Hey You, Get Off of My Cloud!
Keeping the peace in a multi-cat household

by ARNA COHEN

For 11 years, everything was copacetic in Marrakech and Samsara’s world. Together from kittenhood, the sisters loved cuddling, playing with mousey toys, and “singing” in typical Siamese style.

But two years ago, their lives changed dramatically when their owner committed a crime, at least in their eyes: She brought home another cat.

“When I adopted Colette, I would say I adopted a good year’s worth of hell,” says Carol Zytnik of the then 4-year-old Ragdoll mix’s uneasy transition into her New York City apartment. The sisters blocked access to the litter box and relentlessly stalked the younger, larger feline. It’s not that Colette wasn’t a nice cat. But she’d intruded upon their territory—a violation of kitty law.

Turf battles in the feline universe are legendary. Internet videos showcase cats with the moxie to face down animals many times their size—dogs, bears, even alligators (we won’t talk about the wimpy kitty terrorized by a turtle).

In spite of this reputation, Zytnik was undeterred. After several months of patience, intensive play sessions, and cat calming sprays, she negotiated a peace treaty. A year after Colette’s arrival, the Siamese extended the ultimate olive branch—they allowed her into their kingdom, the bedroom.

Attaining that type of kitty contentment involves more than just plunking cats down into your domain and hoping for the best. Whether you’re thinking about adopting another feline or already have a kitty crowd, understanding how cats see the world will help you prevent mild skirmishes from escalating into all-out war.

GIVE ME SOME SPACE
Cats who feel at home send a strong statement—“I own this place”—by walking into a room and rubbing up against people, scratching a post, or heading to the litter box, says Redondo Beach, Calif.–based feline behavior consultant Jackson Galaxy. Less confident kitties have another way of spreading the message, he says: “If they walk into a room surrounded by other cats and go, ‘I own this, right? Right? Right?,’ then they’ll pee on stuff, because they’re saying the same thing in an anxious way.”

To provide elbow room, says Galaxy, spread out territorial identifiers such as bowls, litter boxes, beds, and scratching posts—things that cats “can walk by, look at, smell, and say, ‘This belongs to me.’ ” Clustering these items may be more convenient, but it squeezes territorial significance into small areas, Galaxy explains, causing competition that can trigger aggression and anxiety.

‘SCUSE ME, WHILE I KISS THE SKY
A TV personality and celebrity among feline aficionados, Galaxy classifies cats as “tree dwellers” or “bush dwellers,” roles they play in the natural environment. Tree dwellers feel more secure watching the world from on high, while bush dwellers prefer staying close...
People looking to add another cat to their feline family often gravitate toward kittens, equating youth with instant acceptance by resident cats.

But the age bias is unfounded. Dominant males can be great with kittens, who are territorially malleable, says feline behavior consultant Jackson Galaxy. Cats with different personalities, however, may be stressed by a lawless kitten who hasn’t yet learned the language of cat. “[Your cat] just pops” in that situation, says Galaxy, and may exhibit anxiety, aggression, and litter box problems.

Instead of focusing on age or your own preferences, search for a good fit for your feline team. Lisa Provost of Manchester, N.H., spent several hours at an animal shelter before choosing a friend for her active young Maine coon. “I was resolved to take my time and find the right one,” she says. “I didn’t care what kind of cat as long as they got along.”

At the top of a cat tree in the communal room, she found Lacey, a long-hair described by staff as a sweet, playful animal who never fought. Following recommendations for gradual introductions, Provost installed her in a bedroom; within minutes, the two cats were batting paws under the door. Provost opened the door a crack to let them sniff each other, closing it again after Finnegan hissed.

The next day she took a chance and carefully let Lacey out; much to her surprise, it was love at first sight, just what Finnegan—and his matchmaker—needed.