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Green Space So Exclusive It’s Off Limits Even to Residents

Deborah Nevins is one of the most sought-after landscape designers in the world. She has seeded and sodded estates for the likes of the entertainment mogul David Geffen, the Greek shipping magnate Stavros Niarchos and the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, and her haute habitats dot townhouse backyards and prewar rooftops from Greenwich Village to Park Avenue.

For her latest project, she is turning what would otherwise be a barren air shaft inside a new TriBeCa loft building, the Sterling Mason, into a lush 2,400-square-foot courtyard. Hawthorn trees telegraph the seasons, from rich white blossoms to lush green leaves, red berries and spindly branches. Ivy creeps along the ground, framing a sculptural stream.

“It should be a remarkably peaceful space,” said Dan McInerney, a vice president of Taconic Investment Partners, which is building the 32-unit Sterling Mason, on Laight Street.

To keep that peace, this most inviting oasis will be off limits, and not just to the general public. Even residents of the building, where apartments are going for up to $23 million, will be allowed to enjoy it only from the ground-floor lobby and library or their bedroom windows upstairs.

In the concrete jungle, one of the rarest amenities is actual foliage. In-building laundry — even yoga rooms and bike storage — is more common than a lawn, let alone one designed by one of the premier horticulturalists in the business. But at a growing number of upmarket buildings, the ultimate luxury offering is a miniature Gramercy Park, one so exclusive that no one but the gardener gets a key.

No need to stop and smell the roses, developers and designers say.

“Just catching a glimpse of greenery in the city can bring a sense of calm,” Ms. Nevins said. “I never have time to go to Central Park, but just walking out my door on 73rd Street and seeing it there makes all the difference.”

The Schumacher, a historic printing plant on Bleecker Street in NoLIta that is
being converted, had an original light well from 1883, which helped illuminate the interior of the building. With 21 condos for $4 million to $25 million, buyers could hardly be expected to look out onto an empty concrete shaft, like the denizens of some nearby tenement. Worse yet would be if it became a party venue.

“This is a serene space,” said Roy Stillman, president of Stillman Development, the building’s developer. “The last thing we want is barbecue and cigarette smoke.”

Mr. Stillman hired the renowned landscape designer Ken Smith. “We didn’t want big trees, because it would block too much light, but we still wanted to create a sense of privacy,” Mr. Stillman said. “We decided to bring the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to Manhattan.”

Ivy covers the walls — inspired by a stay Mr. Stillman had at the Hotel Plaza Athénée in Paris — and climbs along cables stretching from a base of crushed marble up to the roof six stories above, looking like alien tendrils. Further complementing the space will be a pair of sculptures by Jeff Koons belonging to the collector Alberto Mugrabi. He bought a pair of triplex units for $20.7 million and was so taken by the garden that he wanted to contribute to it.

The newer residential gardens are largely an outgrowth of the current, post-bubble market, where financing has been scarce, leading to smaller boutique projects with larger units aimed at the wealthy. When apartments stop being cramped, there is less need to leave for a get-together on the terrace or in the courtyard. Plus, if the owners want to escape to nature, odds are good they already have a retreat or two somewhere.
“Even if you have a place out East, upstate, the Riviera, a yacht, it’s still nice to wake up in nature,” Mr. Stillman said.

Technology has also advanced to the point where these spaces require almost no maintenance, especially if they are off limits, which eliminates the need for shoveling and raking — seasonal pruning will do. Ample sunshine can be a problem, though, as well as layout.

“You’re designing on two planes, for people in the lobby and the common areas looking out on the garden, but also from above,” Mr. Smith said.

SK Development is tilling two look-but-don’t-touch gardens. Where others are manicured, the Reade Chambers in TriBeCa has one as wild looking as the High Line. At 10 Bond Street in NoHo, a sunken light well for the gym and retail space was turned into an oversize vitrine planted with a single 18-foot saucer magnolia to enliven the space. “We wanted to make the basement more than a basement,” said Scott Shnay, the principal of SK Development.

While still uncommon in the city, this latest crop of gardens is a bit of a throwback, to an earlier gilded era. Grand turn-of-the-century apartment buildings like the Apthorp, the Dakota and Riverhouse all featured small, inaccessible gardens within their entrance courtyards.

Since this golden age, most installations have been corporate ones, like Isamu Noguchi’s Zen garden at Chase Manhattan Plaza downtown and a stand of birch trees at The New York Times Building, though the goal is the same — a pleasant view and lots of light. The current apartment appellation owes a debt as well to the Museum of Modern Art, where Mr. Smith, the Schumacher designer, created a massive installation of plastic plants and fake rocks on the museum’s roof after its 2003 expansion. It is meant to enhance the view from residences in neighboring buildings.

Even as New Yorkers are getting back to nature at urban farms, waterfront parks and green roofs, apartments boasting these Edenic refuges and their forbidden fruit may actually be the truest expression of gardening.

“It really is a garden in the most traditional sense,” which is a simulation of nature, said Denise Hoffman-Brandt, director of the landscape architecture program at City College. “It’s all about the artifice.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/nyregion/at-luxury-buildings-a-garden-off-limits-to-all-even-the-residents.html?ref=nyregion&_r=0