

IN THE GARDEN

Nearer the Sun, but No Safer

By PENELOPE 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 lilies mixes with a base note of French fries. There's a meadow of bright green AstroTurf, a hedgerow of bushy tomato plants and two teenage maples.

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 blooming on roofs all over New York City, despite decades of fierce challenges by buffeting winds, searing heat, covetous landlords and evolving civic policies.

These doughty survivors tell stories of a time when "green roof" wasn't a buzz term or a reason for a tax credit, when Brooklyn hipsters weren't farming acres of kale on tops of



SPANGLED AND WRANGLED Gerald DeCock's roof 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.

warehouses and when the owners of multimillion-dollar SoHo penthouses weren't laying in multimillion-dollar "instant" gardens, as one longtime SoHo renter and roof gardener put it. Herewith, four urban pastorals.

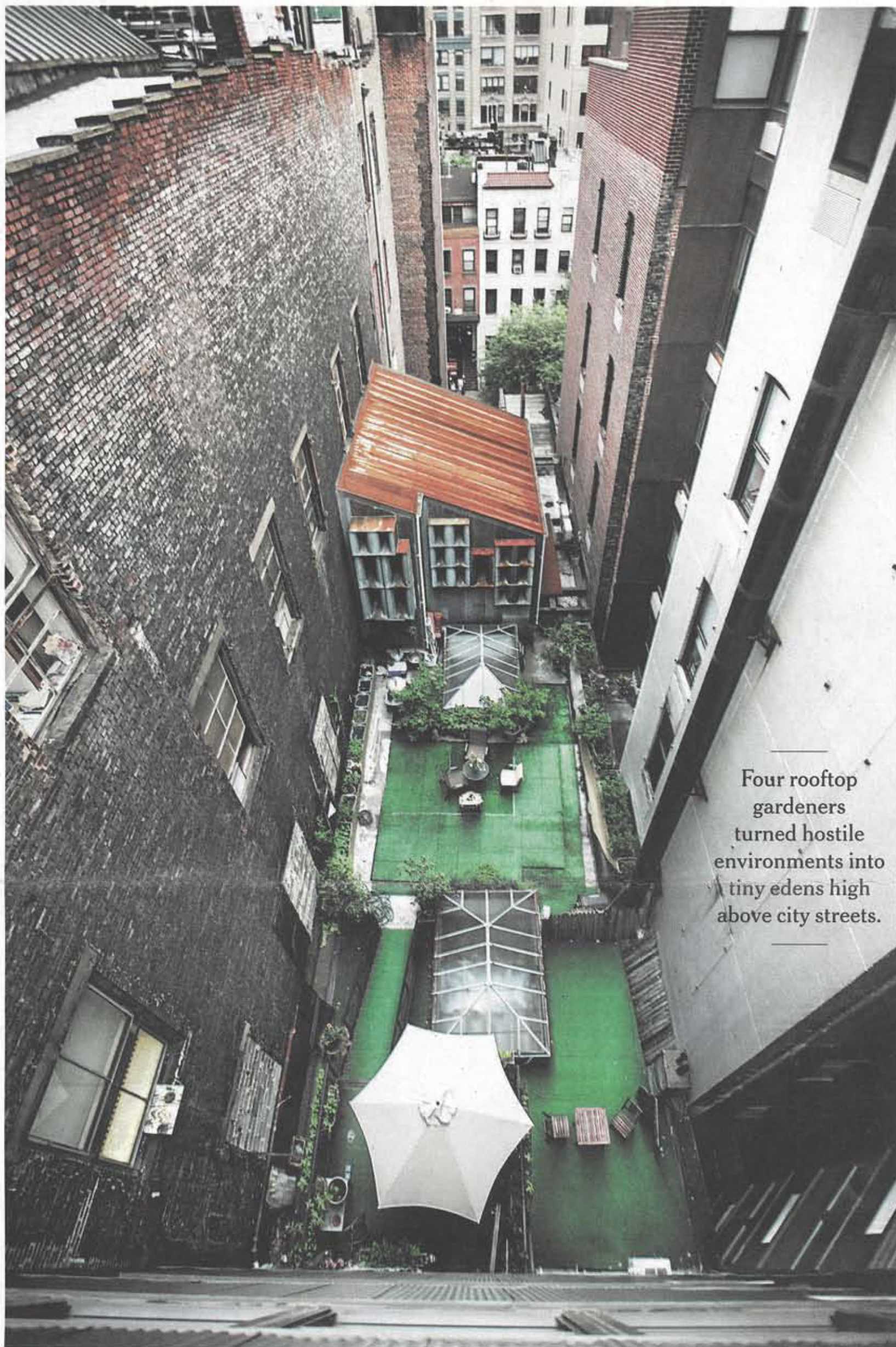
14TH STREET

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 buildings departments show up, she ought to consider "spreading a little grease" — greasing their palms — "and you'll slide better."

"Or something like that," said Ms. 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 mime, in the late '60s, 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. Theirs 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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Four rooftop gardeners turned hostile environments into tiny edens high above city streets.