a Ritz Carlton Hotel, luxurious homes and a spa. The location means that if the world leaders tire of their monastic retreat they will find a golf course on their doorstep as well as a small casino. And if all that concentrating on inner thoughts gets too much, the Las Vegas strip is just 17 miles away.

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