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SUMMER 2009

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# ON

## TOP OF THE WORLD

A MANHATTAN ROOFTOP TERRACE OFFERS A LUSH AND LOVELY PLACE TO GET AWAY WITHOUT GOING AWAY.  
BY IRIS BENAROA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE LAMBRECHT



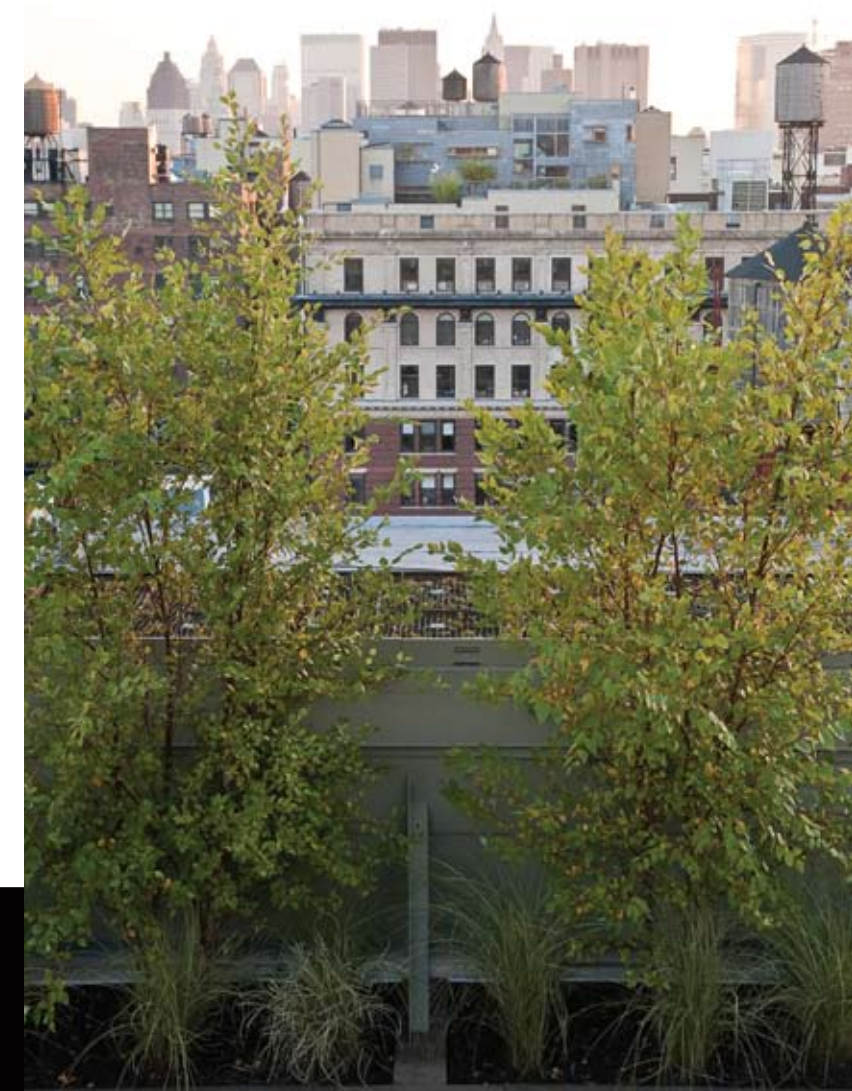
# IN

a city like New York, pining for a private rooftop terrace is a bit like hoping for a seat on the train during rush hour in Tokyo. It is somewhat futile.

Urban rooftops, after all, are inherently fraught. There's the gawking neighbours (is that a telescope?), the restrictive footprint, and the challenge of creating intimacy in an open-air environment. Stipulate that the project must also be green and you've got quite the venture.

Matthew Blesso, a real estate developer, and Andrea Steele, an architect, were up against all of this when devising Blesso's 2,200-sq.-ft. penthouse rooftop in Lower Manhattan (though it should be noted that the original landscape design was by Balmori Associates).

After a process that took nearly two years from conception to completion, the result is a masterful space, which for an urban project has the unusual distinction of feeling very much a part of nature, while also embracing New York City's spectacular skyline. The water towers, for instance, make for a moody backdrop. Yet, not all of the urban landscape was desirable. They planted ornamental grasses and trees along the building's perimeter to soften the edge. "You read the plants, not the building," says Steele. "You



*Opposite page: A narrow walkway planted with flowers and herbs, set atop the penthouse bulkhead, leads to a perch with a 360-degree metropolitan view. The outdoor shower offers a sybaritic pleasure on hot nights. Above: Greenery planted right at the building's perimeter blurs the boundaries between the rooftop garden and the city beyond, framing select views.*



THE GREENERY, INCLUDING TWO RIVER BIRCH TREES THAT SHOOT UP THROUGH HOLES IN THE RICH RED DECK, BENEFIT FROM RAINWATER CAPTURED IN A CISTERN.

don't read that your space is defined by the walls of another building."

Located in a 12-storey turn-of-the-century building, the rooftop has everything a sociable city professional with a love of nature and sustainable design could desire: shower, hot tub, kitchen, home theatre, and, for a charming touch, a perch on top of the bulkhead at the rooftop opening. Here, one can tramp along the meadow flowers and herbs (these roots are made for walking) and pursue a most unusual pastime in a metropolis: sitting or standing in silence. "We purposely gave it a narrow walkway up to encourage a contemplative procession to mediate or take in the city," says Steele, noting that the spot affords a 360-degree view since it's 10 feet higher than the rooftop proper. "It's the most calming space."

The very act of reaching the rooftop terrace is also quite something. Inside the apartment, itself an ode to the environment, one walks up a dramatic staircase carpeted with lush plants and surrounded by giant windows. From there, one reaches the deck—decked out to such a degree Blesso could camp out up there for days very comfortably; he admits to occasionally dozing off on the chaise longue during summer nights.

A stainless steel kitchen with Energy Star-rated appliances includes a dishwasher and icemaker and is perfect for parties. Ditto for the fresh herbs that spring from the strip planter in the counter, should the man of the house need to muddle mint for a *mojito* or two. As a recycling feature, all of the greenery, including the river birch trees—two shoot up through holes in the Forestry Stewardship Council-certified *ipe* (Brazilian walnut) deck and four are in the south planter—are watered with rainwater that's captured in a cistern. The *ipe* decking, incidentally, is stained to maintain its natural rich redness.

Guests at his parties tend to gravitate to the white sofas near the kitchen area, notes Blesso, who nevertheless hesitates to divide the deck into distinct zones. "One of the underlying themes I went for was blurring the line between what traditionally goes inside and what goes outside," he says. "People usually have metal and glass table and chairs outdoors. Instead, I have white sofas. I wanted to make it look like a living room." Which is why the trumpet vine climbing up the wall doubles as a backdrop for movies. "It's very low-tech," says Blesso. "I have a projector and I hang a big screen



The rooftop aerie is at once part of the urban fabric and a restorative retreat. The changes in elevation, a time-honoured landscaping device to enhance design interest, take on additional drama at 12 storeys up. The bold, simple curves of the shower (opposite page) echo the industrial chic of the classic water towers. Angular stepping stones (left) amid waving ornamental grasses are another modernist touch. Ipe wood decking (above) is both luxurious and hardy.



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over the vines for movies and manually bring it down when I'm done."

Then there's the industrial-looking outdoor shower near the hot tub and chaise longue. It's a simple curved pipe to echo the water towers, says Steele. The faucet for the kitchen sink also appears to grow out of the deck for a similar design aesthetic.

But the ambitious project doesn't stop here. The deck is lit with fibre optic ropes, which are embedded in the dirt and were chosen because they were energy-efficient. The light is transmitted through clear cables from a single source. "It's more costly, but if you're committed to investing in the future and saving energy, it's a valuable resource," says Steele.

So what does Blesso make of his great green aerie? "This is my oasis," he says. "There's a Zen feel to it. I like the juxtaposition of being right in the urban fabric but in a peaceful environment."

And in a city like New York, who could ask for anything more?

*At dusk, the screen descends, the grill gets fired up, and the rooftop transforms into an intimate outdoor cinema and party space. Leafy plantings offer a subtle degree of privacy without blocking the sparkling city lights. The hot tub, chaise longue, and sofas ensure a relaxing time. Fresh herbs for garnishing drinks or tossing into a marinade are close at hand, planted in an irrigated narrow strip set into the counter near the sink. A stainless steel grill, dishwasher and icemaker, all Energy Star-rated, make for effortless entertaining under the stars. Energy-conserving fibre optic lights, ingeniously embedded in the garden's earth, create a soft glow.*

