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Serenity in the City

HM White Site Architects has always had a knack for creating serene designs in the middle of a big city; for instance, take the design of the Puddicombe Roof Garden, shown here, in New York which includes weeping birches at each end, offering shade and privacy.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

CENTER FOR GLOBAL CONSERVATION AT BRONX ZOO

HM White Site Architects draws the world's attention, once again, to New York City

BY KELLY MATLOCK

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY:
HM White Site Architects

LOCATION:
New York, NY

FOUNDED:
1992

EMPLOYEES:
12

AREAS OF SPECIALTY:
Site design and planning, urban landscape design, environmental engineering

AVERAGE ANNUAL SALES:
\$1.7 million+

NEW YORK CITY is famous for being the loud, bustling, city that never sleeps. And even with large open spaces like Central Park, opportunities to find peace and refuge in such a populous city are few and far between. Still, nature can and should be incorporated into the urban landscape, according to HM White Site Architects, a boutique, NYC-based architecture and design firm. Perhaps it is even more important to focus on sustainable design in such an environment. "New York City represents extremes on so many levels—social, cultural, political, and environmental stress," says Hank White, founding principal at the firm. "If you can make [sustainable design] work in NYC, you can make it work anywhere."

According to the firm, even in large cities, sustainable design and natural, outdoor havens have an important role in helping people live better and in making the earth a healthier, cleaner, and more enjoyable place. "[We must] tread delicately on the land and regenerate the performance qualities of our natural systems on urban 'manufactured' sites," White explains. This philosophy, to always utilize and incorporate natural systems and resources to improve existing urban buildings and infrastructure, is exhibited well in two of HM White's recent projects, the Puddicombe Roof Garden and the Center for Global Conservation at Bronx Zoo.

The 4,500-square-foot Puddicombe roof, which was originally designed only to store mechanical equipment and window-washing stanchions, was transformed

into a beautiful rooftop escape featuring an assortment of benches, chairs, and tables, with an area of grass inserted over a green-roof, composite-drainage and water-proofing system to serve as a "lawn beach" for residents, with weeping birches at each end offering shade and privacy. The mechanical equipment is now concealed by a beautiful cedar fence, which still allows the window-washing equipment to pass through via sliding gates on both ends. A string of uplights was placed within the fence's cavity to create a back-lit "shadow box" effect in the evening.

The other major project, highlighting the firm's expertise in creating sustainable designs within urban areas, is the Wildlife Conservation Society's new Center for Global Conservation at Bronx Zoo, an anticipated LEED Gold-certified facility. The site's design, which features a constructed wetland garden substituting an existing open water channel containing storm-water runoff from numerous zoo exhibits, reflects the zoo's mission: habitat preservation and demonstration of environmental conservation values. "We used the building intervention to regenerate lost wildlife and native plant community habitats that were disturbed by earlier zoo exhibit alternations," White explains.

The architects no doubt had aesthetic appeal in mind while designing the zoo site; a mixture of wetland grasses are synchronized with the meandering topography and arranged in patterns that highlight contrasting heights, leaf textures, colors, and seasonal foliage changes. Still, the design features were used not only to make the site beautiful and to divide and connect space, but also as a way to process and recycle the zoo's water in order to conserve energy. In addition to absorbing effluence and storm-water run-off, the landscape treats it biologically through a series of tiered gardens and releases it to the aquifer below or to other zoo operations in a cleaner condition. A green roof also functions to ameliorate peak storm-water flows and reduce building-energy loads and urban heat-island effect.

"The site's hydrology became the genus of the site design, where wet meadows and low-lying wetland plant communities were showcased as a central landscape feature and integral to cleaning and absorbing a natural stream and channeled storm-



The constructed tiered wetland at the Bronx Zoo conservation center perfectly reflects the institution's mission: habitat preservation and demonstration of environmental conservation.

water flow,” White says, explaining the significance of its functionality. “The landscape design in this case functions as a high-performing engineering solution that diversifies and seamlessly wedds itself to its larger woodland landscape.”

The conservation center at the zoo exemplifies HM White Site’s dedication to using natural resources and nature to improve structures and spaces, especially in the city. Still, sustainable design is nothing novel or foreign—it’s just being progressively emphasized and prioritized the way it always should’ve been. “Fortunately for all of us and our planet’s health, there has been growing attention, awareness and ‘marketing’ of sustainable design and its applications,” White says. “I see the adoption of sustainable design practices not as a new trend but an evolution of how we as a society need to change the way we approach how we build and use our available resources and live within the carry capacity of our local environments.”

As proven by projects like the Center for Global Conservation, HM White Site continues to create designs that reflect their ongoing dedication to improving the Earth and society through what White describes as “a relentless pursuit of beauty and wonder within the strict adherence to fundamental ecological principles.” GBQ



The landscape design [at the Center for Global Conservation] functions as a high-performing engineering solution that diversifies and seamlessly wedds itself to its larger woodland landscape.

– Hank White, Principal, HM White Site Architects



HM WHITE IS FOUNDED ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE IS AMONG THE MOST POWERFUL FORMS OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION. THE FIRM PRIDES ITSELF ON CREATING HIGH PERFORMANCE AND MULTI-FUNCTIONING LANDSCAPES THAT ARE ROUTED INTO THE DYNAMIC NEEDS OF THE SITE AND ITS USERS.

OUR PROJECTS RANGE IN SCALE, PROGRAM AND GLOBAL LOCATION AND ENCOMPASS A VARIETY OF SERVICES THAT INCLUDE ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS, MASTER PLANNING, AND LANDSCAPE DESIGN FOR PUBLIC PARKS AND CIVIC SPACES, EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CAMPUSES, MIXED-USE URBAN DEVELOPMENTS AND DISTRICTS, CORPORATE FACILITIES, AS WELL AS INTIMATE GARDEN SPACES AND RESIDENCES.

OUR WORK IS UNIFIED BY ITS CLARITY IN FUSING THE DYNAMIC ELEMENTS OF NATURE AND THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FORCES OF OUR CULTURE THAT ULTIMATELY PROMOTE SOCIAL INTERACTION. EACH LANDSCAPE DESIGN INTEGRATES THE SITE’S ECOLOGICAL STRUCTURE WITH THE NEEDS OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS AND ESTABLISHES AN AUTHORITY OF HARMONIOUS LONGEVITY AND VITALITY.

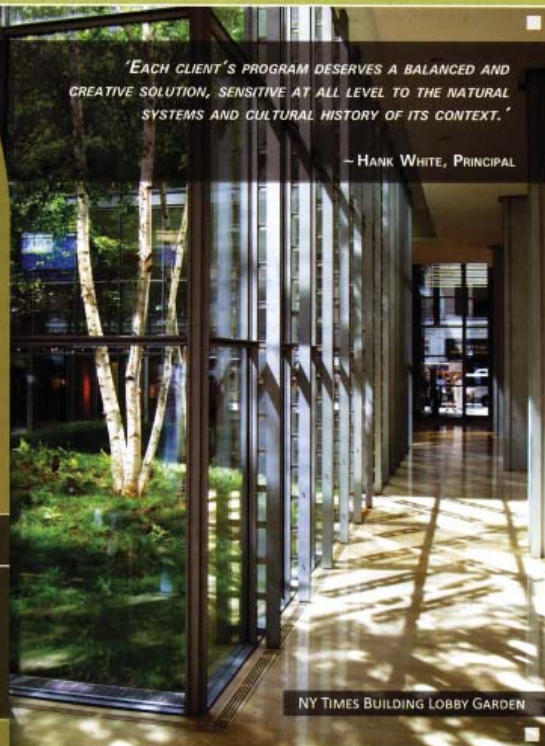
“EACH CLIENT’S PROGRAM DESERVES A BALANCED AND CREATIVE SOLUTION, SENSITIVE AT ALL LEVEL TO THE NATURAL SYSTEMS AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF ITS CONTEXT.”

– HANK WHITE, PRINCIPAL

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