

Form follows 50:
A guide to decorating
state by state.

BY RIMA SUQI



Living the tiny-house
life, kite-making in
Brooklyn and sales
on rugs and lighting.

Home

The New York Times

ON LOCATION

Kinderhook, N.Y.

Sleeping In the Afterthought

A transplanted
horticulturalist in the Hudson
Valley starts with the garden
and renovates inward.

By SANDY KEENAN

Even before Hurricane Sandy swooped in two years ago and wiped out 15 years of her work at the Battery Conservancy, where she was director of horticulture — in charge of what she thought of as her “23-acre roof garden” — Sigrid Gray had already decided to leave the city.

Her exit also had nothing to do with the changes happening in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, neighborhood, where she had spent nearly 25 years living in an industrial art space and managing a balky 1934 residential building nearby. Or with anything going on in nearby Greenpoint, where she had assumed the (pro bono) stewardship of the grounds connected to the Police Department’s 94th Precinct headquarters back in the 1990s. (The disarray bothered her trained painter’s eye and Scandinavian sense of order, and when she made an impromptu offer to organize things, the desk sergeant replied, “Knock yourself out.”)

Simply put, her city energy was spent.

“Changing Williamsburg amazed me, but at that point it could have been lined with dancing bears and pony rides,” said Ms. Gray, 57. All her instincts told her it was time to move on. As she put it, “I prefer open land.”

Her relocation requirements were quirky and rather specific: grounds that

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JANE BEILES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

“It’s an amazing experience to have a new house built around you, almost like a new skin,” Sigrid Gray said of her renovated home.



TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Hole in the Wall Gang

A Brooklyn building’s residents show off one of its coziest architectural features. Page 4.

IN THE GARDEN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RANDY HARRIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from top left: The Lotus Garden has occupied a West 97th Street garage rooftop for 30 years; statue in the plot of Linda Gallo, one of 30 gardeners; Judith Vowles’s yellow roses against the backdrop of the Columbia; astilbe; Deacon deGarmeaux lotus in goldfish pond; coleus; robin nestling in quince tree; one of a profusion of ladybugs; Pamela Mason Wagner’s roses; and angel statue in the plot of Farrin Ullah.

The Garage That Bloomed

The Lotus Garden, a community patch in an unlikely Upper West Side spot, celebrates 30 years.

By JULIE LASKY

For five years now, I have been tending a plot — cultivating hostas, lilies and astilbes, gently trying to persuade a hydrangea bush not to depart this earth — in the Lotus Garden, a community garden on West 97th Street between Broadway and West End Avenue.

The Lotus Garden is one of the most lush and tranquil spots in New York, but if you’ve never heard of it, you are far from alone. While a sign on an iron gate plainly marks the entrance, all that is visible through the bars is a flight of concrete stairs leading to the roof of a parking garage.

But should you be inclined to mount those steps — an opportunity the public

has every Sunday from April to November, between 1 and 4 p.m. — you would find a sixth of an acre supporting mature trees, shrubs and serpentine paths curving around clumps of fragrant plantings maintained by 30 gardeners of various ages and experience levels.

There are also vines, bits of statuary, conversational seating clusters, a quaintly decomposing toolshed and a pair of goldfish ponds that gave the garden its name. It appears that a man from Manchuria who had been growing lotuses in tubs in his New York living room showed up one day around the time the garden was being installed three decades ago and asked if he could park them in the new ponds while the weather was warm.

Yes, three decades: that’s how long it has sat on its rooftop, hemmed in by buildings, like a miniature High Line without tourist swarms. And then there is the ex-

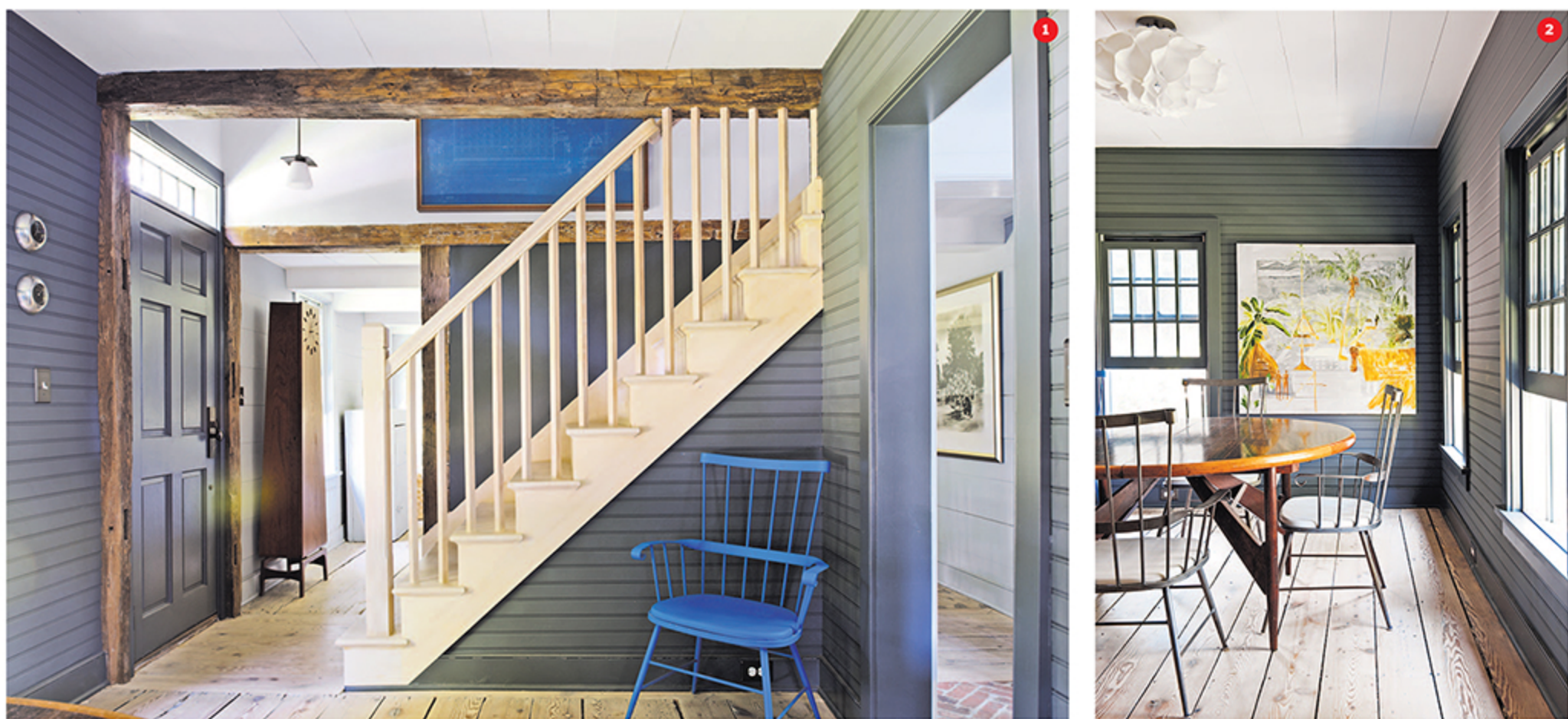
traordinary way it came to be.

As recounted by Jeffrey Kindley, a Lotus gardener who shares a plot with his wife, Louise, and is compiling the garden’s history to commemorate its 30th anniversary this fall, the origins date from the late 1970s. At that time, Broadway between West 96th and West 97th Streets was a study in blight, having been stripped of a pair of historic theaters, the Riverside and the Riviera. The buildings had survived the death of vaudeville but not the city’s recent financial crisis.

Mark Greenwald, an architect with the Department of City Planning and a rooftop gardener at his West 97th Street home, joined members of his block association in persuading Manufacturers Hanover Trust, the bank that owned the vacant land, to allow the group to clear it of rubble and lay down soil around the perimeter. Within a

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE BEILES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sleeping in the Afterthought



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would challenge her, with trees and distant vistas and eccentric slopes, but that wouldn't need extensive tending. And nothing terribly remote.

After a number of scouting trips, she eventually found what she was looking for in the historic district of Kinderhook, a Hudson Valley village settled by the Dutch in the 17th century. "It was a small property, but it had many planes," she said of the not-quite fifth of an acre, with a 1,500-square-foot house on it, that she bought for \$260,000 in 2012. "I knew I could garden it for a very long time."

At the moment, though, there isn't much of a garden to see. Out front, she has planted a lawn of Canadian fescue that tops out at eight inches and needs only two trims a year. Along a side border, she is training a live willow fence in an intricate diamond pattern, and behind the house is a large slab of bluestone waiting to be chiseled into a birdbath. Half of the driveway is being ripped out so that more of her favorite things — sour cherry trees, Irish moss, blue flax, horseradish and asparagus — can take root, somewhat willy-nilly, as is her preference.

"It's got another year and a half before it all knits," she warned a visitor. "There's a



There isn't much of a garden to see, but there's a master plan.

plan, but I'm afraid it's only in my head."

What about the house?
To her, it was something of an afterthought, of indeterminate style and equally fuzzy vintage. At first, she didn't mind that it had exposed beams that were mysteriously not attached to the walls or that you could see through the floorboards between the first and second floors. Her plan was merely to spruce up the kitchen with new cabinets.

But James Dixon, the Chatham, N.Y., architect she hired, kept making small obser-

vations and helpful suggestions for other alterations here and there. And soon she started seeing what he saw: a house in need of a more authentic identity — and a complete overhaul.

Mr. Dixon and his colleague, Matthew Herzberg, asked her to consider changing the roofline from pitched to gambrel, to give it more presence and get an extra 30 inches or so on the cramped second floor, a convincing argument for the 5-foot-10 Ms. Gray.

From that point on, she almost never said no to their ideas. And they went through the house, reimagining it room by room.

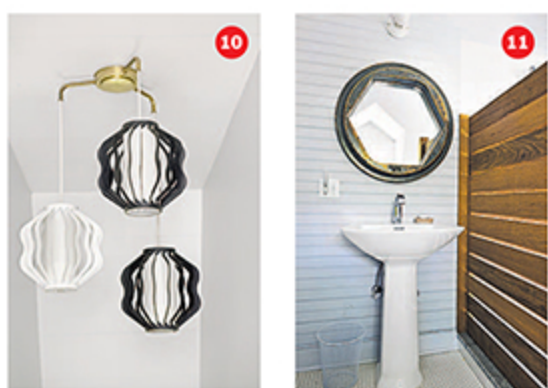
"It's an amazing experience to have a new house built around you, almost like a new skin," she said.

The transformation, which more than doubled the cost of her initial investment, was finished in the spring of 2013 and received an award from the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Everyone on the design and construction team wanted her to go with a flashy front door, lobbying hard for yellow. But Ms. Gray insisted on keeping the look quiet. Every project has its star. And this one, she said, was never about the house.

"They did an amazing thing: They found grace in the house," she said. But for her, the real grace lies beyond its walls.

For the first time in her horticultural career, she said, "I now have the pleasure of waking up in the middle of my garden. There are drip lines on timers and I can actually hear them going off."



1. The home's wide-board pine floors were found under two layers of flooring. The vintage Windsor chair was found at Foley & Cox, in Hudson, N.Y., and painted bright blue.

2. The dining room is painted in Down Pipe No. 26 from Farrow & Ball. The Phrena Hanging lamp (\$110) is by Karl Zahn.

3. The second floor picked up about 30 inches in height when the roof was changed from pitched to gambrel. The orange chair was found at an antiques market in Stamford, Conn.

4. The print over the fireplace is by Elizabeth Bramsen, Sigrid Gray's grandmother. The Shadowy chair is by Tord Boontje.

5. The living room sofas are from Restoration Hardware. The wooden stool is from Elkland Handwerke; the pillows are from One Kings Lane.

6. Bookshelves were built into wall over the daybed in Ms. Gray's study.

7. "I love that it feels like it will stand strong for another 200 years," Ms. Gray said of her renovated 19th-century home. The siding is cedar shake, painted in Duxbury Gray from Benjamin Moore.

8. The credenza in Ms. Gray's study was found at Arenskjold Antiques in Hudson, N.Y.

9. The black rattan Storsele chair in the kitchen is from Ikea (\$119). Ms. Gray refinished the antique cherry table herself.

10. The light fixture in the second-floor stairwell was found at Time and Materials Antiques, in Woodstock, N.Y.

11. In the guest bathroom, the open shower wall is made of ipe. The mirror frame is a vintage sand mold.