

Long Island City

# *Garden Loft with Skyline Backdrop*

When Dagny and Timothy Du Val sit in their garden in the evening, they see a silhouette like a mountain range with summits, crests, canyons and gorges. What looks like a mountain range is the Manhattan skyline, with architectural icons such as the Chrysler Building, the UN headquarters and the Empire State Building. Dagny Du Val raves about sunsets in June, which she considers to be the most beautiful month, when the skyscrapers are bathed in incandescent red. These are magical moments which depict dramatic cloud-and-light moods. Almost thirty years ago, together with her husband, she bought a former metal foundry in Long Island City. This was a collection of buildings dating from the 19th century bordering on three streets. At the beginning of the 1980s, very few people lived here. The area was dominated by industrial and factory buildings. Even though Long Island City is only a short hop over the East River from mid-Manhattan, people think of it as the last place on earth. By now many have discovered that Long Island City is part of the city and closer to the center than many parts of Manhattan itself. Many of the old buildings have been demolished and apartment houses are sprouting out of the ground like mushrooms. Nevertheless, the district has been able to maintain its original raw charm. The most beautiful factory buildings have been redeveloped and now house loft apartments and studios. The Du Vals fear that the building boom will result in nothing being left of the original area. They themselves have taken great care in their restoration to keep the flair of the former foundry. Un-

plastered brick walls, doors with innumerable paint layers, large industrial windows, and rusty metal fittings are combined with modern design. The Du Vals have recognized the potential of this unusual mixture, and hire out the building for weddings, commercials and film productions such as *Sex and the City*.

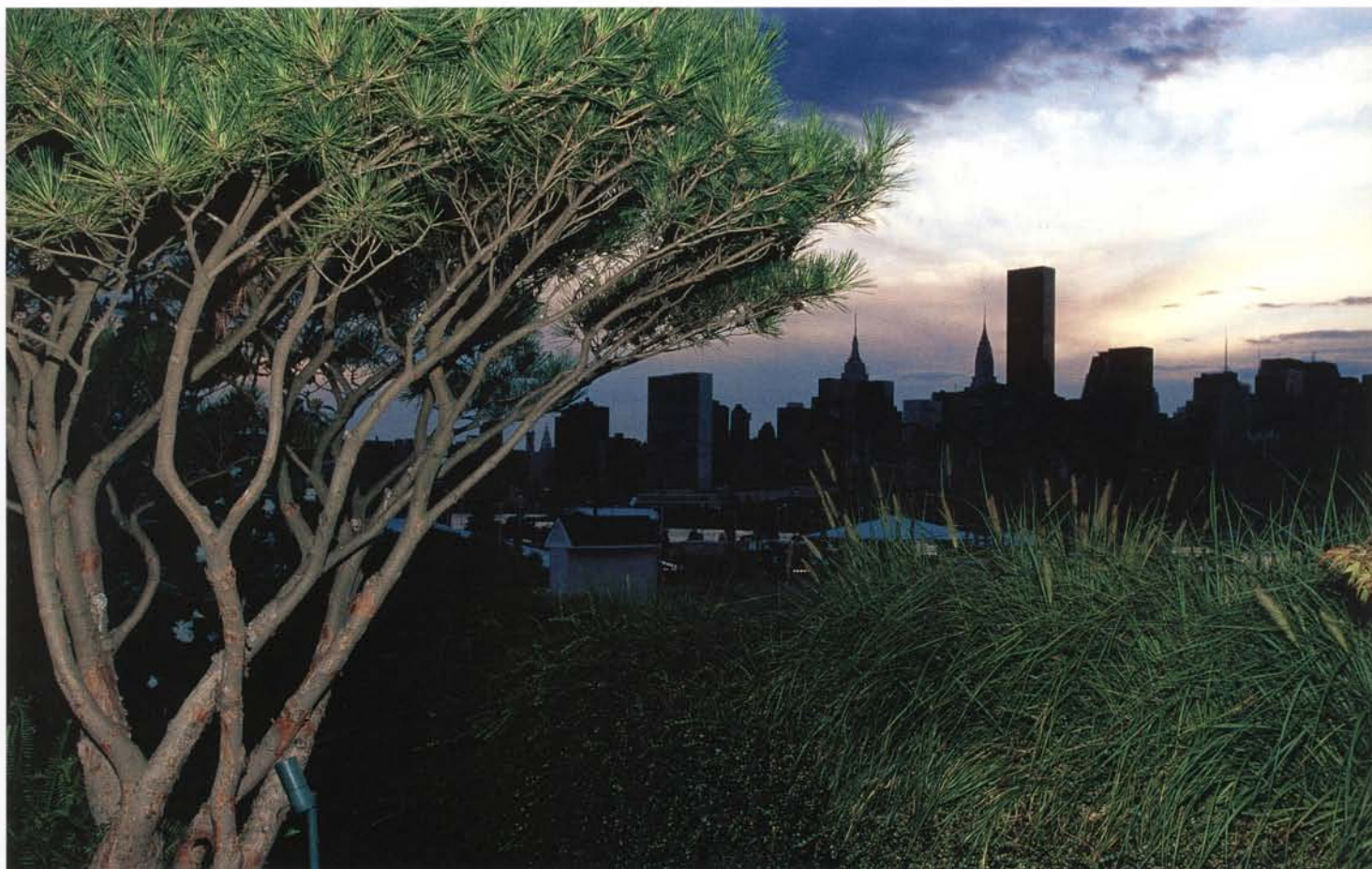
Three double doors open onto the garden, which was originally the roof of the neighboring ice-cream factory. Here they found gigantic pieces of equipment standing on black tar-paper, which had to be dismantled and removed. The statics of the roof had not been calculated with a garden in mind. The weight of all the individual elements had to be precisely worked out. The plants are housed in variously sized containers made of fiberglass, a very light material, although some are made of plastic or wood. They are all dark green or black, to make them as invisible as possible. In addition, Dagny Du Val chose ground plants that grow over the containers and make them appear as natural as possible.

The first plant was a Japanese maple which the Du Vals brought from their roof terrace in Manhattan. It has been a family member for over thirty years. The 3,200 square feet are divided into single garden rooms. The Du Vals built a pergola of old wooden beams from the foundry and in its shade there is a long dining table. The open areas benefit from the exceptional location, which is very close to the Queensborough Bridge. Particularly on weekends, when no trucks are thundering over the bridge, the garden is a very attractive place to meet friends, or to read and to enjoy the atmosphere









above the city. There are now many evergreen plants in the garden, such as dwarf and black pines, while the grasses in the background look like the natural bank of the East River. Purple loosestrife grows very well in the damp air. The Du Vals are particularly proud of their aspens. Ten years ago the cuttings, only as thick as a thumb, came by post; now they are almost fifteen feet tall. Dagny appreciates it most when, even in a light breeze, their leaves glint and shimmer. She admits that she is privileged to be able to grow flowering plants which normally need a warmer climate: papyrus, jasmine, pigeonberry, snowball bushes, false myrtle and passion flowers. The colors range from white through pale pink to blue; there are no red or orange blooms. The Du Vals have been very clever in their choice of floor covering, which helps to create the impression of different garden rooms. The wooden floor makes the

pergola cozy and comfortable, while the black gravel and integrated paving stones fit in well with the character of the fountain and the bamboo. A cubic table and four chairs in the front garden area are made of slate-gray stone and fit in well with the ground covering. The luxuriant planting has been specifically chosen to contrast with the sober furnishings. Another garden room is defined by large, light gray paving stones, where comfortable sun-loungers with dark green cushions are an invitation to laze in the sun with Manhattan as a backdrop.

The signature of a professional is clearly seen in the optimal use of what is quite a small area. The Du Vals turned their love of nature into a profession and in 1971 started a company for garden design, which they managed until recently. They employed up to seventy-five people and experienced all the ups and downs of the





sector. When Wall Street was booming, many stock-brokers realized their dream of having a roof garden; when the stock market went into decline, so did their business. Gardens, then, reflect the economic climate of the city. At the beginning of the recession, the Du Vals called their own garden an “orphanage,” because they took back the plants which their clients no longer wanted or could afford. However, that does not mean that their garden has become a hodgepodge. On the contrary: With its imaginative harmony it testifies to the pleasure the Du Vals take in their own work. They have created a place to reflect the identity of life and design.









