

Debunking the

Uncovering the truth about Stepford

BY RISA C. DOHERTY

Moving from within the city limits to the suburbs is a big change. For many Queens residents it can mean the move from an apartment to a house.

Many lifelong apartment dwellers, in areas like Forest Hills, are accustomed to landlords pumping up the heat so high that the balmy indoor temperatures bring to mind a Maui luau. On the coldest of winter days, these apartment residents rely on their window fans to relieve the heat from radiators that can only be described as possessed: continuing to generate heat even after being turned off. When these young families make the move to a private home, with normal indoor temperatures, they feel like they have finally left the tropics.

Of course, there is a virtue to having a superintendent in your apartment building. When something breaks, he comes and fixes it. Once you move out to the wilderness of Long Island, Westchester or New Jersey, when something breaks, you either crack open the phone book or call your neighbors for references. Hence, you add a new serviceman to the roster, which includes the air conditioning guy, the roofer, the chimney guy, the alarm guy, the lawn guy, the tree-trimming guy, the landscaping guy, the tree doctor, the exterminator, the sprinkler company, the plumber, the heating oil company, the furnace man, the termite exterminator, et al. When there are three or more service providers scheduled for any single day, I almost feel like breaking out the hors d'oeuvres.

If you grew up in an apartment along Queens Boulevard, you are familiar with the seismic sensation caused by the E, F and what used to be the G, subway lines, running underground. You barely notice it after a few years, happy that the furniture does not migrate across the room with the arrival and departure of the express train, much like an episode

No fewer than five mothers in my area drive the exact same SUV, and my daughter always tries to get into the wrong one.

of I Love Lucy. Still, the uninitiated feel the apartment vibrating and may tactfully ask why the building is shaking, guessing that we hit a three on the Richter scale.

If you ever hear a siren in suburbia, you will probably run right outside, to see which neighbor's house is on fire. Back in "the old neighborhood" one does not even bother peering out the window to see what is going on, because one would hear sirens go by several times per hour. I remember one evening when part of my apartment building was on fire. We paid no attention to the multiple sirens and only bothered to look outside once we were disturbed by the lights from the five fire engines parked directly under our windows.

Many parents think that one of the best reasons to buy a house is so that each of the children can have their own bedroom. Yet, the truth be told, many of the children, used to the company of their siblings choose to continue to share a room and leave the other bedroom vacant.

In addition, all the new landowners vow to host their children's parties in their new homes. They now have enough space to accommodate 25 to 30 of their children's closest friends. Ironically, the moment the deed changes hands there is often a sudden change of heart and the new homeowner suddenly deems it unthinkable to permit a pack of miniature mobsters to descend on her pristine palace. As soon as the realization would dawn, she would hurriedly familiarize herself with

every commercial party establishment within a thirty-mile radius.

I have noticed over the years that small suburban communities maintain an unwritten law with respect to pedestrian activity, i.e. people are not permitted to walk anywhere a car can access, with two exceptions, power walking in pairs or walking a dog. A resident just does not set out on foot merely to reach a destination. Newcomers to suburbia quickly learn that lawbreaking pedestrians must endure the insufferable stares of long-time residents, when they deign to leave their abode sans vehicle.

Suburbia is quite inviting to the uninitiated urbanite, who might enjoy a quiet stroll to the store. After all, with its lush green rolling hills, majestic trees and wonderful fresh air, it should be a pedestrian paradise. In many areas, residents refuse to install sidewalks to discourage such foolish behavior. But, the newcomers quickly catch on and can be seen driving in and out of adjacent strip malls with ease.

For the most part, apartment dwellers have no clue when their garbage is carted off. Needless to say, uninitiated former urbanites must soon face the new complexities of trash removal. The former city-dwellers I know never expected that they would be crossing the days off on their calendar in desperate anticipation of the next trash removal day. Mondays are for kitchen garbage only, Wednesdays are for kitchen garbage in back and cartons and boxes in front, and Fridays are for kitchen garbage in back and bottle recycling or newspaper pick-up in front: check your schedule. It was so much easier to just walk down the hall to the incinerator room (which used to have a chute leading to an actual fire-burning incinerator) and dump your garbage down, whenever you pleased.

The limits on suburban trash removal seem to have had a deleterious effect on some of my friends'

suburban myth

other idyllic lifestyles. I listened with amazement as one friend clapped with joy at an invitation to her in-law's house, within the New York City limits. It seems as if each trip into the Big Apple is a new opportunity to unload excess trash. They approach the city limits with delight, their trunk filled to the brim with large green trash bags.

One tool of suburban life that is undervalued by many apartment-dwelling city slickers is the snow shovel. Each of the seemingly 400 times that it snowed this winter, apartment dwellers in Queens must have reveled in the knowledge that snow removal was someone else's problem, secretly amused by the aggravation that some haughty new landed gentry had to face. They must feel lucky that they do not have to sit glued to the weather channel, dreading any bursts of color that might appear on the local radar. Even worse, in a way, are the homeowners paying for snow removal for each and every storm, in a snowy winter.

For the most part, city residents prefer not to drive in seriously inclement weather. Suburbanites, on the other hand are undaunted by inclement weather. No matter how much snow is coming down, they board their four-wheel drive vehicles and steer their vehicles down their long driveways, leaving tire tracks in the newly fallen snow. It is inconceivable that they would allow their child, at any age, to walk in such conditions (see earlier pedestrian rules). When I first moved to the suburbs I would sit at my window in amazement and watch the SUVs and minivans exit their driveways in synchronized motion, under treacherous conditions.

Suburban moms can be found shopping in the local overpriced

gourmet market, with their matching boots and designer handbags, lapsed professionals with flawless manicures. At the designated time, they all make a mad dash for the register, so they can rush to the parking lot to their SUVs and reach the schools before they are summoned by cell phone by their demanding progeny. There are no fewer than five mothers in my immediate area who drive the exact same make, model and color SUV, and my daughter keeps trying to get into the other cars, never sure which one is ours.

Then there is the "myth of the manageable commute," which is perpetuated by most suburbanites. They claim that commuting to Manhattan is a quick and pleasurable experience. Unable to compete with the 25-minute express train ride or

the 20-minute express bus record, they talk in terms of "travel time to the city." This surprisingly only includes the time on the actual train, not the time to and from the train on either end. Residents of western Nassau County commute almost an hour and a half to go 19 miles to midtown Manhattan. Some claim to utilize the ride time to do work or socialize with fellow commuters and even play cards on the train. They forget to mention the delays and cancellations, which are not uncommon on the LIRR, Metro North and NJ Transit lines.

So, there you have it: the truth about suburban life. Theoretically, the house with the white picket fence in the suburbs is the American dream. I guess it comes with a catch or two, like everything else.

