

heady heights

Presented with a roof terrace 13 floors up in central London, the landscape designer Emily Erlam overcame various challenges to create a relaxed and secluded garden with dramatic views

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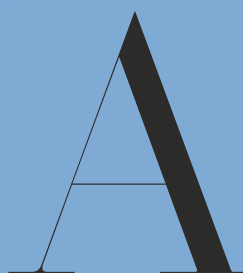
OPPOSITE The dramatic London skyline is softened by the drought- and wind-tolerant planting, with *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' and *Gaura lindheimeri* forming a semi-transparent screen. The lush planting surrounds several secluded seating areas, designed so anyone sitting down can almost forget they are on a roof terrace. THIS PAGE Clipped mounds of *Prunus lusitanica* 'Angustifolia', *Phillyrea angustifolia*, *Pittosporum tobira* 'Nana', hornbeam and yew create evergreen structure, while santolina and lavender waft scent into the apartment





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Calamintha nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' in a terracotta pot from Atelier Vierkant. The dining area has a custom-made linear planter system by Kinley and porcelain floor tiles from Alfresco Floors. The multi-stemmed dwarf pine, *Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri', creates year-round structure. A stepped water feature in bronze brings the calming sound of water. A cedar daybed with built-in storage edges one of the planting beds. Layers of *Origanum vulgare* 'Compactum', santolina and lavender give a Mediterranean feel to the planting. OPPOSITE *Hebe rakaiensis* and *Thymus vulgaris*, with *Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus Group' spilling over the front





fear of heights is not what you would expect from the owner of a penthouse on the thirteenth floor of a block of flats. But it was one of the defining factors for this King's Cross roof terrace owned by Alex Hooi and Keir McGuinness and designed by Emily Erlam in 2014. 'Keir was upfront

about the fact he disliked heights, so we had to find a solution that disguised the edges of the terrace and provided a barrier to the sheer drop below,' says Emily. The dizzying vertical views have been cushioned by clever planting, lulling people into forgetting how high they are – yet still allowing a dramatic and far-reaching panorama of the city.

'Our objective was to create some sort of seclusion and enclosure in what was a windy, barren space,' says Keir, who bought the flat in the RIBA award-winning Plimsoll Building in 2014. 'When you are out on the terrace at weekends, this place is so quiet. There's a real sense of peace and calm.'

Spanning 170 square metres, this is certainly one of the largest private roof spaces in this area, if not the whole of London, so the aim was to divide up the space into a series of cocooned seating and dining areas to make it feel less bleak. 'It was a challenge,' remembers Emily. 'I was collaborating with David Morley Architects and interior designers Johnson Naylor while the building work was still in progress to ensure that the roof terrace was integrated seamlessly into the design, attending board meetings with huge numbers of people. When the architect first sent through the plan of the terrace to me, it was such a large file that it kept crashing my computer.'

Then there were the infinitesimal calculations for weight allowance. This is, of course, of paramount importance on a roof, as are the considerations that go hand-in-hand with it.

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The Kinley planters, for example, made from 3mm thick powder-coated steel, are without bases and filled with lightweight compost to half their depth only. They also had to fit the space down to the last millimetre, a plan that almost went pear-shaped when, well into the design process, Emily was informed that various points around the perimeter of the terrace had to be kept free for abseiling access for window cleaners. The solution? To design bespoke containers that can be wheeled out.

The other challenge of any roof terrace, particularly one this high, is that it has its own microclimate. 'Wind speeds can be extraordinarily high up here and can pick up quickly, so we had to be aware of that at all times and never leave anything untethered,' says Emily. The planting is designed to withstand the inhospitable, desiccating conditions with as little intervention as possible.

Emily's bible became *The Dry Gardening Handbook* by Olivier Filippi, who runs a nursery in France that specialises in Mediterranean plants. She chose sculptural, mound-forming plants that can withstand sun and wind, such as *escallonia* and *euonymus*, as well as billowing evergreen shrubs like *Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri', *Pinus mugo* and *Phillyrea angustifolia* to create the required screening. Aromatic rosemary, oregano and lavender cascade around a wide cedar daybed with built-in storage, while softer plants such as *pennisetum* and *gaura* bring contrast and movement.

Movement also comes from the bronze water feature, inspired by something Keir had seen at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. 'The movement and gentle sound of the water is designed to focus you inwards on the space, so you're distracted from the world outside,' says Emily. It has brought an unexpected bonus. 'We get all sorts of wild-

life,' says Keir. 'We've had ducks nesting, goldfinches and even dragonflies. It's wonderful' □

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