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VERTICAL GARDENS ADD A GREEN TOUCH TO LUXE NYC & MIAMI SPOTS

By POST STAFF REPORT/JUNE

Exposed brick? Venetian plaster? Good — but not good enough!

In the modern townhouse at 305 Degraw St. in Cobble Hill, \$7.2 million won't just buy you 6,000 square feet of sunlight-splashed elegance, it opens the door on a singular wow

moment: a giant interior wall comprised of living, breathing, verdant plants.

The 18-foot-high wall, designed by NYC landscape designer FireDean Schilling, cost \$100,000 and contains distinctive striations of 1,080 regional plants such as woodland, bird's nest and rabbit's foot ferns. Irrigation for the home — which is on the market with Terry Naini of Town — is controlled by a computer offsite. A nifty technical trick.

“People are increasingly interested in garden walls,” says Schilling about the emerging trend of using plants as an interior architectural or design element in residences and commercial projects. “You can see them! A rooftop garden is lovely, but you can't enjoy it year-round, nor can you easily see it.”

For a \$300 per month maintenance fee, his firm also handles the green-thumb guesswork of upkeep for residential clients — who pay \$130 per square foot, or about \$6,500, for a 10-by-5-foot wall, the minimum size for any Schilling project.



“Plants are temperamental,” Schilling explains, and New York City typically poses two challenges: insufficient sunlight and insufficient water. “Plants get cold, they get blight, they get viruses. These vertical gardens are high maintenance.”

Yet at Colonie and Atrium, two Brooklyn restaurants with smaller projects by Schilling, the effect is unarguable.

“[They’re] right in front of you. It’s really compelling,” he says of the restaurants’ interior green walls, above the diners’ heads.

“Most of us live in towns with less contact with vanishing natural environments,” echoes Patrick Blanc, the French garden designer widely acknowledged as the inventor of vertical gardens several decades ago. “Thus, it is normal that we want to see a kind of nature coming back; where the only living creatures aren’t only just ourselves.”

His gardens adorn residential and commercial projects worldwide — from Bahrain to Sydney to Kuala Lumpur.

“My vertical gardens have been thriving for many years: 32 years for the oldest, and 20 for many others,” Blanc says.

These unusual gardens are now attracting buyers at high-end condo developments as well as long-time renters, such as Brooklyn marketing executive Summer Rayne Oakes, who commissioned a garden wall in her 1,200-square-foot rental apartment in Williamsburg. It’s a lush tangle of green leaves and fragrant blossoms that includes philodendrons, ferns and dracaena. Created by Jersey City-based Mingo Designs in 2012, hers is 8 feet tall and 9 feet wide.

“Prior to this wall, I had 120 plants in my home,” says Oakes. “I was basically running out of space!”

With some of its tendrils tumbling to the floor, her vertical garden offers a soothing environment during long, bitter winters.

Mingo founder Kari Brooke Elwell, who designed and installed Oakes’ garden wall, also has one in her own home. They are a great investment, she says, “people are so interested in their interior environments and wellness. You can buy a beautiful painting or choose a living piece of art like this.”

Elwell’s firm is 13 years old, but she has been creating luxurious landscapes for 30 years. A garden wall completed for a TriBeCa penthouse uses ferns, liriopie, ajuga and other plants. In West Chelsea, she has three more high-end projects underway, including a 10-foot wall at the rear of a townhouse whose layers of green echo its interior.

In Miami, Starwood Capital Group has partnered with LeFrak to develop 1 Hotel & Homes South Beach. The complex on Collins Avenue includes a 3,000-square-foot vertical garden at the hotel entry that spans half the building — an entire city block in length. There’s also a creeping vine-covered pavilion at the pool bar accented by bougainvillea.

“We’re using various philodendrons, liriopie, Asparagus densiflorus, jasmine, Zoysia grass, bird’s nest ferns, wart ferns and wire vine,” says Kemper Hyers, senior vice president of design for the Starwood Capital Group. “The look is a textured green wall — fully grown, healthy and tropical.”

Opening this fall, the project has a 406-room hotel and

127 condos priced from \$1.2 to \$15 million.

“People are buying a brand,” says Camille Douglas, a senior vice president of the LeFrak Organization Inc., which developed the project. “1 Hotel & Homes’s ethos is using natural fibers, colors and tones.”

Sales have been strong, with 78 of 127 available units sold. The architect, Debora Aguiar, is Brazilian, and Douglas says Starwood expected most buyers to come from Latin America. So far, 30 percent are American, 25 percent Latin American and 22 percent European. “People want to live in a place that feels welcoming and our brand identity is bringing nature inside,” Douglas says.

Also embracing the vertical garden trend is the Hotel Hugo on Greenwich Street. The gardens appear in the check-in area and in the restaurant, Il Principe, and are filled with plants such as Austral Gem fern and Neon Pothos. “The composition we chose has a quality similar to abstract art,” says the gardens’ designer, Marcello Pozzi.

“You can see it almost as an art installation or a very slow performance-art piece since it’s alive.”

In TriBeCa, 7 Harrison is an eight-story, 12-unit renovated warehouse development which will include a garden wall created by David Kelly, partner in charge of landscape for the design firm Rees Roberts + Partners LLC. The wall is about 18 feet wide and 24 feet high and is filled with English ivy.

Designed for the building’s maisonette, known as the Atelier, the wall-garden will be a dramatic backdrop to the apartment’s living room. The 3,135-square-foot, three-bedroom, 3½-bathroom duplex with a 272-square-foot traditional garden is now in contract for \$8.5 million. Leonard Steinberg, formerly of Douglas Elliman, the building’s broker, named the vertical garden a key selling point.

“Outdoor space is especially valuable when it leads directly off living spaces and is seen boldly from the inside,” he says. “It becomes your view and an integral part of the interior.”

Adding a vertical garden can boost the value of a property by “10 to 15 percent at a minimum,” Steinberg adds. “A green wall is all the difference between a nothing exposure and a beautiful exposure. You’re taking control of a view and that adds one of the greatest values to a piece of real estate.”

Will their popularity continue to spread? “Absolutely” — garden walls are “100 percent” a growing trend, says Steinberg. “We have so many ugly exposures in New York City and they could all be gorgeous.”