Nearer the Sun, but No Safer

By PENELIPE GREEN

From the roof of a loft building on East 14th Street, you can peer into a deep brick-lined canyon where the sweet tang of blue marigolds mixes with the base note of French tarragon. There's a meadow of bright green Astroturf, a hedge of bay laurel and potted tomatoes, and two teenage pigeons. Despite its leafy cover, the temperature here at midday can top 110 degrees, as it did on a recent scorcher. This garden may not win any beauty contests, but it is nonetheless a champion, one of many scrappy green spaces still glowing on roofs all over New York City, despite decades of fierce challenges by buffering winds, scorching heat, and rent-stabilized landlords and evading civic policies. These dozy survivors tell stories of a time when "green roof" wasn't a buzz word or a reason for a tax credit, when Brooklyn hipsters weren't farming acres of kale on tops of warehouses, and when the owners of million-dollar Soho penthouses weren't laying down multithousand-dollar "instant" gardens, as one longtime Soho resident and roof gardener put it. Here and there, urban pastoralists.

SPANGLED AND WRANGLED: Gerald DeCock's rooftop garden, above, is one of the more modest atop the Chelsea Hotel. Right, Susan Doukas used to have a garden on top of her 14th Street loft; when the landlord built two stories above her, he gave her the use of the studio roof behind.

14TH STREET

The rent on Susan Doukas's third-floor loft was $114 in 1979, the year she moved in. That fee came with no heat, no hope of repair if a window broke or the ceiling fell in (as happened from time to time) and no possibility of an audience with the landlord, though he did suggest when she signed her lease that should someone from the fire or building department show up, he might think of "spreading a little grease" — greasing their palms — and you'd slide better.

"Or something like that," said Mr. Doukas, now 65. "It sounded better in Yiddish."

That year was the middle chapter in a love story. She had met Robert Brady, an acting coach, casting director and same, in the late 90s, when she took one of the acting classes he taught out of his studio on the ground floor of the building. She was a writer and an actress, married at the time, and working as a waitress at Max's Kansas City; he was charismatic, also married and 15 years her senior. There was an on-again-off-again affair until 1979, when she found herself living on the building's top floor and cast by Mr. Brady in

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