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Welcome to the Neighborhood

Can landscape design lend a human scale to a Manhattan megadevelopment?

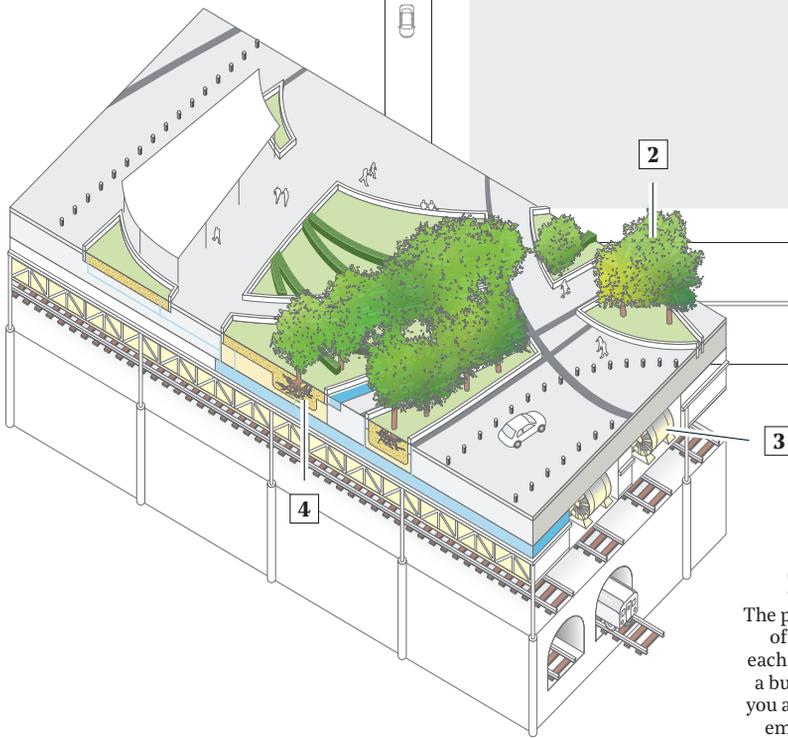
The role of lead landscape architect Thomas Woltz in the Hudson Yards project was always clear: Breathe life into the hulking new neighborhood. Early on, he understood the centrality of Thomas Heatherwick's 150-foot-tall climbable installation, Vessel (right). "We realized that it was definitely the gravitational pull of the plaza," Woltz says.



Hudson Yards, the New York City development that opened to the public on March 15, is a colossus. Its construction began in 2012 and is ongoing; what's accessible now is raised above a train yard on a steel and concrete platform weighing more than 35,000 tons. In time, a second platform will join the existing one for a total of 28 lifted acres. The \$25 billion project will ultimately encompass more than 18 million square feet of offices, residential towers, high-end retail shops, and other real estate. Even in its incomplete state, Hudson Yards dominates the space around it. Its size and proportions prompted *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman to write that "the whole site lacks any semblance of human scale."

The task of countering that notion has fallen to landscape architect Thomas Woltz, whose firm, Nelson Byrd Woltz, is a key collaborator on the project. "The architecture is attempting something new at the scale of the city," Woltz says. "And so our job was to steward the human experience." ■

Hudson Yards' soaring buildings offer bird's-eye views of the plaza's design (right). Tree roots should be both protected and free to grow, thanks to a "soil sandwich" of gravel, concrete, and sand (below).



“Nature is a pretty fickle dance partner. These are living things, and we’re asking them to do a lot outside of their native habitat.”

THOMAS WOLTZ, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

TRIM AND FINISH

The plaza is divided into a series of ellipses orbiting Vessel, each leading to the entrance of a building nearby. “Wherever you arrive,” Woltz says, “you are embraced by the curvature of these lines and brought into the center of the plaza.”

DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM

The platform beneath Hudson Yards contains 15 built-in fans—the kind that chill jet engines—to counter the heat of the train yard below and to keep plants cool enough to survive. In theory, every drop of rain that falls on the complex’s Public Square will collect in a 60,000-gallon tank and then be recycled for irrigation.

FOREST FACSIMILE

Hudson Yards will be blanketed in the quasi-perpetual shade of its 1,000-foot-tall buildings, so Woltz looked to the ecology of Hudson Valley forests and selected plants that can live with little sun. The site will feature canopy trees overlooking smaller flowering trees, shrubs, and perennials.

TAKING ROOT

Some of the site’s trees were bought in Georgia and first planted in New Jersey in order to get them used to the regional climate. “We’re not pretending it’s a scoop of the forest,” Woltz says. “We’re really just taking our cues from plants that thrive in similar conditions and using them, but using them very artfully.”

ILLUSTRATIONS: HAISAM HUSSEIN