

My shoulders and pants are soaked. I'm wrestling against every torque in the wind. If this umbrella turns inside out again, it's toast. I can't see where I'm going. In fact, under the black nylon I feel like Charlie Brown, shadowed by a private cloud.

A magic circle of dryness wreathes my face: This is my only comfort. Then the wind blusters and a baby tsunami splatters my cheeks. Execrable, flapping nylon!

Peering through the spitting air, dodging all the maniacs and dawdlers, Sartre pops into my head: "*L'enfer, c'est les autres.*" Hell is other people, especially when it rains. Eye-poking; bobbing and weaving; lifting umbrellas to avert jousting: Where does all this anti-etiquette come from?

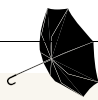
The quality of every society depends on how individual citizens interact. Each umbrella—shading a private dot of misery—bumps into the others in a miserable, largely selfish (and wet) pattern. See that banker, standing alone under his space-hogging golf umbrella? You're on to something vital about that guy. Closed, his umbrella looks like a natty cane. He might as well be striding through Rhodesia, overseeing diamond mines. Or that one: the snarky one stealing her umbrella from the restaurant lobby vase. She's got no problem eroding the public trust. Besides, if you could give a tin-penny damn about your umbrella—if an umbrella functioned well enough to deserve guarding—you'd check it with your coat. As such, we're reduced to filching each other's pieces of junk and then tossing them on the street when they break, like skewered black banana peels.

I am so sick of how crappy umbrellas are.

You say: Wear a raincoat. And I say: Only a Penelope Plan-Ahead can stomach orchestrating her days to keep a raincoat always nearby. Sure, you can open your vast closet; fish out a raincoat to match the season, conditions, and your outfit; pair it with rubbers and hat or snap-on hood; then enjoy staying dry while resembling a stuffed tick. While you're at it, store duplicate coats at your office—saints be scolded if you're ever surprised or forgetful.

Me, I live in New York City. I have limited closet space, a lifestyle that demands walking outdoors, and no patience for superhuman planning. When it rains I want my face dry, hair unsquashed, a reasonably sharp ensemble, and my usual impromptu air. Name me a raincoat that manages that.

Fact is, for whatever reasons, we aren't universally wearing raincoats and sending umbrellas the way of the dodo. Umbrellas are everywhere, and we buy more and more of them as fast as they get lost or broken.



Never Say Dry

If we can send a spaceship to Mars, why can't we design a decent umbrella?

By Jude Stewart

Umbrella design suffers from a predilection to sweat the small stuff and ignore big problems. Recent "advances" address trivial issues: umbrellas that cover two people, filter UV rays, light up inside, defy lightning, free hands by attaching to a shoulder, open and close with one-touch button action, patterns aplenty. *Salut*, baby, but what about tackling the biggies: staying dry and navigating at the same time?

One new umbrella design closes into a collapsible plastic sheath, minimizing splattering water indoors. *Fantastique!* Your umbrella and floors are dry; you're still wet. How does this design meaningfully improve upon carefully leaving a wet umbrella at the doorstep?

Bigger guns are fighting the navigation battle. I like the first: clear-topped "bubble" umbrellas that surround your shoulders narrowly, improving coverage and vision. I feel winsome under there, smiling up at raindrops, shouldering chummily past my neighbors. Other people might, rightly,

feel like a claustrophobic Mary Tyler Moore in a human condom.

In the new, vented design, eight holes in the canopy are covered by a second tier of fabric. Wind blows under the top layer and through the holes, preventing the umbrella from collapsing in gusts up to 60mph. Admittedly, it's sweet to beat the wind. But with my still-wet shoulders, still-jousting neighbors, and still-crowded line of vision, I can't confuse one advance with a war won.

So I slap down my crappy umbrella like a gauntlet. You can fix this—and there's a huge market waiting if you do. Make it portable, low-cost, low-commitment. It's either a better umbrella or a universal network of outdoor tunnels. Or stop the goddamn rain.

Jude Stewart writes frequently on design for STEP Inside Design and ReadyMade. Her work has been published in Fortune, Inc., MBA Jungle, and Publishers' Weekly, among other publications.