Living Window-to-Window, It's Not Polite to Stare

By DANIELLE FLOOD

Richard Singer, who is 15, stands alone in his room in the Bronx. He faces his closet door. It is nighttime. A song comes on the radio. "Oh that's horrible," he says.

Who is he talking to?

The window is open. So is the window of the man's apartment next door.

Soon maybe they will have a stereo war, as they have had before. Richard says the funny part is they have the same taste in music.

"Funny," because Richard doesn't know this man's name. He has never spoken to him. He has spoken at him (see above) upon occasion. And he has stereo wars with him.

And Richard knows so much about him, just because his living room window is across a seven-foot-wide alley that most of the time he calls the man "they"instead of "him."

It's a way of coping with a certain dimension of reality:

Richard lives with his parents. But Richard also lives with this man, sort of, the way many of us live with dozens of other people or a few other people, sort of. They live with us, we live with them, but not in the same house or apartment.

The domain we share is the window world.

Mostly it's a kind of visual reality, most of the time visual rather than auditory because windows of buildings opposite each other aren't usually as close to each other as Richard's and his neighbor's are.

Sometimes it's like watching TV— without the sound—only the show will not be renewed.

And in environments where others live close by and/or most of those who live around us are strangers, the window can be bond or barrier, in varying degrees, depending upon individual definitions of and attitudes toward privacy.

For some, privacy is in the mind, and so they leave their shades up all or most of the time and do what they wish, oblivious. Most people, however, become shy at some point.

And so an unwritten code, a window etiquette, evolves: I'll look at you and you look at me, but only from time to time and never too intently.

Maybe it's like being on a subway. We observe one another, sometimes minutely, but each act of perception must be oblique. Nothing personal. No eye contact, please, no gestures of recognition.

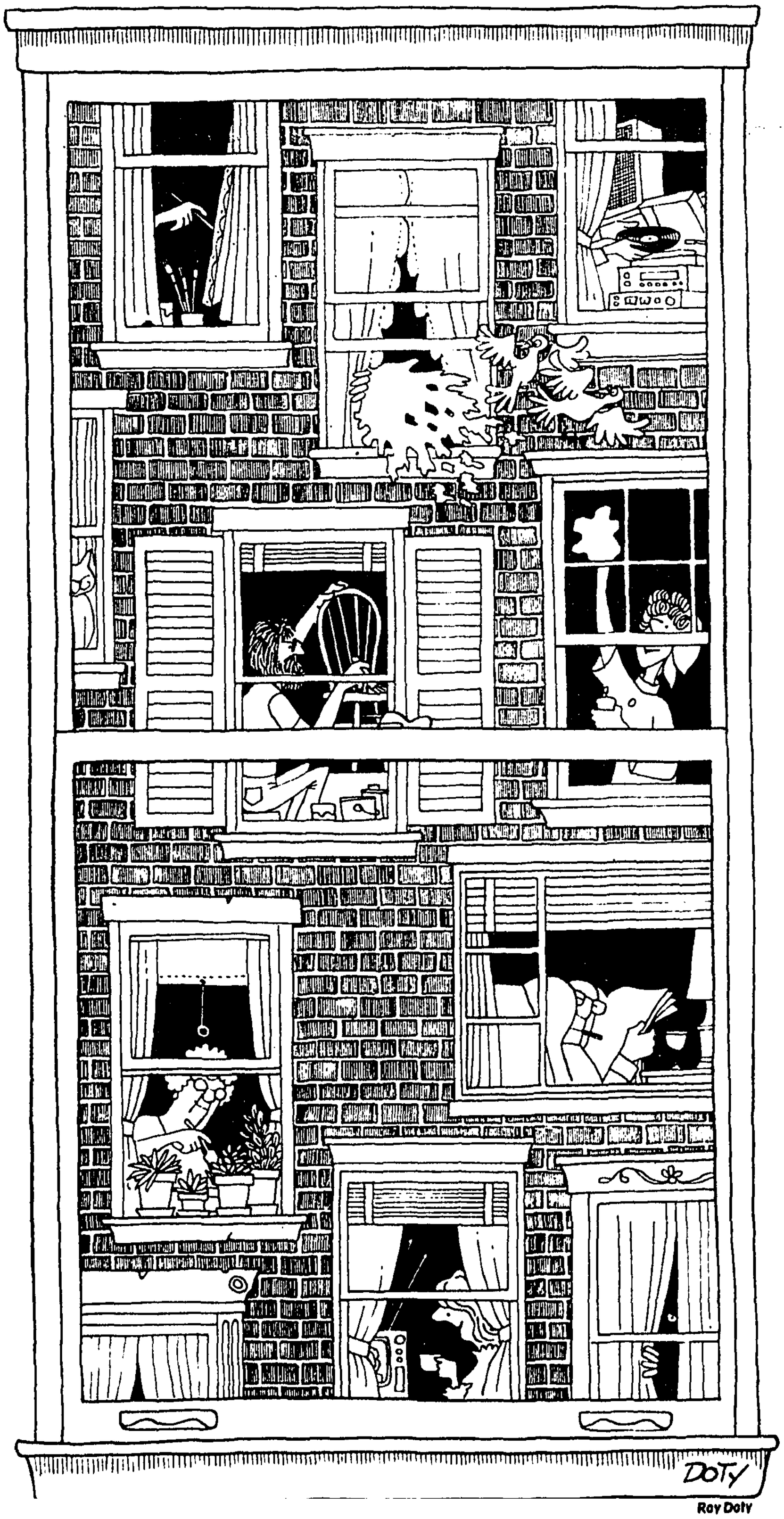
This is even more important for window gazers because looking too closely, too directly, is a kind of peeping. We feel this, even though there is no law in New York City about peeping Toms from afar.

According to a spokesman for the Manhattan District Attorney, should a watcher stand right beneath a window—or beyond the stoop or property line of a residence—and look in, he or she could be punished under the criminal trespass law. But there is nothing against peeping from the apartment window next door. If your neighbor is too curious, pull the shades.

Thus, natural light may sometimes have to be sacrificed for privacy. But usually it doesn't go that far. A delicate balance of window etiquette is maintained, and barrier becomes bond.

"I don't feel alone," says Joy Jaxson, a painter. Yet she is usually by herself for much of the day, until her husband comes home from work.

But then people walking, working, watching others, dealing with plants, paint, easels, lamps and canvasses are part of the citiscape she sees through the five eight-by-five foot windows on two sides of the Jaxsons' 2,500-square-foot Soho loft.



Roy Doty

"I feel like they're there. There's company around me," she says. "I don't feel lonely and that feels good and they're in their apartments and not covering up and that feels good.

"They're part of my visual life and my visual life is separate from my life."

Part of her fascination with the windows around her has to do with what she doesn't see in them.

Imagination takes over.

Like short flashbacks in a movie, she sees scenes.

In one window—"I have seen hands watering the plants but I have never seen anyone. I think generally that it's someone who would rather be home than with people, so maybe they're someone I don't want to know—someone self-contained."

In another window—like her own on the

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second floor—"You can tell she's serious. She'll paint for hours, working on two or three things. Cans of paint are there. It's business. It's not pretty. I can just see how she moves her brush. I can't see any of her work. But I have an idea she's good.

"It makes me feel good to watch her. I like it the way she stands there and works, totally concentrated and absorbed."

Mrs. Jaxson doesn't mind being watched, she says, because she is absorbed in her painting. But the people who watch her generally don't want her to see them seeing her, which is typical window behavior (you turn your head quickly.).

"I think it's a politeness New Yorkers have," says Mrs. Jaxson, who is from Memphis. "It's like, I'm not going to bother your territory

It's like on the subway, people will read your newspaper over your shoulder until they see you looking then they won't look anymore."

Patricia Earnest thinks that when people across the street from her West Side apartment turn away after she sees them see her they are, by avoiding eye contact, merely adjusting to scrutiny—which is what she considers life in New York to be. So what does she do then she sees them see her? She waves. They don't wave back. "I refuse to make myself embarrassed at a visual encounter or confined to my home out of fear," she says. "Then I die a little bit."

If Margie Patterson felt she were being watched all the time, she would draw her shades. But she doesn't feel that way about the people who live behind the windows that are like "a patchwork quilt . . .a pattern" outside her fifth floor rear window.

"As much as I'm aware of these people I know that they're probably aware of me. But I see. I don't watch. So I assume that on their parts, they're doing the same, which is maybe a dumb assumption.

"I feel that those people living over there are part of my community. I don't feel anything sinister. So I guess that's why the shades are left open in the living room. Most of those people over there leave their shades in their living room open too, possibly for the same reason I do. To get more extension of space, to see light and see darkness and stars.

"I accept these people as part of my living. They're just like me. Relaxing, when they can, on their off hours. Living their routines. There's some humanity there. Some of them are more human to me than others.

There's the lady who sunbathes in the nude, ("I think she's kind of neat; she's not paranoid about people watching.") there's the guy who's always refinishing things and once Miss Patterson saw him refinishing furniture in the rain in November in a tee shirt and jeans. And then there's the pigeon lady.

In the morning, and, Miss Patterson says, sometimes as early as dawn, the white-haired woman parts her lace curtains and throws hot water on her little terrace to chase away the pigeons. "No matter what she does they keep coming back. But if she has to do it again the next day, she does it the next day. I think of her as a fighter."

In the warm months people are constantly out on their terraces and in their yards and Miss Patterson can hear their voices and music and laughter. "Sometimes it's comforting. You don't feel closed in. You know they're there. You need them."

One night last summer, Miss Patterson was on her roof, about nine o'clock and she heard three screams. "I was totally paralyzed with fright because it really sounded like someone was being murdered and I came downstairs as soon as I could get myself up and moving.

"All of the people were on their terraces and at their windows and everybody was yelling back and forth, yelling 'Which side was it? Where did it come from? Which yard was it?' People were like yelling across to one another to locate where the screams had come from. Someone said 'I'm calling the police.'

"It was reassuring because I felt that if anything ever happened and I started screaming, people would react.

"I feel isolated on the streets but not in my apartment.

"The city is a place where most people work. It's kind of a dehumanizing thing when you live in the city. So you look for some touch of humanity."

Defensive. Mike Gorman says "urban city living creates defensiveness.

"There's something about quote unquote people not having time for other people in the city. If somebody comes up to me on the street there's some mechanism in me that says either this person wants something or this person's crazy and I suppose you could carry that neurosis to my kitchen window."

(You see, Mike Gorman's kitchen window has curtains drawn over them, but he can see the lady next door—across a driveway off Avenue O in Brooklyn—noshing in her kitchen at two o'clock in the morning, because Mr. Gorman is a nosher at two o'clock in the morning, and she can't see him.)

He keeps his curtains drawn to keep out the draft and for decoration. "Looking into somebody else's window is not exactly my idea of living room decor and I happen to enjoy my privacy. Living in the city you have a certain limited amount of privacy and you have to grab every bit you can get."

Ahha! But Mr. Gorman watches the lady across the driveway nevertheless. He knows she watches the soaps, all the police shows, the sit coms and light TV movies and stays up late enough to watch Mary H. "I kind of chuckle. This is what the American 55-year-old widow is watching and then I say this is what the 35-year-old American man is watching." And why does he watch her? Admit it Mr. Gorman. "I'm a yenta."

Camile Moran knows the type. "Yeah," she says from a "tight" New Rochelle complex of eight six-story buildings with 15 families in each. "Certain apartments always have the shades down. They're so paranoid that we're going to look at them.

"Even though I can, I don't look, not in other people's apartments. I never do. It's an exercise in character building. So when I'm home I keep all my shades up hoping they won't look at me."

Most of the windows in this complex are covered most of the time, except Mrs. Moran's.

One window that is not shaded however is directly across from her kitchen window and Mrs. Moran, a pseudonym, believes it is due to her influence that that window has no shade.

A middle-aged couple lives in the apartment with the unshaded kitchen window and for the first two weeks after they moved in, they kept the kitchen window covered. "I kept mine up all the time. I wasn't ashamed of what they see. I don't care if they see me in my house coat or my rollers. I thought that was ridiculous they should have the shades on the kitchen window. You should start the day off with the shades off.

"Now she takes pride in her window. And at Christmas she puts little flashing lights on the kitchen window and I put up a little Christmas tree for her. If I ran into her tomorrow I wouldn't know who she was."

Of the majority of windows in the complex which are shaded, Mrs. Moran says "I think they keep their shades closed because they're probably looking.

"When we first moved in we were first married and we didn't have curtains and the super came. That goes to show they were looking. The super. The super comes and tells us to put curtains. The point is, how did he know I didn't have them? (She had drawn venetian blinds.) Why was it so important to him? We had plants in the windows and we weren't doing dirties. They were watching our lifestyle. I didn't mind that they watched. I didn't like that they comment on it.

"The point is there was nothing to watch—cooking, cleaning, having a few people over. We were very happy newlyweds. It must have bothered them.

"I think a lot of it has to do with their not being happy. If you're happy you keep the shades open. If you're not, you shut the world out. You close the world. I mean if you're open, you leave them open. If you shut them, you're closed."

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