

# The Big Mistake



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

**ONCE BITTEN** Rene Gonzalez and Colleen Mathis moved to get away from mice.

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**WHEN** it comes to homes and spouses, one bad experience can alter a person's choices forever.



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

**TWICE SHY** Laura Zanzal and her roommate Alex North have discovered the joy of a live-in super.

And in [New York City](#), where there are untold challenges to vertical living, a seemingly endless number of pitfalls lie in the real estate road.

Bad choices include: the location of one's building, insufferable neighbors both human and feral, long-distance supers, heat-conducting windows and prized amenities that turn out to be booby prizes.

Consider the unfortunate story of Rob Paladino. Three years ago, he rented a one-bedroom pied-à-terre on the fifth floor of a new apartment building in the garment district. For \$3,800 a month, he got a generous 600-square-foot patio, built above four floors of retail space on top of the building's first setback.

"It was a big feature, and I really believed it was worth the extra few hundred dollars a month," said Mr. Paladino, a single 52-year-old digital media entrepreneur who looked forward to entertaining friends outdoors.

Soon after unpacking, Mr. Paladino furnished his outdoor space with a table and chairs, a barbecue and Christmas lights.

Then came the cigarette butts: incendiary paratroopers raining down from Mr. Paladino's neighbors — 40 stories of them, or about 280 apartments. Mr. Paladino thinks his neighbors, mostly young professionals sharing places, assumed the butts would float to the street.

Instead, "they would burn through my awning and the patio chairs," he said. "I would make a game trying to figure out what the brands were." (Lots of Newports, he said.)

Enough flotsam made its way to the patio that Mr. Paladino asked the super to clean it up every week.

Then one morning a sad young Japanese couple appeared at his door.

"They couldn't communicate why, but they seemed to really need to get out on the patio, so I let them through," Mr. Paladino said.

Their cat, it turned out, had plunged from the 36th floor to the great beyond.

Still determined to enjoy what most New Yorkers would consider a perk of enviable proportions, Mr. Paladino persevered — until the night he held an alfresco gathering that collided with a couple's argument 8 or 10 floors overhead.

“When the first candy dish hit, it sounded like gunfire,” he said. “Glass shards went everywhere. We ran inside and more stuff came down — a little statuette, a child's toy, a model car. After that, it didn't feel safe out there.”

Mr. Paladino forsook his prized patio and, six months later, the apartment. He moved to a third-floor walk-up in the meatpacking district. Now he says he would consider another patio or terrace only if it were on a very high floor.

“If you're on the 16th floor with a setback patio and there's only 9 floors above you, that's totally different,” he said. Not only are there fewer potential sources of detritus, but, he speculated, people who pay a premium to live on a higher floor might be more courteous and respectful.

Many of the walking wounded have nothing against their apartment or building: It's the location that offends.

For example, people who have lived near an elevator frequently balk at doing so again.

“They feel the elevators themselves are noisy and also people tend to congregate in front of the elevator,” said Laurence P. Mitchell, an associate broker at Prudential Douglas Elliman.

Others refuse to live beneath a terrace after suffering through floods caused by blocked drains and the like, said Paul Purcell, a founder of Charles Rutenberg Realty. And just as veterans of sixth-floor walk-ups don't reprise the experience if they can afford not to, many ground-floor-dwellers vow to shoot higher next time.

When Alina Munoz moved to New York nearly four years ago, she shared a ground-floor street-facing two-bedroom apartment with several roommates.

“It didn’t allow much natural light because we kept the blinds closed for privacy from the street,” said Ms. Munoz, 27, a founder of Culintro, a restaurant-industry trade organization. “You could hear every conversation. And every single morning at 7:30, the doorman would hose off the sidewalk and the windows, so every Saturday and Sunday, I would be woken up with what sounded like a fire hose blasting at my windows.”

Ms. Munoz’s low-level misery was complicated by another location issue: Her building was adjacent to a church.

“On Saturday and Sunday mornings, you would hear kids playing and the parents would stand around letting kids be kids,” she said. “Then they also had gatherings like Alcoholics Anonymous, and on Tuesday or Thursday night there would always be a group of smokers outside — you could hear them when you’re on the ground floor.”



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Flavie Bagnol in her new home, free of road noise.



James Estrin/The New York Times

Lee Alexander’s horror stories include rats and racket. She now lives in quiet Stuyvesant Town.

Loud, smoke-emitting crowds are more commonly associated with nightclubs, bars and restaurants, not always the best downstairs neighbors. Once bitten, many people vet prospective blocks, sometimes conducting late-night sweeps to check for club activity invisible during the day.

But it is easier to miss acoustical nightmares on the next block, in the form of a fire station or something more mysterious.

Flavie Bagnol, the director of communications for [Thrillist.com](https://www.thrillist.com), rented an apartment on East 64th Street, near but not facing Second Avenue. Late-night trucks racing down the avenue would hit something that sounded like a bump, triggering thunderous, bone-rattling explosions.

“I looked many times to see if there was a speed bump or a hole, but there was really nothing beyond maybe an uneven part of the road,” Ms. Bagnol said. “I tried earplugs, white noise, thicker curtains, music, and nothing ever covered it. I didn’t sleep well for two years.”

When her lease was up, she bought a studio apartment facing a courtyard in the West 60s.

“The first thing I did when I looked at the apartment,” Ms. Bagnol said “was see if there was a lot of traffic, like any buses stopping by, and I made sure I was not on a main artery. I went back at night and checked the noise with the window open and closed.”

Other city dwellers run from a more intimate nuisance.

Last December, Colleen Mathis, 27, and her boyfriend, Rene Gonzalez, 35, sublet a rent-controlled apartment from a friend of Ms. Mathis’s family. It was a one-bedroom walk-up in the East 70s for \$600 a month.

“When we first moved in, we noticed a little bit of a problem with [mice](#),” Ms. Mathis said. “Then, in January, I was sleeping and felt this little tickle on my feet, and I woke up to a mouse scurrying off the bed. About two months ago, it got really bad — we were seeing maybe two mice a day.”

This fall, after a mouse stole up her arm and she accidentally drank a cup of coffee laced with mouse droppings, Ms. Mathis and Mr. Gonzalez reluctantly went looking for another apartment.

They took a flashlight on their hunt, searching for telltale signs: droppings and “weird holes” between walls and floors.

“We almost took a duplex that seemed too good to be true,” said Ms. Mathis, a publicist. They ruled it out when Mr. Gonzalez, a freelance videographer, turned up incriminating evidence with the flashlight.

They recently rented a large one-bedroom apartment in an older, well-maintained walk-up on East 88th Street near Madison Avenue for \$1,600 a month. The day they moved out of their mouse pad, their downstairs neighbor was leaving for the same reason.

Lee Alexander, a television producer, broke her lease two months after moving into a building on St. Marks Place that turned out to have rats in the walls and the basement laundry room.

When she found the ground-floor apartment, it had never occurred to her to look for signs of rats, like the presence of pesticides and warnings to keep garbage cans tightly shut.

Having come to believe that living on the ground floor means living closer to vermin territory, she fled to a top-floor apartment around the corner on Second Avenue.

Her rat problem vanished, only to be replaced by a different species of nuisance, one she might have avoided if she had checked out the apartment at night. Her place was within shouting distance of “Stomp,” a musical predicated on the percussive potential of not only heavy boots, but hub caps and garbage can lids.

“My bathroom was right over the backstage for ‘Stomp,’ so from 8 to 11 p.m. nightly I got the full show in my bathroom,” Ms. Alexander said. “It was an awful, noisy situation.”

She lived there for several years before rising to the top of the waiting list (and a top-floor apartment) in Stuyvesant Town, a sprawling apartment complex whose residents don't drum on trash bins. However, the owners were recently found to have improperly raised rents and deregulated units.

“For the most part it's a lovely, quiet place to live, except for the weird increases in rent,” Ms. Alexander said.

As Ms. Alexander's experience illustrates, it can be hard to spot trouble unless you are already sensitized to the dangers.

“I will never again buy a sponsor-renovated apartment,” said Matthew Grob, who along with his wife, Betsy Lichtenstein, purchased a two-bedroom apartment in Lincoln Towers on the Upper West Side a decade ago.

At the time, with Ms. Lichtenstein six months pregnant, the deal seemed too good to pass up. They were happy not to have to renovate. But Mr. Grob, a health care consultant, said they came to regret it: He and his wife are disappointed by the shoddy workmanship, cheap fixtures and cramped kitchen layout they continue to endure.

One of the couple's neighbors harbors a different regret, in the form of the 15th-floor terrace that transformed into a menace after her daughter was born.

“Once I had a baby, I wanted to nail it shut forever so she could never get out there,” said Wendy Siegel, a career counselor at [New York University's](#) School of Law. “I would rather have a bigger apartment — or a parking spot.”

Mr. Purcell, the broker, said that among the recurring never-agains he hears is the one about buying something that doesn't actually exist.

“I have had many people say I will never live in new construction again until it's fully built out and I can see what I'm getting,” he said.

As for Mr. Purcell, he fled south-facing floor-to-ceiling windows, trading them for an apartment with open views facing north.

“I boiled, even in the winter time — it was like a heat box,” he said.

Also, he complained, “my floors were bleached and my furniture was bleached if I didn’t put my blinds down every day, so what was the point of having a view?”

Other apartment hunters, shuddering at the memory of long winters without a ray of sunlight streaming through the windows, give north-facing apartments the cold shoulder.

But some would rather go without sunlight than an on-site super.

“We didn’t have a live-in super at my last apartment, and it was just a disaster,” said Laura Zanzal, 24, a renter who works in public relations. She shared an East 89th Street walk-up apartment with three roommates; the super lived in [Queens](#).

“When we didn’t have heat, we would call him and if it was only one of us calling, it didn’t make much of an impact. And the first month we lived there we had power outages and he would say ‘five minutes,’ but you’d have to call him again to make sure he was coming.”

This fall, after one super-less year, she moved with two roommates into a full-service building: “As soon as we call with a problem, someone is there within minutes,” she said.