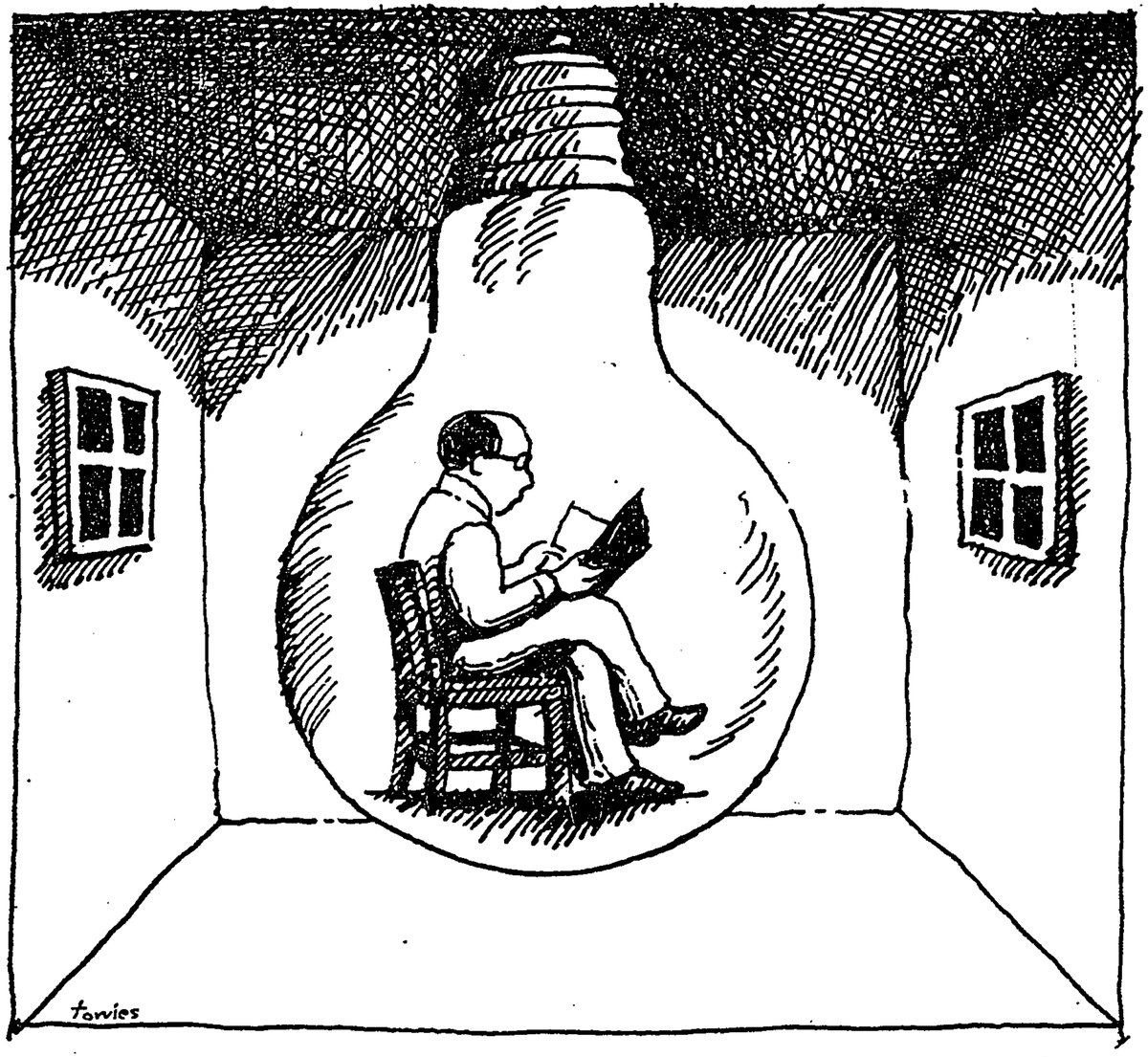

Ed Towles

A Home With Little Light The Lot of Many Here

By DANIELLE FLOOD

There are many things Patricia Burstein loves about her apartment. It is located at 40 Central Park South. A nice address. Close to work, about 10 blocks away, and she likes to walk to work.

She likes her building. The service people are nice. One tenant was sick and they rang up and asked if she needed anything. They do repairs. They will hang a painting.

She likes the security of a doorman. The owner of the building lives there, and she likes that. She can order from room service at the St. Moritz next door. For a $10 installation fee an answering service picks up her calls after a certain number of rings.

She likes the apartment itself; "the way the space is appointed." It is quiet, a back apartment.

And she loves leaving it on weekends. Because it is dark. Because she is tired of finding out whether or not it is sunny from the reflection on the windows of the Park Lane Hotel. "I feel like a giraffe," she said of having to stretch her neck out the window to catch a glimpse of sky or reflection of sky from another window. The view from her three windows is of brick. Manila-colored brick. She calls it "manila misery."

She took the apartment a year and a half ago anyway, because of its advantages. "And I didn't want to live in a modern high rise." Her rent is $450, including electricity.

"It's a trade-off," she says.

For many, living without natural light—or with very little natural light—is part of The Great New York City Apartment Compromise.

As compensation, there's space, quiet, or a chic address.

People will often sacrifice light for more space. But there are people who work all night and sleep all day and don't want much natural light. And there are people who prefer the quiet and privacy of a dark, rear apartment to the noise and exposure of a sunny apartment overlooking an avenue. And then there are always people who will give up anything, absolutely anything, including light, for a good address.

The value of light is almost wholly subjective, intertwined with life style, occupation, and, in some cases, childhood memories and experiences with various living spaces. And how people accommodate to a lack of it depends on how they furnish and decorate their apartments, how much time they spend there, and what they associate lightness and darkness with.

Myra Vega, a senior at Morris High School, is sometimes better able to "see" in the dark than in the light. She visits the den of the 149th Street and Third Avenue apartment she shares with her parents and younger sister. The den is used for storage. There is a window. The view is of brown brick. The next building hides most of the light.

"The mood is quiet and deep," she says. "You can go there and really meditate on your problems, check out your own mind. To me, when you're in the dark you have a feeling of serenity. The darkness is black and it's a quiet color. You usually find it at funerals and funerals are very quiet. A light room fixes your mind on just about everything. But when you're in the dark you can't see anything so your mind is strictly on the thing that you're thinking about. Sometimes I'd rather be in the

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dark than in the light." Alan Zeibel, a television writer, doesn't, even though the shutters of his apartment are usually closed. No difference. From there, not only is his line of vision on a level with car doors, he has a northern exposure and lives in the shadow of a 17-story building. He likes his apartment best when he's not in it.

In the morning by a vague fan of light that peeps through the top edge of his shutters, you can make out a pullout couch, a makeshift desk, an oversized spearmint gum box for a cocktail table and an Emmy twinkling on the mantle. "I wake up," he says, "and I don't know what time it is because it's as dark as it is when I go to sleep."

His is probably the simplest way of dealing with living without light. "I'm not here, I'm just not here," he says. "This is just a place for me to sleep and to do some work on occasion. I couldn't see spending the days here unless I just felt like being depressed. I spend maybe five hours of my day here."

Anita Silverman, who lives in a ground floor duplex facing north with "buildings all around," exchanged light for a yard. She is used to light and space. "In El Paso, you just looked out the bedroom window and you could see the Rocky Mountains," she says. "It was really nice. When you took a shower you could see the desert. There's nothing like having a barbecue in New York City and if you can look outside from your living room and see space it makes it seem like the living room is bigger."

Confinement is what makes some people depressed by dark places, according to Dr. Elliot Weitzman, a neurologist who has studied persons living without natural light for months at a time. "It's not that there's not light," he says. "It's that you don't see the outside. Probably the most powerful fear and concern relates to freedom of choice and action."

Mrs. Silverman keeps trying to bring the outside inside. Instead of putting up curtains or blinds in the guest bedroom, which is above ground level, she installed glass shelves across the windows and put plants on them. There are three plant lights in her living room and about half a dozen plants that don't seem to grow and don't seem to die.

There are no plants in the Silvermans' underground bedroom. "Too dark," she said. Its only window "is not a real window." It opens onto an air duct that leads to the back yard and is covered by a grate. "Neither of us like that room that much," she says. Besides, as a bedroom it's illegal.

"Every bedroom has to have windows. Every livable or habitable room where normal domestic functions are carried on must have a minimum of ventilation and light according to the city's building code," says Irving Minkin, director of operations for the Department of Buildings. That minimum is 10 percent of the floor area for which the window is providing light and ventilation, he said. The below-ground-level room in the Silvermans' apartment does not meet code requirements as a bedroom, he said; it should be a recreation room or some other semi-habitated room.

There are more than two million apartments in New York City; Manhattan leads with about 700,000. Mr. Minkin says he couldn't guess how many of them do not have code-required light and ventilation. The department has a backlog of 55,000 violations, a staff of 113 to handle them, and priorities such as "structurally distressed buildings." In addition, said Mr. Minkin, "we can only honor a written complaint, unless we see something hazardous."

So who is going to complain to the buildings department that the Silvermans' bedroom is illegal even though their apartment was advertised as a two-bedroom?

"Who cares?" said Dennis Layne who owns two two-family houses in Flushing and lives in the illegal basement of one of them. "Go up and down this block—every two-family house is an illegal three."

Living without light doesn't bother Mr. Layne, an orchestra leader who is home more at night than day.

"If things are darker they're a little warmer, closer to the earth," said Mr. Layne. "Like when you're playing sax and clarinet, there are a lot of different sounds you can get. I like a darker sound as opposed to a more shrill higher pitch. I feel bad for the animals though," he said, referring to his two cats and English sheepdog. "Maybe the darkness makes them a little sleepier."

Particularly in the interior room, where a purple light shines in a large aquarium, it is easy after a few hours to lose a sense of time, which is partly what a certain study at Montefiore Hospital and Medical Center in the Bronx is about.

There, in a restricted area of the fifth and top floor, beyond signs that read "Remove Watch Do Not Mention Time of Day" and "Say 'Hello' Only Do Not Say 'Good Morning,' 'Good Afternoon,' etc. Do Not Discuss Day of Week," Mr. East and Mr. West were living recently in the Laboratory of Human Chronophysiology.

They are students who are being studied under the constant condition of not having time cues. For weeks at a time they listen to their bodies. As they live in separate apartments whose windows have been painted black, covered with fiberglass insulation, foil guard and plasterboard, Dr. Elliot Weitzman and Charles Czeisler, a doctoral candidate, measure their sleep patterns, brain waves, body temperature and hormones, give them performance and psychological tests, and watch them on closed-circuit television.

The study, conducted on and off for a year and a half, has included eight subjects, among them Mr. East and Mr. West. It is partially funded by the Office of Naval Research and costs "in the hundreds of thousands of dollars," said Dr. Weitzman.

Although their findings are far from final, Dr. Weitzman and Mr. Czeisler have made some observations, including the fact that all the subjects had broken away from a 24-hour rhythm. "Most of our people go on a 25-hour day," said Dr. Weitzman. "Some subjects go on a 40-or 50-hour day. They sleep for 18 hours and they're awake for 30 hours, and to them it's a normal day."

During a recent visit to the lab, strains of The Beatles came from the data acquisitions system monitoring the subjects. Mr. West was playing "Here Comes the Sun."

"When you're walking into their rooms," said Mr. Czeisler, "it's completely different from the outside world. It's very calm and relaxed. They're free to leave at any time although none of the subjects has done this. On the other hand we try to make it pleasant for them. They have a very nice stereo."

Dr. Weitzman said the subjects were "extremely productive" in their time cue-free environments and showed "remarkably little significant emotional depression."

"One guy, an artist who owns a pizza parlor, painted 15 oil paintings in three weeks," Dr. Weitzman said. "Another wrote 80 percent of his doctoral dissertation on biomedical engineering in two weeks. He said he probably wouldn't have finished it if it weren't for the study."

Barbara Siegel, an artist, has no problem with productivity in her basement studio. For $150 a month she has 1,200 square feet and 12-foot ceilings. Her view is "legs, lots of legs" and a brick wall. She doesn't mind not having natural light. "An impressionist works with the play of light. I'm much more interested in symbols and metaphors. Sunlight is a kind of naked clarity. I'm more interested in what's not obvious."

The white walls and beige floors of her studio are ablaze with the reflections of four 200-watt bulbs and General Electric Mainlighter Daylight Fluorescent rods.

"I need light but the colors I create are not what I see outside," she says. "Art is usually hanging on a wall with very little natural light. It doesn't make that much sense to work on something under one condition that is going to be looked at under another condition. Light from fluorescence is constant. I can create any light effect I want. Sunlight comes and goes."

Paul Marantz has been fascinated by light since he was 10 years old, when he built a model puppet theater and put on a play without puppets. "I was mystified by the way the light changed and what I could do with it. The stage became a stage of light events."

Mr. Marantz, a lighting consultant who teaches at Columbia School of Architecture, is still attracted to light events —"the day doesn't really start until the sun comes up in the east, which is over tall buildings in Manhattan."

He lives on the side of town that gets to see the sun go down. He took the apartment on 82d Street and Riverside Drive because "it was the right apartment in every respect but light," which just goes to show—even a lighting consultant will sometimes sacrifice light.

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