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Hudson's New Front Yards

Nelson Byrd Woltz creating public spaces for Manhattan megadevelopment.

By Alan G. Brake



COURTESY NELSON BYRD WOLTZ

The dusty rail yards and blocks of barren concrete on Manhattan's far west side are beginning to be transformed into the office, retail, residential, and cultural mega-development called Hudson Yards. At its center will be a new civic square designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBWLA). The firm is also designing the six acres of streetscapes for the project.

Hudson Yards will connect with three other significant landscapes: The High Line at the south, Hudson River Park to the west, and new Hudson Boulevard, which is being designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh, to the north. For NBWLA principal Thomas Woltz, the meandering nature of the High Line and Hudson Boulevard and the linearity of the Hudson River Park called for a large-scale gathering place within Hudson Yards, which would become a destination and

defining feature for this tabula rasa neighborhood. “One of the goals is to connect to these landscapes fluidly but distinctly,” Woltz said. “The urban plaza should be a kind of sitting room for the entire west side. It should be a place for spectacle, large groups, small groups, and individuals.”



Though the design is still evolving, Woltz and the developers, Related and Oxford Properties Group, are planning a six-acre plaza ringed with trees, a water feature, and a large central artwork. Woltz intends to use innovative horticulture as a major formal feature of the plaza, including large stands of clipped native trees, and seasonally timed plantings to draw visitors and New Yorkers. “That could be a massive bulb display for Fashion Week,” Woltz said. “We want the horticulture to be something people come to see throughout the year.”

For the landscape architects, creating intimate spaces under the canopies will also give the space a human scale, something they feel is crucial given the great height of the adjacent skyscrapers. “It will create a soft ceiling,” Woltz said. Café chairs and tables on crushed stone will populate the ground beneath the monolithic tree canopies. The plaza will be a privately owned public space, so it should be highly maintained. “Related has made a commitment to create a great public space for New York over the long term. Too often maintenance is overlooked,” he said.

For the streetscapes, Woltz is looking at European models where sidewalks flow seamlessly into streets without curbs and bollards to protect pedestrians.

Though NBWLA has a national reputation built on dozens of award winning projects, Hudson Yards is by far the firm’s most prominent commission in New York to date. For Woltz, working on a landscape of this scale and civic impact is nothing less than “career-defining,” he said.

“The open spaces in Hudson Yards are our greatest honor and obligation to the city. This will be our legacy for all New Yorkers to enjoy,” wrote Jay Cross, president of Related Hudson Yards, in an email. As with LA’s new Grand Park, which Related helped develop and will maintain as a part of their massive Grand Avenue Project, the developers see high quality public space as a major amenity for real estate development.