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In the Botanical Garden, Construction Workers Tiptoe Quietly

The New York Botanical Garden has taken steps to protect the tranquil oasis as its Edible Academy complex sprouted up



Rendering of the Edible Academy at the New York Botanical Garden. PHOTO: COOPER ROBERTSON

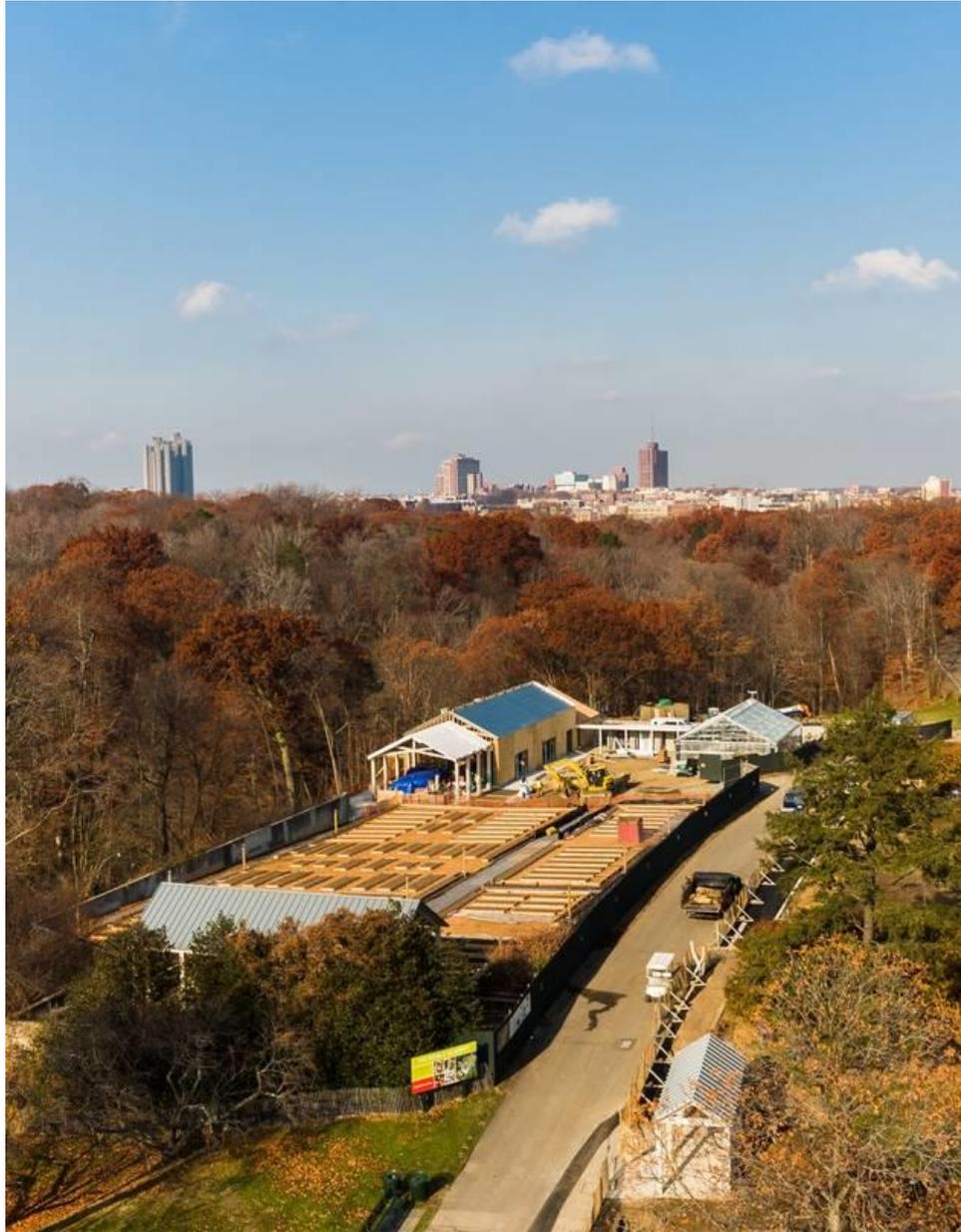
By *Keiko Morris*

For most New Yorkers, construction is a messy, noisy business filled with clanging, dust, shouting workers and growling equipment. But at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, the latest building project has been an exercise in doing the opposite.

For the past year and a half, the institution's new Edible Academy complex, a 3-acre facility that includes a new classroom building, greenhouse and amphitheater, has been undergoing construction and landscaping. It's taken place in a delicately choreographed production designed

to minimize any disruption in the tranquil oasis and protect the garden's identity as a 250-acre living museum.

The task has required extreme sensitivity, taking into account everything from the carefully nurtured soil on the site and the nearby old growth forest to the Bronx River running below, said Robert Zirkel, vice president at EW Howell Construction Group, the firm managing the project.



Construction has been under way, discreetly, for over a year. The center opens in June.
PHOTO: MARLON CO/THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

Talk about fussy neighbors. "It's like working with 56,000 Picassos around you," Mr. Zirkel said.

Construction of the \$28 million facility has been a discreet affair, taking place mostly behind tall fencing. All trucks and heavy-equipment vehicles are off the roads by the time the Botanical Garden opens at 10 a.m. Tires are washed to leave no tracks on the interior roadway. Even once the trucks were inside the fenced-off area, the vehicles could move only in specific zones to avoid compacting soil that needed to be properly aerated and maintained for gardens soon to be planted.

The site's existing soil has been nurtured over many years, so workers stockpiled, covered and fenced it off to prevent erosion and runoff into the Bronx River.

"The soil contains all sorts of micronutrients plants need," said Toby Adams, director of the Edible Academy. "That's where plants get nutrients and water. There's an architecture to that."

In its previous form, the site contained gardens and two open-air shelters for its programs. When the new complex, an expansion of the existing Ruth Rea Howell Family Garden, opens in June, the Botanical Garden will be able to broaden its programs teaching children and families how to grow and prepare fruits and vegetables and promoting healthy living practices and gardening with year-round classes, institution officials said.

Designed by architecture firm Cooper Robertson, the facilities includes a single-story building of mass timber and concrete that will have two high-tech classrooms and a green roof. The building will use a geothermal cooling and heating system, relying on wells dug 465 feet underground. The expansion also will feature new gardens, a greenhouse, an open pavilion with solar panels to help power the facility and a terraced lawn amphitheater for cooking demonstrations and other events. Composting restrooms are another environmental element.

Just as the project is geared toward minimizing its impact on the environment, so was each step in its construction, Mr. Zirkel and garden officials said. The site sits on a partially rocky terrain overlooking the Bronx River and an old-growth forest. Workers have put in place a number of measures, including silt fencing and a grassy slope for water retention, to prevent water, silt and debris from running into and polluting the river during heavy rains. This system is inspected weekly, garden officials said.

Big deliveries of material and movement of equipment, such as cranes or the trucks pouring concrete foundations and slabs, had to be in and out between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. or on Mondays, the one day the garden is closed. Three tractor-trailers hauling massive, prefabricated, heavy wood timbers from Wisconsin had to time deliveries for Mondays. A rainy day might delay construction and set the schedule back a week because of the limited hours.



Visitors enjoying the blossoms of spring in the Bronx.
PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“We are always careful about how the garden looks,” said Gregory Long, chief executive of the Botanical Garden. “You have to be able to handle people and precious nature of the landscape.”

All of these measures lengthened what could have been a construction timeline of one year, Mr. Zirkel said. But for important reasons.

“You have to be sensitive to the staff, to the visitors,” Mr. Zirkel said. “You have to be sensitive to the ground and you have to be sensitive to nature, the Bronx River, the rock.”