

Up on the roof

Once they were neglected concrete wastelands, but now London's rooftops are sprouting sylvan idylls with impeccable eco-credentials, discovers **Hannah Bort**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDREW LAMB

A mellow meadow in Newington Green

As a teenager I was worried about how we were going to feed our growing population when we were building on farmland,' says Justin Bere, director of the eco-architecture firm bere:architects. 'I would draw sketches of semi-submerged houses with soil going over the top, and the idea has stuck with me ever since.' The result of Bere's years of daydreaming is a zinc-clad Newington Green house/studio influenced by a building code developed in Germany known as Passivhaus and designed to use as little energy as possible. Everything from the triple-glazed windows to the solar panels and 3,000 litre rainwater harvesting tank has been envisioned with energy saving in mind. And as for the garden on the roof? There are four separate horizontal plains of soil at different levels, creating a lush wildflower meadow. There are grape hyacinths, roses, poppies and chives, offering a rich pasture for urban bees. 'It's so important to support the natural environment, and also to create low-energy design that looks good at the same time.' The staff at Bere's practice are equally enthusiastic, particularly in the summer months when al fresco lunches are served in the meadow. If you're green with envy, don't despair, a rooftop oasis is simple to achieve. 'I think almost any roof is strong enough for a thin level of soil. If we can grow a meadow up here, you can do it anywhere.' (bere.co.uk)



The high life in Dalston

The Print House in Dalston, a four-storey former factory, is now home to one of the most exciting creative spaces in East London, the Dalston Roof Park. Inspired by the High Line in New York (a disused railway line that's now a public garden), the charitable Bootstrap Company opened the space in May 2010. 'Our philosophy is about bringing empty spaces to life,' explains chief executive Sam Alderton. Bootstrap's mission is to improve and regenerate Dalston, which they have done here by creating an allotment and garden. Thirty volunteers water and harvest the produce, which is then shared out among them. But it is not just about artichokes and Swiss chard. By night, the space transforms into a rooftop bar serving frozen margaritas and offering weekly film screenings, live music (the receptionist is the lead singer of London folk band Lulu and the Lampshades), DJs, and a Turkish BBQ. 'The other day we had people enjoying a beer, there was someone walking with their baby and children picking strawberries, all while we were setting up the film screen. That's exactly how I envisaged this project – breaking down barriers and creating something for everyone out of nothing.' (bootstrapcompany.co.uk)



The hanging garden of Hammersmith

Hammersmith isn't known for its green spaces, but look closely between the concrete and the flyovers and you will spot a secret sylvan retreat. On the roof of the Lyric theatre is a public garden complete with magnolia trees, eucalyptus, wisteria and clematis. Add a BBQ, a canopied pergola and some spot lighting and it's the perfect place to escape from the bustle of the city below. The garden is the result of a collaboration between the theatre, the environmental charity Groundwork London and HammersmithLondon, a business funding organisation. 'We wanted an environment that would act as a piece of public art, as well as being an escape for locals,' explains Patricia Bench, development director

of HammersmithLondon. The horticultural haven was created using environmentally sustainable materials, including reclaimed timber, paid for with help from Marks & Spencer's 5p plastic bag scheme, the profits of which are ploughed into eco projects. 'The garden functions as an extension of the theatre for our audience and staff, but it's also an amazing public space,' says Sean Holmes, artistic director of the Lyric. 'It's always in use; from actors practising between rehearsals, to children on school trips, through to mothers with their babies.' The theatre holds Poetry & Pimm's evenings, featuring young Slam poets such as Deanna Rodger and Dean Atta, summer parties and barbecues. (lyric.co.uk)

Crouch End's aerial allotment

It started with a vision of me walking through London and seeing roofs covered in orchards,' says Azul-Valerie Thome, a former jeweller and the creator of Food from the Sky, a project based on the principles of permaculture and sustainable gardening. Fast forward a few years and the result is a bio-dynamic garden on the roof of a Budgens supermarket in Crouch End. 'I talked to Andrew Thornton, the manager, and he showed me this roof. I knew it would be possible to grow more than just a few salad leaves up here.' Haringey Council donated 10 tonnes of compost and 300 recycled boxes, and with the help of 20 volunteers, the concrete space was transformed into an aerial allotment. The garden now boasts herb pots, edible flowers and vegetables to sell in the aisles below. There's a plastic bottle 'greenhouse' that doubles as a rainwater butt, plans for a chicken coop and Thome is even training to be a beekeeper. Boris Johnson made an impromptu visit, spending time with students from Highgate Wood School who are setting up a mushroom project. 'I want people to take over and grow what is close to their hearts,' says Thome, who was delighted when the staff created a 'Bangladesh' garden to celebrate local diversity. 'We need to grow food; we need agricultural skills. This is the future.' (foodfromthesky.org.uk)

