

URBAN STUDIES

Staying Dry

The Mystery of the Umbrellas



ROBERT CAPLIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE first time it happens, the neophyte will probably think it's an aberration, maybe one oddball's bizarre pathology. Then there will be another, and another, and it turns out everyone's doing it. What a funny bunch, these New Yorkers.

Autumn has faded, the cold has descended, and then the first snowfall of the year arrives. The flakes start falling, and to the transplant from the snowy provinces, they will be a nostalgic reminder of home. Ah, the snow! So lovely, and what a hush and lulling contrast to the usual hustle and bustle.

Then the transplant sees that first person walking down the street nonchalantly holding an umbrella overhead, as if such behavior were normal. Initially this image seems a hallucination. It's a surprise, to put it mildly, this ridiculous affectation, because as everyone knows, umbrellas are made to be used when it rains.

The first few instances in which these umbrellas are sighted will be ascribed to the charitable guess that the people wielding them didn't notice that the temperature has dropped low enough for the rain to have turned into beautiful white fluffy

snowflakes. Or maybe these natives are crazy, or at the very least a little eccentric.

But no, these people are everywhere, shrouded by their mostly black umbrellas from the lovely snow. And after the first winter, the now-jaded,

not-so-new New Yorker will come to accept this practice as normal and mundane, and he will stop gawking.

Yet deep down in his soul, the transplant will hold on to the notion that umbrellas are to be

used only as protection against the rain, which is wet and, when it drenches the clothes and skin, makes one uncomfortable.

The neophyte, who has turned into a jaded New Yorker, will find out in time that people don't do this just in New York but in many other cities, too. It's the old rural-versus-urban divide, the difference between accepting and finding enjoyment in nature's arbitrary whims and refusing to find pleasure in this sort of thing.

In New York, the sight of umbrellas raised aloft in the snow may be more common simply because the streets are filled with people wearing nice clothes and heading to and from work, and they will do anything to prevent melting snowflakes from ruining their outfits or God forbid mussing their hair.

Even though this New Yorker will get used to the sight of those harried and hurried walkers warding off one of nature's most precious gifts, he will still

carry with him the feeling that blocking out snow's charms borders on the insane, that a determined effort to not get touched by those wonderfully soft star-shaped flakes is patently absurd and always will be.