

Underneath it all we're artists," admits John Broere. But he and business partner Mark Gomes could also pass for engineers, even inventors. As Gomes says, "We're conceptual but also pragmatic." Their rooftop-garden design firm, Box Design Build, has become a crucible of innovative thinking when it comes to roof-savvy materials and puzzle solving. After all, the phrase "think outside the box" was one of the inspirations for the company name.

On their rooftop gardens, decking and even stonework are designed in modular fashion, easily removed in sections for roof maintenance. Vine-draped trellises and Plexiglas screens make unavoidable infrastructure elements like AC units and neighboring condos disappear. They devised their own lightweight, insulated planters, and even accent "boulders" are actually half-inch-thick cement-and-latex shells, castings of real rocks done by Rockscapes of Canada. Says Gomes, "We're always looking for new ways to apply existing technology."

In hindsight, their 10-year-old company seems like a natural outcome. Having met at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario, via a mutual interest in environmental art, Broere and Gomes moved to Toronto to be near the art scene (Broere to draw; Gomes, who still shows in galleries, to sculpt). Purely for amusement, they started gardens on the roofs of the respective warehouses where they'd set up shop, hauling up wine barrels for planters and scrounging plants from friends. After seeing one of these, a client (their first) commissioned a balcony garden. Since then, Broere and Gomes have designed some 35 roof gardens — from 150 square feet to 3,000.

Though their current business address is still a warehouse, this one is decidedly a step up. Its brightly lit 2,000 square feet houses a battery of tools, a spray booth, walls of material samples and three-dimensional models of current projects. For Broere and Gomes, hands-on is the only way to work. Calling it "material engagement," Gomes admits: "We would have headaches if we were just designing all day. We think with our hands." Typically they preassemble almost an entire project beforehand to make sure everything is just right, then take it apart and transport it to the site. Says Gomes: "The whole garden has to be carried up in an elevator and through a \$2 million living room. But clients want it to look like magic."





John Broere and Mark Gomes (above right) of Box Design Build are masters of the rooftop garden, employing an ingenious range of materials to create outdoor spaces with altitude. This garden oasis includes everything a ground-level garden could want: decks, a water feature, a sophisticated mix of plants and a bit of lawn (actually artificial turf). Opposite, below: Always mindful of weight, at this location they employed their signature planters of high-density foam, mesh cloth and flexible concrete. The "boulder" is a half-inch-thick casting of a real rock.