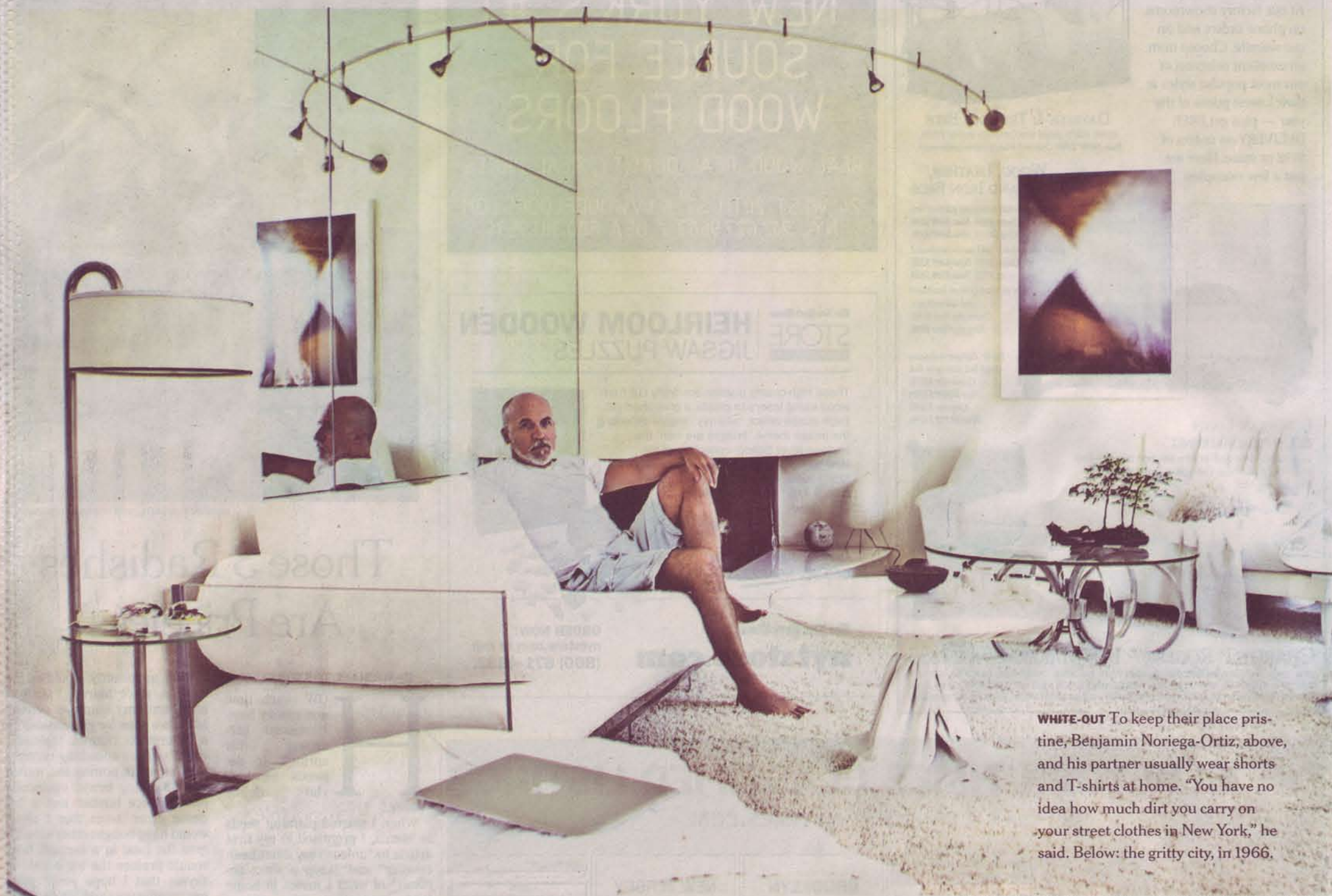


The New York Times



WHITE-OUT To keep their place pristine, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, above, and his partner usually wear shorts and T-shirts at home. "You have no idea how much dirt you carry on your street clothes in New York," he said. Below: the gritty city, in 1966.

FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES (ABOVE); NEAL BOENZI/THE NEW YORK TIMES (BELOW)

Soil and the City

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

JAYNE MICHAELS, an interior designer who lives on East 57th Street in Manhattan, throws open her windows every chance she gets. "I need light and air in my life," said Ms. Michaels, who favors gauzy fabrics in pale colors.

But breezes carry dirt, especially in New York, so once every six months Ms. Michaels pays about \$400 to have her sofas, chairs, chaises and rugs shampooed.

It's another price of living in New York: call it the dirt tax. The dirt tax appears in cleaning costs, replacement costs and even the inability of New York homeowners to consider certain finishes and fabrics because they're just not practical.

Not in a city where schmutz — the preferred New York term for the black gritty material — accumulates on every surface.

White rugs and sofas can become filthy anywhere. But ex-



Living amid grime, New Yorkers fight for their white.

perts (who include anyone who has ever dusted, vacuumed or swabbed in the five boroughs) say New York City's dirt level is highly unusual.

And it inspires some unusual responses.

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, a prominent interior designer, and his partner, Steven Wine, a lighting designer, undress each time they enter their apartment on West 23rd Street, where almost everything is white. Then they put on "inside clothes" — usually shorts and T-shirts.

"You have no idea how much dirt you carry on your street clothes in New York," said Mr. Noriega-Ortiz. When laying out the duplex apartment, he put the washer-dryer right by the front door.

He added, in an e-mail message: "Since we are not about to impose the remove-your-clothes-and-change rule on our guests, we tend to not entertain strangers that often. Our interi-

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or world stays much cleaner that way.”

Although none of his clients have followed his example (so far as he knows), many of them do ask guests to leave shoes at the door. Increasingly, he said, clients ask him to design foyers with benches for removing footwear, as a way of keeping their apartments clean.

Ms. Michaels said she advises clients who want light-colored fabrics to accept the inevitable: limited life span and extra expense. “I’m a prisoner to it,” she said of the cleaning regimen, which is performed by Delmont Carpet and Upholstery Cleaning Specialists in New York.

But in one concession to New York’s air, she had her drapes made of “wash and wear” polyester. In a different city, she said, she might have chosen linen. But not in New York. The last time she rinsed out the polyester drapes in her bathtub, she said, the water turned black.

The culprit is soot, said Richard Kassel, an air pollution expert with the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council.

In one study cited by Mr. Kassel, soot in one stretch of Midtown Manhattan was found to contain 52 percent diesel exhaust, mostly from trucks, buses and construction vehicles. The other 48 percent was a mix of everything from ground-up car tires to sea salt, he said.

Even in New York, the amount of soot varies from block to block. Susan Moolman, a publicist who moved to Manhattan in 2007, said that the dirt was much worse at her previous apartment, near the entrance to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, than at her current place on the Upper West Side.

Whether New York is a soot champion or just a contender is hard to know. Particle pollution is actually worse in cities like Bakersfield, Calif., and Pittsburgh, according to studies cited by the American Lung Association in its latest “State of the Air” report. But the particles measured are microscopic — “small enough to lodge deep in the lungs,” the report says. What New Yorkers think of as soot consists in part of much larger “chunks” that are not easily quantified, said Michael Seilback of the association. New York’s population

The dirt tax is progressive: it has a disproportionate impact on the rich.

density, traffic patterns and road conditions all contribute to the mix of dirt in the air.

In the early 20th century New York had more soot than it does today. Back then, engines were dirtier, apartment buildings had incinerators and factories abounded. “Housekeepers Have Difficulty in Keeping Homes Clean Owing to Greasy Deposits — Laundry Bills Higher,” said a 1922 New York Times headline.

But the construction boom of recent years may have worsened the soot problem for some residents. “I had one client, across the street from a construction site, who couldn’t open her windows for six months,” said Howard Sklar, owner of Durotone, a carpet- and fabric-cleaning firm based in Mamaroneck, N.Y.

The dirt tax is progressive, in that it seems to have a disproportionate impact on the rich. And that’s because only the rich insist on things like white silk rugs.

“The higher the discretionary income, the more



MR. CLEAN Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz keeps a washer-dryer by the front door. He doesn’t entertain strangers much. “Our interior world stays much cleaner that way,” he said.

likely they are to go for fragile goods,” said Mark Nelson, who designs and sells carpets through interior designers. His products, which frequently cost more than \$50 a square foot (yes, foot), are often cream or ivory colored.

One way to keep interiors clean, many designers say, is to avoid opening windows.

That’s easy when the windows aren’t made to open, as is the case in some apartment buildings in Manhattan. But windows that don’t open pose a problem of their own: occupants have no way to wash the glass, and the building may not do it frequently enough.

In sleek modern towers, “you think you’re going to be floating above the city,” said Marc Kushner, an architect with the Manhattan firm Hollwich-Kushner. “But in reality, you’re really looking out through grime.”

Mr. Kushner and his business partner, Matthias Hollwich, designed an apartment for a client on the Upper East Side with an entire wall of moldings, which was their way of reconciling the client’s desire for period detailing with their own contemporary sensibility. Since the building’s windows don’t open, Mr. Kushner said, he wasn’t worried about dirt collecting on the moldings.

But he is working on another apartment in a building where the windows do open. “The interior designer is from L.A.,” he said. “She suggested that we raise the bathroom vanities 12 inches, so they look like they’re floating. The first thing we thought, being from New York, is that there’s going to be so much dirt under there.”

For the living room, the designer has picked off-white upholstery, he said. “We’ve warned her about that, especially close to the windows.”

But even sealed windows don’t solve the soot problem entirely. Mr. Nelson and others said that gases created by basement heating systems often rise through buildings’ interiors.

Because the gases tend to follow load-bearing walls, which are continuous, they concentrate around the edges of rooms, he said.



SITTING WELL Jayne Michaels, a designer, has her sofas, chairs and rugs shampooed twice a year. The bill: about \$400 a pop. “I’m a prisoner to it,” she said of her cleaning routine.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

OFF THE WALL The architects Marc Kushner, above, and Matthias Hollwich gave one client a wall of moldings. The windows don’t open, so they weren’t concerned about dirt settling.

The gases leave oily deposits as they pass through carpets, which are really room-size filters.

And when dirt hits those deposits, it sticks. One result can be a dark line around the perimeter of the room, known as filtration soiling.

Mr. Nelson remembered one particularly egregious case.

The setting was an apartment on Park Avenue in the 70s. A “very nice” couple had bought hand-tufted wool carpet that was installed wall to wall in their bedroom. “It was a light beige,” he said.

Soon, they noticed a dark line forming around the edges of their carpet. Mr. Nelson called Mr. Sklar, who is a certified carpet inspector. (“If you buy a new carpet and you think there’s something wrong with it, the industry dictates that a certified inspector come out to look at it,” Mr. Sklar said.) He discovered a case of filtration soiling — or as he sometimes calls it, “ring around the collar.”

Mr. Sklar told Mr. Nelson, who told the couple that “it wasn’t a carpet problem, it was a New York City problem,” Mr. Nelson said. “That’s not what they wanted to hear.”

But “if you buy white carpet, what do you expect?” Mr. Nelson added, momentarily forgetting his role as an enabler of the impractical carpet habit. “You buy a pair of linen slacks — you know they’re going to wrinkle. It’s the nature of the beast.”

When people ask him, he recommends choosing darker colors, especially for stairs. And he suggests creating a buffer zone to allow dirt to dissipate before shoes reach the carpet.

People in buildings with carpeted lobbies or foyers tend to have cleaner carpets inside their apart-

ments, he explained. “The big question is, what carpeted surface will your feet be on before they get to your apartment?”

For those who simply have to have light-colored carpet, there is a way to prevent filtration soiling. “It’s a procedure that is done prophylactically,” Mr. Nelson said, before the carpet is installed. “It’s referred to as ‘soot seal.’”

“Basically, you take roofing paper, and you caulk and seal it into the perimeter of the room,” he said. “Then you do your normal install, with tack strips and padding.”

The roofing paper, he explained, prevents the gases from concentrating around the edge of the room. The process, he said, generally costs about \$500 a room. But it’s worth it, he said, for people spending \$20,000 or more to carpet a single room.

Mr. Sklar, who lives in Westchester, said that even after all he has seen, he understands the appeal of white carpet.

“White carpet makes a small apartment look bigger,” he said. “My son was living in an oversized closet. When my wife decorated, she did everything in whites and beiges, and all of a sudden it at least looked like a room.”

As for upholstery, Mr. Noriega-Ortiz still endorses white, because it can be bleached. “Bleach this and it’s white again,” he said, pointing to a snow-white chaise in his apartment. “What are you going to do when there’s a stain on your red sofa?”

Vicente Wolf, the well-known interior designer, lives in a white-on-white loft on West 39th Street. After describing dirt as “a price we pay for living in New York,” he said, “If it bothers you that much, take off your glasses.”