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Cyclists vs. The City: A Survival Guide

As the pandemic cleared traffic, many took to two wheels. Now that cars (and other dangers) are back, a nervous novice gears up to join them.

By DANIEL VARGHESE

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE with city cycling wasn't promising. The suburban rides of my childhood hadn't prepared me for crumbling concrete, hulking cargo trucks and hostile drivers. By the time I moved to New York City six years ago, biking seemed absurd.

At the start of the pandemic, however, traffic vanished from my neighborhood in Brooklyn and it seemed like everyone took to two wheels. The New York City Department of Transportation reported it tracked 33% more bike trips year-over-year between May and December of 2020. Recently, I realized I was tired of being too scared to join the new wave of cyclists.

The data wasn't encouraging. American streets are dangerous places, even in a two-ton box of steel. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said the U.S. had the highest per capita rate of deaths from road accidents among the 38 countries from its data set in 2021, the most recent year for which it has statistics.

And cyclists face considerable threats. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that fatal injuries to cyclists went up by 9.2% between 2019 and 2020, and by another 5.2% by the end of the 2021. Sheryl Porter, a 52-year-old stay-at-home mom in Grand Prairie, Texas, told me drivers sometimes play "Chicken" with her. More chilling, Mark Lowe, 49, a physician assistant in Aurora, Colo., said he once had a driver ride beside him, roll down his window and aim a handgun in his face.

And yet, both bike a lot. Veon McReynolds, 71, a retired university administrator, said the key to staying safe is treating cars like dogs. "If you come up to a dog and feel like it's going to bite you, you'll approach that dog a lot differently." He said even drivers in Houston, full of six-lane highways, respect cyclists who look comfortable and regularly look behind them.

Dressing the part can also help. Though some studies indicate that drivers give cyclists with helmets less room, most

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SAFE TRAVELS

Unlike our model, you won't need to cocoon yourself in bubble wrap to avoid danger on urban streets.



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DESIGN & DECORATING



PHILIP DURRANT, STYLING BY OLIVIA GREGORY (ASHBY); NICK GUMENAKS (JOO); GUY SHIELD (ILLUSTRATION)

ERROR, ERROR ON THE WALL

Dine With Dash

How to avoid the five decorating goofs—from unpalatable wall colors to stingy rugs—that design pros see in rooms meant to fire up appetites

BY NINA MOLINA

DINING ROOM DÉCOR gone awry can kill appetites. Whether your guests are flinching from an eerie portrait their chairs face or squeezing into too-tight seats, bad decorating can take the joy out of even the most well-concocted meal.

Los Angeles-based designer David Netto believes dinner guests are rarely eager to enter these stuffy rooms. “So what a dining room must have, above all, is atmosphere,” he said. Here, interiors pros detail five mood crushers in dining rooms, and palate-pleasing alternatives.

Blinding Lights

Ample light helps diners distinguish between mashed yams and potatoes, but cruelly aggressive bulbs inspire squinting, not conviviality. “Nothing will kill the vibe of a dinner party faster than harsh overhead lighting,” said Marina Medina, a Vancouver-based interior designer. No one feels good under 5000K LED bulbs, says Susane Jory, a designer in London, Ontario, “and few of us look good bathed in it.”

Instead Kelly Finley, a designer at

Joy Street Design in Oakland, Calif., relies on “recessed lighting on a dimmer, a chandelier with soft lightbulbs and wall sconces” for a softer shine. Mark Eckstrom votes for the old-timey romance of candlelight. Said the co-founder of Studio Eckström, in Omaha, Neb., “Every guest at your table should have faces aglow.”

Tasteless Walls

Think of a dining room’s walls as a platter on which dinner is served.

Sterile white dishes with a hospital vibe often don’t flatter food. Nor do chaotically patterned ones. Similarly, when it comes to walls, some color can help, but Mr. Eckstrom returns to the effect décor

has on complexions: “Sorry, but nobody looks good in a yellow or chartreuse room.” And Brian del Toro, a New York City interior designer, warns against surfaces with “overly active patterns, colors which are too bright or distracting, and combinations of the two, which aren’t soothing.”

Instead Save the pattern-on-pattern alchemy for the powder room, and pursue colors like terracotta, rose and aubergine that Mr. Eckstrom says “stimulate appetite and reflect well on guests’ skin.” But know that naked walls don’t make people feel comfortable and sociable either. “Every seat should have a view—a window, art, sculpture, wallpaper, mirror, flowers,” he said.



Intriguing art makes a room by Manhattan designer Jae Joo more hospitable.

LET’S TALK Abundant textiles improve acoustics in a room by London designer Sophie Ashby.

Sound-Bouncing Surfaces

When you ponder your dining room’s décor, remember that happy repasts aren’t silent. Poor acoustics can turn animated chatting into cacophony, said Olle Lundberg, a San Francisco designer. “Hard surfaces like stone flooring, plaster walls and large windows all bounce the sound back into the space, creating reverberation,” warned Mr. Lundberg.

‘Nothing will kill the vibe of a dinner party faster than harsh overhead lighting,’ said one interior designer.

Instead For a more discussion-friendly space, Mr. Eckstrom prescribes a blend of softer materials like drapery, carpet, tapestries or a tablecloth “that help absorb echoes and promote conversation.” Mr. Lundberg goes further, endorsing the idea of covering walls with fabric or draping it from the ceiling. Many textiles come in “large formats and can often be installed seamlessly,” he said.

Prissiness

You won’t feel inspired to plop down at your dining table for a casual brunch if it’s surrounded by austere crystal chandeliers and dusty mahogany sideboards. Mr. del Toro finds that most dining rooms skew too formal, dark and “limited,” appealing only for an evening dinner.

Instead “Most of us lead relatively informal lives,” said Mr. del Toro, who likes dining rooms casual enough for sipping a smoothie or morning latte. Chris Goddard, an interior designer in Springdale, Ark., said he’s partial to installing weathered wood tables that, while inherently chilled, can be “dressed to the nines for a festive dinner.”

Failures of Scale

In a dining room, ill-fitting furniture is more than an eyesore—it can result in stubbed toes and dry-cleaning bills. “If you’ve placed a giant table in a small room,” said Ms. Jory, “your guests will invariably be wearing the soup as you squeeze behind them with the gazpacho.”

Even the size of a carpet can throw a wrench in the roast. “Rugs that are too small pinch the overall vignette,” said Jessica Lynn Williams, founder of Hendley & Co, in Newburgh, N.Y., who adds you should never force your guests to scooch their chairs awkwardly over the edge of a tottyn rug.

Instead An occupied chair should ideally have 3 feet of space behind it for proper circulation and flow, said Meg Lavalette, founder of Lava Interiors in New York City. And carpets should accommodate sliding chairs—without giving them any lip. Laura W. Jenkins, an interior designer in Atlanta, says that when it comes to light fixtures and rugs, she prefers to err on the side of a little too big.

DIGESTION IMPOSSIBLE / DESIGNERS RECALL MEAL-SPOILING DECORATING GAFFES



“Once I saw a light fixture that hung so low and so close to the edges of the table that even the older kids in that family complained about bonking their heads against it!”

—Noz Nozawa, interior designer, San Francisco

“I tried to convince [a client that] even though red was his

favorite color, it wasn’t a great choice for a dining space and that we could bring it in through other avenues—décor, rugs, wallpaper. We ended up not taking him on because he couldn’t get past the red for the dining room, but it was so bad.”

—Shaolin Low, interior designer, Honolulu

“I was once seated in a dining room with a table that was too small. The chairs were covered in Fortuny, but not even the chicest choice of fabric could keep my knees from bumping against the person who was sitting next to me.”

—Michelle Nussbaumer, interior designer, Dallas

After All, It’s a Window Wall

Want a little separation without losing luscious sunlight? Interior panes are an elegant compromise.

THE OPEN FLOOR PLAN lost considerable appeal once the din of WFH video calls began echoing through it. As Americans have grown more interested in walls, but no less interested in airiness, a new-old solution has emerged: interior windows. These apertures let light jump from room to room while creating a soothing sense of separation.

When renovating her historic 1902 home in Grand Rapids, Mich., interior designer Jean Stoffer found 100-year-old storm windows there. As part of a new wall pierced by a wide doorway, they proved a handy way to introduce a distinct but not too darkening division between her grand living room and kitchen-seating area. She then painted the windows’ wood sashes black, in keeping with the home’s exterior windows. “The style of an interior window should be the same as or

complementary to the home’s exterior windows,” Ms. Stoffer advised.

Vintage windows have advantages. Designers in search of handsome frames have more leeway when they needn’t factor in heat retention and element resistance. Retrouvius, a salvage company and design studio in London, often repurposes exterior windows no longer up to code, to add “an instant historical reference” in older buildings, said co-founder Adam Hills.

Wedging even a small transom window above a door frame can brighten darker spaces like laundry and powder rooms. Assuming the doorway is a standard 80 inches tall, you need a ceiling height of at least 9.5 feet, said Stephanie Sabbe of Sabbe Interior Design, in Nashville, Tenn. Any lower, and your transom will look squished.

Costs for an interior window vary greatly. On one end of the



ROOM WITH A VIEW OF A ROOM In her 1902 home in Grand Rapids, Mich., interior designer Jean Stoffer repurposed vintage storm windows.

spectrum, explained Ms. Stoffer, is a simple wooden-sash window with minimal millwork set into a non-load-bearing partition wall that’s, say, 6 feet wide in a room with an 8-foot ceiling. A skilled carpenter can turn such a project around for roughly \$1,500. Ditto for a standard transom.

Meanwhile, if you’re planning to install a custom steel window with complicated moldings into a bigger existing wall with mechanicals in it, you’ll need an engineer and other tradespeople. Cost: in the tens of thousands of dollars.

If all this glass seems like an overshare waiting to happen, know that light and modesty can coexist. To brighten a windowless bathroom in a Brooklyn home, Mr. Worrell cut an aperture in the wall between bed and bath, then filled it with a translucent but not transparent glass. “In the bath, you get daylight from the bedroom’s windows, while in the bedroom, you see only a shadowy figure,” he explained. The result is less edge than it sounds, he said. “There’s a bit of play with voyeurism, but it’s discreet.” —Lauren Joseph