

BEST CULTURAL/WORSHIP

A Garden Visitor Center Grows in Brooklyn

An old ticket booth and turnstiles were considered a less-than-dignified entrance to the historic 52-acre Brooklyn Botanic Garden that spreads out alongside Prospect Park. But the initial proposal to site a new visitor center in the garden's middle would have required people to walk through a large adjacent parking lot.

The solution was to locate the 20,000-sq-ft building, which twists like the letter S and can appear to be almost underground, at Washington Avenue so that visitors can enter directly from the sidewalk.

Highlights of the interior include an exhibition hall, a plant shop and a leaf-shaped room that can hold 200 people and that has floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the garden's Cherry Esplanade. Tan wooden wall panels come courtesy of a ginkgo tree that was removed during construction.

Outside, the building, which tucks into a green berm, sports a planted 10,000-sq-ft roof covered with grasses and wildflowers. The roof edge boasts exposed copper pleats that will eventually acquire a verdigris hue like the top of a

nearby McKim, Mead & White-designed administration building.

The roof, which absorbs rainwater, is expected to help the visitor center earn LEED-Gold certification, as will the 28 geothermal wells that heat and cool the structure.

The \$28-million project was not easy to build, however. To avoid clipping existing limbs in the surrounding Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden, a crane, which was smaller than normal to begin with, could only operate from the building's basement. And the two-year project was completed six months late because of the discovery of contaminated soil.

But there were zero safety incidents, which general contractor E.W. Howell ascribes in part to prizes being awarded to safety-conscious subcontractors during regular lunches.

"Architecturally speaking, I found this one of the best of everything I saw," says one ENR New York judge. "I like the way it was embedded in the design. It is not everybody that can back a building into a hillside and make it look good."

BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN, VISITOR CENTER

Brooklyn, N.Y.

KEY PLAYERS

Owner/Developer: Brooklyn Botanic Garden

General Contractor: E. W. Howell Co.

Construction Manager: The LiRo Group

Architect & Site Design: Weiss/Manfredi

SUBMITTED BY E.W. Howell Co.

