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# Home

Creative city dwellers dress up their prized outdoor spaces for a socially distant summer

By JESSICA DAILEY

It was a trip to Target in April that made Vida Cornelious realize she needed to start her backyard renovation sooner rather than later. “People were going crazy buying outdoor stuff,” recalls the Harlem resident. “The little bit that was in the store was almost gone.” Plus, it was already clear that New York City wouldn’t fully reopen for summer, so she knew she was going to need someplace to retreat.

Across the country, home improvement projects have been a quarantine hobby of choice, and most DIYers have focused their efforts on their outdoor spaces — a recent survey by Porch.com found that 61 percent of renovators made upgrades to their garden, patio or exterior since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic — for the same reason Cornelious did.

In New York City, where private outdoor space has always been a rare amenity, these little slices of real estate have become even more precious, and residents lucky enough to claim a piece of the outdoors as their own are taking full advantage.

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# QUAR STARS



Stefano Giovannini: Courtesy of Vida Cornelious (inset)

Vida Cornelious turned her bedraggled Harlem backyard (inset) into an oasis for warm weather months spent mostly at home due to COVID-19.

## ▲ THE BOHO BACKYARD

When Vida Cornelious, a 49-year-old executive creative director, moved into her Harlem rowhouse rental in January, she knew the backyard was going to need some work. It had a patio, but the former tenants had left what should have been a grassy area desolate, filled with rocks and scraggly plantings. After a few weeks spent sourcing products and scouring Pinterest for ideas, Cornelious got to work.

The first step was clearing the weeds and garbage in order to lay artificial

turf. She meticulously measured in order to calculate the amount of turf she would need for her lawn, and enlisted a contractor friend to help her level the ground — a task that required 1,800 pounds of sand and renting a tamper tool — and install it. “That was the most expensive part of the whole project,” she says.

Then she painted the back fence a deep charcoal — “It really brings the whole space together and makes it feel cool and modern,” says Cornelious —

and created an outdoor living room with a woven furniture set from Safavieh Home. She hung mirrored candle holders and a Toni Morrison poster on the black fence and added a bistro table on the patio. Solar string lights, pillar candles, Moroccan-style lanterns and potted palms complete the look.

“I have a bohemian vibe inside, and I wanted the yard to be an extension of the house,” says Cornelious, who spent about \$2,000 on the project.

“I have my coffee out there and all of my morning meetings,” she adds. “It has been well worth the investment.”





Anna Ulrich and Adam Soltis, of Crown Heights, built a bar-like counter to connect their living room and balcony.

# Outside the box

Stephen Wang

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## ▲ THE BALCONY BAR

For months, New Yorkers missed restaurants and bars. To recreate that experience in their apartment, Anna Ulrich and her boyfriend Adam Soltis came up with a simple yet ingenious solution: turn the window that faces the balcony of their Crown Heights apartment into a bar.

"We've had a few different iterations of it," says Ulrich, a 26-year-old nurse. Initially, it was just a piece of plywood with a towel over it, but they wanted to "make it a little more upscale." So during quarantine, when dining out was no longer an option, they put pencil to paper and designed a 37" by 24" plywood bar top that they covered with a white scallop-edged tile. It fits perfectly through the window, creating a counter-height table on the inside and the balcony.

It took Adam, who works in sound for film and TV, two days to build and cost roughly \$100 for the materials. "I don't even have the energy to leave the apartment when I come home now," says Ulrich, "so it's really nice that I can come home and have it be its own little experience."

"There are a lot of fun bars and restaurants in the neighborhood, and we hope to get back to going to them," adds Ulrich, "but in the meantime, our home is a little bit of an extension of that."



Lesley Stordahl (left, holding glass) set up a projector in her Carroll Gardens driveway for socially distanced outdoor movie nights. Her family sits on one side of the projector, while their friends sit on the other.

## ▲ THE DIY MOVIE THEATER

Last year, Lesley Stordahl and her husband Mike Smith decided to give up their apartment with a backyard in order to move to a larger place in Carroll Gardens with more space for their kids, Jasper, 12, and Odessa, 10. It was a compromise they were willing to make, plus the brownstone apartment isn't totally without outdoor space; it has a driveway and a sitting area out front.

"But when this all hit," says Stordahl, referring to the coronavirus, "we realized we didn't have a real yard and we needed a place to go." The driveway proved to be an ideal setup: Since it has direct access to the street, visitors wouldn't have to go through the house in order to have a so-

cially distanced hang. They invited friends over the first chance they could, but without set activities, Stordahl says, "the kids kept trying to be near each other."

It was learning about a local drive-in that inspired the perfect solution: an outdoor movie theater. They had purchased a projector and screen a few years ago with the intention of setting it up in their basement, and Smith and their son built a frame for the screen out of PVC pipes. They set the projector on a stool, and each family takes one side. The kids bring out their bean bag chairs for comfort, and Stordahl makes popcorn (separate bags for each family, of course).

"We choose a theme and the kids get to pick the movie," says Stordahl. "It's turned into quite the event."

## ▼ THE BOUNCE ZONE

Lockdown life has been especially challenging for parents, but even more so for those going through it alone. Jeanne Wang, a single mother of two, said she was "really paranoid" when COVID-19 hit the city. "I don't have much family close by, so who would help me with the kids if I got sick?" she says. "I was kind of crazy about staying inside."

But it became clear that her kids, Brandon, 6, and Norah, 9, needed an outlet for their wiggles — and an activity to break up the virtual school day. "My kids are wild. They have so much energy," says Wang, 43. "If they don't get it out, it's hard for them to listen or function."

At first, they joined their mom for her daily workouts, which she did on the terrace of their three-bedroom

Brooklyn Heights condo, learning how to do things like jump rope. But when the novelty of exercising wore off, she needed a new release for them. She found it on Amazon in the form of a bouncy house.

While their terrace has a sofa and a hot tub, Wang also added a clean-burning fire pit and turf for their 12-pound Yorkie poo so they wouldn't have to take her for walks.

"It's been perfect," Wang says. "First thing in the morning, they go jump in the house before they do their homework. They don't have to wear masks or anything like that. It's just so easy." Still, having relatives nearby would make stay-at-home life even easier, so Wang has decided to move, and her condo is currently on the market with Douglas Elliman for \$2.99 million. The bouncy house, alas, is not included.



Jeanne Wang bought a bouncy house on Amazon for the terrace of her Brooklyn Heights condo. Her two kids — Brandon, 6, and Norah, 9 — jump around to let off steam.

Tamara Beckwith/NY Post (2)