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Wall Flowers

The next horizon in greening is straight up

By Lisa Skolnik

Chicago has about 600 green roofs, according to the City's Department of Environment. But with thousands of buildings that lack flat roof space for vegetation, there is clearly far more acreage on our walls. Architects are beginning to catch on to this reality and mine these vertical reaches, as evidenced by two recent local projects that are precursors of things to come.

At the new Whole Foods Market in Lincoln Park, 1550 N. Kingsbury, which edges the Chicago River, the building's gigantic, river-hugging west and south walls sport a wire mesh system to support vegetation that is slowly creeping into place. Gensler, the project's architect of record, used the Greenscreen (www.greenscreen.com) system as a base, and Wolff Landscape Architecture selected fitting plant materials to fill it.

Nearby, Morgante Wilson Architects' addition to a Lincoln Park home inspired a green wall "to make a gigantic new concrete wall beautiful," explains architect Elissa Morgante, who got the idea when she saw one of French botanist Patrick Blanc's celebrated vertical gardens on a trip to Paris. The firm worked with landscape architects Kettelkamp & Kettelkamp, who used BrightGreen, a hydroponic tray system (www.brightgreenusa.com), to create a 900-square-foot ornamental installation to match the project's neo-Classical styling and embrace the pomp and pigmentation of a formal year-round garden. "It was the first residential application for the system, which uses pre-grown trays that are installed like pictures," says BrightGreen owner Jim Rizzo.

Green walls make sense for myriad reasons. Like green roofs, they can improve air quality, cut energy costs and provide habitat for desirable wildlife. Unlike green roofs, which are not viable for many structures and usually unseen by and inaccessible to most of us, green walls can be installed on a much broader array of structures and are inherently more noticeable. Both Chicago green wall projects are meant to be highly visible and enrich their surroundings.

These projects also showcase two different types of green walls: green façades and living walls. The former, which was employed at Whole Foods Market, is made up of climbing plants that are rooted to the ground and grow



The green panels running up the south wall of this Lincoln Park residence give the concrete expanse the appearance of a gigantic living quilt.

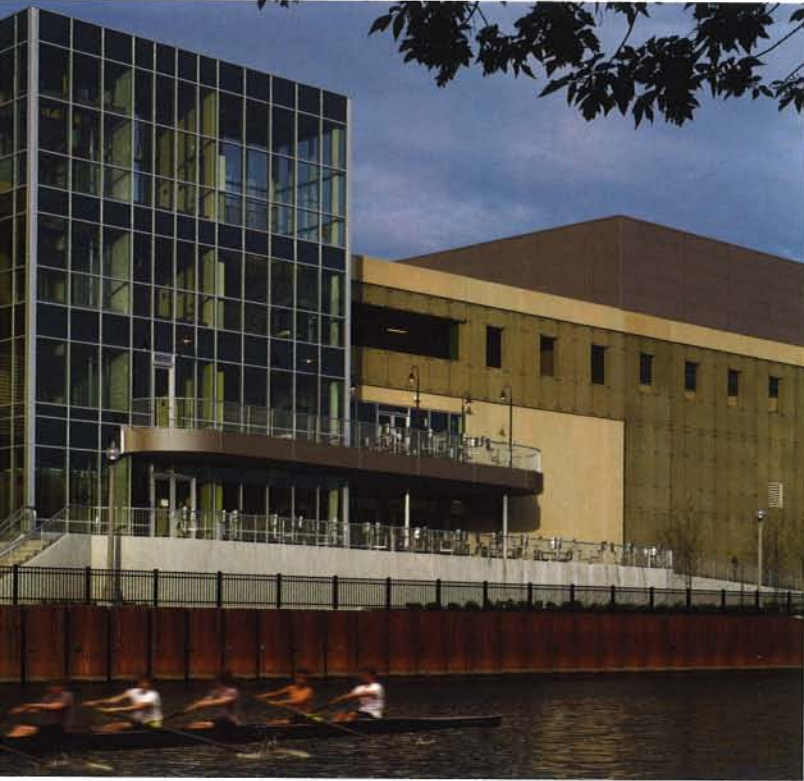
directly on the wall or specially designed support structures, while the latter, used on the Lincoln Park residence, sports an engineered fabric or metal support system that is affixed to a wall to sustain vegetation selected for the locale. Blanc has famously pioneered this system in Europe, which uses epiphytes →

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(non-parasitic plants that grow on other plants or objects) as a paradigm. "His big insight was that you could grow a wide variety of plants on vertical surfaces without a growing medium by providing water and nutrients," explains Wolff Landscape Architects principal Ted Wolff.

Since both these green walls are Chicago firsts, determining what plants to use has been an investigational exercise.



Blank-looking walls on the Whole Foods Market building will fill in with greenery over time.

At Whole Foods, Wolff selected vines that were hardy, fast growing and native and presented seasonal color. "We used the old Wrigley Field approach," Wolff says. "You don't plant one thing and say this is best. You plant everything and see what works out."

For the Lincoln Park residence, the owners wanted a crisp, artfully executed motif that mimicked the home's architectural detailing and metalwork, and retained visual interest year-round. "We chose plants that would provide color, texture, contrast and four seasons of interest," explains Kettelkamp & Kettelkamp principal Claire Kettelkamp. They were pre-grown at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens in Hebron, Ill., and are maintained by a local gardening contractor monthly under the aegis of Kettelkamp & Kettelkamp.

Now the city is catching on to the trend, especially since the residential project was a winner in Mayor Daley's 2009 Landscape Awards Program. "They changed the green roofs category to include walls," Ryan Kettelkamp points out. So will the green roofs initiative trickle down to include walls? "We're aware of it and have been trying to encourage these installations," says Department of Environment spokesperson Larry Merritt. **CA**