

Picture This!

The Brooklyn Botanic Garden Visitor Center (2012), featuring a 10,000-square-foot green roof, won a 2014 AIA Institute Honor award in January. Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Part sleek contemporary building, part grassy hill, the LEED Gold Brooklyn Botanic Garden Visitor Center is a garden gate for many of the 750,000 people who annually visit the 52-acre urban oasis.

Completed in 2012, the \$28 million, 20,000-square-foot (1,858-square-meter) visitor center designed by Weiss/Manfredi, New York City, and built by E.W. Howell, Plainview, N.Y., garnered a 2014 AIA Institute Honor Award for Architecture from the American Institute of Architects in January. Jury members cited the center's aesthetic and environmental features in bestowing the award, according to AIA.

Those features include landscaping that merges part of the building into a grass covered berm on its north side, geothermal heating and cooling, and a green roof.

"Green" might be a misnomer, however, since the rooftop mane of little blue stem, prairie junegrass and other grasses takes on a tawny reddish hue in winter, and turns a buff brown and cream in autumn, according to the garden's vice president of horticulture and facilities, Melanie Sifton. Even spring and summer see change, from light green to dark, dotted with bursts of orange butterfly weed, purple blazing star and pink fox glove.

"Personally, I love the roof's rainwater management aspect," says Sifton, whose background includes green roof installation. It might not be as apparent as the beautiful grasses, but saving rainwater from becoming wastewater is a huge benefit, she says.

Sifton notes that the Garden is working on more water garden and recirculation projects, and expects, within the next few years, to save 22 million gallons that might otherwise be lost to sewers.

"It's practical," she says. "But it can be beautiful, too." — Gary Henry

Practical Beauty

Got a spectacular project to share? Email details to editor@durabilityanddesign.com.