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People Who Live in Glass Houses

It's Not All Sunshine; Faded Furniture, Nosy Neighbors and Baking Heat Among Grips

By **SARA LIN**

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Seeking views, Sara Antani bought a 17th-floor condo last August in a new Manhattan high-rise with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Hudson River.



Glen DiCrocchio

The sun faded Sara Antani's sofas and made it tough to read her laptop until she installed shades in her Manhattan high-rise.

She got her vistas. But she got other things she didn't bargain for. The strong and relentless western light forced her to don sunglasses while reading. It made watching television and using her laptop computer almost impossible. The air conditioning could barely keep the temperature tolerable as sun baked the \$1.5 million apartment on summer afternoons. And the sun bleached her pair of brightly colored European sectional sofas, which cost \$20,000.

In June, Ms. Antani gave in, spending \$12,000 on motorized shades that she keeps lowered during the day. "I love being able to see everything," says Ms. Antani, a


23-year-old graduate student. But "the sun's just in your eyes; you can't focus. Everything is so bright."

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Wall-to-wall windows have become a signature of chic urban living, from Minneapolis to Miami. Home magazines and real-estate ads depict fashionable people in glass-walled towers lounging in front of endless views. But some residents say the reality can be less glamorous. Their windows often are streaked or spotty, even when washed regularly. The sun fades not just furniture but also kitchen cabinets, wood floors, artwork and even books. While urbanites are used to nearby neighbors, a glass-walled apartment without shades can be akin to being on display in a terrarium, especially at night. And temperatures near the glass can be chilly in the winter and roasting in the summer.

In Los Angeles, David Wood learned the hard way not to try to clean the expansive windows in

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SEE AN INTERACTIVE 



his downtown condo on a sunny afternoon. The investment banker squirted Windex onto the inside of one of them -- and it stuck. "The mist baked right into the window and stained it. I couldn't get it out. It was that hot," he recalls. The stain is still there.



Ann Johansson

Investment banker David Wood sprayed Windex on the glass of his Los Angeles condo -- and it baked on.

Rick LaBelle bought a downtown Chicago condo in October that came with sweeping views of Lake Michigan -- and of the hotel across the street. "They can clearly see in," he says. "Oftentimes people over at the hotel will wave." The lack of privacy forced his daughter to retreat to a bathroom to dress. So the auto executive this month paid \$15,000 for motorized shades to cover his windows.

Melanie Feinbloom says privacy is just one reason she spent \$8,000 for 62 feet of curtains for her downtown Manhattan condo. After her family moved from a brick apartment building to the glass-walled high-rise, her electric bills doubled per square foot because of all the heat-transferring glass. It costs more than \$500 a month to heat the 2,200-square-foot apartment at the height of the winter and at least \$400 a month to cool it in the summer, says Ms. Feinbloom, an interior designer.

Complaints about glass houses date to some of the earliest examples. After architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe completed his iconic Plano, Ill., Modernist house in 1951, the owner, Edith Farnsworth, started grumbling. Illuminated at night, the elevated glass box became a magnet for bugs. During the summer, "the sun turned the interior into a cooker," writes Mies biographer Franz Schulze. Dr. Farnsworth sued the architect, in part over cost overruns but also because she contended that the house was unlivable. She ultimately lost her petition to rescind the added expenses, but her gripes were aired widely and resulted in a small backlash against Modernist architecture.

UNPREPARED FOR THE HEAT

Glass technology has improved since then. To cut down on sun damage and heat transfer, window makers use films on the surface and gases between the double panes that act as insulators, such as argon. Some windows even have a coating designed to shed dirt and reduce the need for washing. But problems continue. Terry Talentino, chief operating officer of Automated Shading Inc., says he has done work for thousands of apartment owners in Florida and Manhattan who are unprepared for how much solar heat gets transferred by their enormous windows. Many buy their condos based on preconstruction renderings or after viewing a sales unit with ideal conditions, such as less-sunny northern and eastern exposures, he says. "I'm not sure people really anticipate what they're getting themselves into when they're buying these," Mr. Talentino says.

And even when residents decide they need to compromise their views and install curtains or shades, the installation can be problematic. The longer rods and extra fabric needed to cover a wall of glass not only are expensive but also often require installers to use extra-tall ladders or scaffolding. And sometimes these extra-long curtain rods or shades don't fit into condo freight elevators and have to be carried up the stairs or taken up on top of the elevator cab -- at extra cost.

Seasoned glass-house residents have developed strategies to cope with the sun-filled spaces. Connie and Jeff Watson, whose primary home has large windows, recently bought a second home

in the new W Dallas Victory Hotel & Residences, which has floor-to-ceiling glass. Ms. Watson says she worked with her designer to carefully place every piece of furniture in the 4,800-square-foot apartment. Bright orange-and-red sofas were set back at least 10 feet from the windows. The rosewood grand piano went next to a small east-facing window. But they left some honey-colored leather dining chairs exposed to direct light because "it's hard to fade something that color," Ms. Watson says.

EVERYTHING BECOMES BEIGE

Window treatments are a must for glass walls, says New York interior designer Jamie Gibbs. Without them, he says, "You'd better pick beige interiors, because everything is going to become beige in two years." Solar shades, which are made of a semisheer fabric, can cut down on heat and damaging ultraviolet rays while allowing residents to retain much of their view. But at night, with the lights on, solar shades aren't enough for privacy. Mr. Gibbs says it is like a scrim on a theater stage with a light illuminating the actors from behind. "You see defined shadows. There's not a lot left up to the imagination," he says.

Then there's the trouble with birds. Houston artists Dana and Hana Harper live in a 1960 house by architect Harwood Taylor with "wall-to-wall windows," says Mr. Harper. The couple enjoys looking out over a wooded bayou, but they don't like that birds periodically crash into the glass and die.

Architect Adam Rolston has a more comical problem with birds -- wild turkeys, to be precise. Groups of them sometimes march up to the glass doors that line the sides of the Modernist house he built in upstate New York and peck at their reflections, often early in the morning, he says.

Yet most people who live in glass-walled homes insist they wouldn't trade their views. Standing in his Manhattan living room overlooking the Hudson, Raj Mahajan says, "It brings a little bit of nonconcrete serenity to my New York existence." But Mr. Mahajan, a 35-year-old financial-software executive, advises sleepover guests in the summertime to lower their shades before they go to bed. "If they don't, they get scorched in the morning."

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