

SEDUM, JE T'AI ME

Morgante-Wilson Architects brings the Parisian-style vertical garden to a city known for green roofs

By Lindsey Howald Patton

Husband-and-wife architectural team **Fred Wilson** and **Elissa Morgante** flew to Paris to attend a conference in 2009. While there, a project left *en media res* lingered in both of their minds. Their Evanston, Illinois firm **Morgante-Wilson Architects** had been asked to find an elegant solution to a side yard created when the clients purchased a neighboring residential lot and demolished the home that sat on it. Specifically, this had exposed a windowless, split-face concrete wall that needed beautifying in order to complement a planned classical garden.

During a stroll one day, Paris presented the solution. Morgante and Wilson noticed a home with one exterior wall completely covered in plants. "It was just in a small neighborhood. It wasn't anything grand," Wilson recalls. "But it definitely caught our eye." This was 2009, and Mayor **Richard M. Daley** was working to build Chicago's reputation—one that continues today—as a leader in green roofs in America. But green walls? They didn't yet exist in the city.

The walls of France, on the other hand, had been covered with vegetation for years. Vertical gardens, as they're sometimes called, are associated with the country, mostly due to the creations of prolific French botanist Patrick Blanc since the late 1980s. Morgante and Wilson returned home inspired. They had implemented green roofs on projects before, and they proposed building a wall like the one they had seen in Paris for the residence in question, located in Chicago's historic Lincoln Park neighborhood.

"Rather than just creating a mundane patterning on that giant side wall, it literally comes alive," Wilson says. "We created a garden in the horizontal space down below and brought that garden up to the wall's surface, and added French doors to the façade that allow access to this side yard. It's a really cool effect. It's like a beautiful outdoor room."

Beauty isn't the only factor. A living wall offers many of the same benefits green roofs do, including energy savings from insulation and improved air quality. After sealing the wall with a roofing membrane, the system was installed in prevegetated panels. The landscape architect on the project, **Kettellkamp & Kettellkamp**, selected an **ELT Living Wall** system of high-density polyethylene panels, notched to provide drainage and aeration and attached to a framework. Within that framework, an irrigation system pipes water into a small collection chamber in each panel for distribution to the plants.

Choosing plants is a delicate dance between hardiness and beauty, particularly considering the beating vegetation can take during a Windy City winter. Additionally, green roofs typically include soil, while walls are aeroponic, and plants need time to adjust to growing sideways. This wall's species—nearly all from the sedum genus, hardy ornamental plants known as stonecrops—include Red Carpet (*sedum spurium*), Weihenstephaner Gold (*sedum floriferum*), Forsteranum (*sedum rupestre*), and Emerald Blue (*phlox subulata*) in colors that change from season to season. "It's a living cycle, dying off in the winter and then coming back," Wilson says. "It was the first, and it still the largest, living wall in Chicago, and it took the top prize in Mayor Daley's Landscape Award Program in the Green Roofs and Walls Category. "I think it brought awareness to green walls," Wilson says. "The whole process speaks to how our firm tries to create innovative solutions that aren't knee-jerks. There's always a little twist to our work." **gbd&**

DETAILS

LOCATION Chicago
Size 800 ft²
Completed 2009
Program Living wall
Awards 1st Place, Green Roofs & Walls, Mayor Daley's Landscape Award Program, ALA Gold Medal Award (2009, 2011)
Architect Morgante-Wilson Architects
Landscape Architect Kettellkamp & Kettellkamp



At 25 feet wide and 32 feet high, this vertical blanket of greens features a polychromatic variety of plants arrayed on a grid.