

The landscape architect behind the most ambitious real estate development in American history on accessing a site's essence, no matter the scale

The WOLTZ *of* HUDSON YARDS

By DACUS THOMPSON

Photography by SAM POLCER

THE MAN WITH THE PLAN
Thomas Woltz in
his firm's offices in
New York City

THE FIRST thing Thomas Woltz does when he gets a new project is listen to its voices. It's something he's been doing a lot of lately, as his firm—Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects—has gone from a midlevel outfit doing small but nuanced private gardens, farms and parks to the brightest landscape architecture operation in the country.

“Our approach begins with a very careful and attentive reading of the site,” says the 46-year-old North Carolina native. “Our goal is to use the design of landscape architecture as a lens through which people can understand the history of land and the dynamics of ecology.”

But to get to that lens, Woltz first must listen. He sizes up each project, whether it's the \$15 billion Hudson Yards revamp on Manhattan's West Side or the far more quaint Brooklyn Navy Yard re-greening, by asking questions of anyone and everyone who might shed light on a site's essence: cultural historians, structural engineers, conservation biologists and more. “Our process uses a deeper site analysis than is probably typical,” Woltz says without irony.

Woltz began his almost preternatural relationship with the natural world at an early age. He grew up the youngest of five kids on a 500-acre farm at the foot of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, watching and learning as his family grew their own crops in terraced garden beds and raised cattle. He studied architecture at the University of Virginia and, after graduating, moved to Italy to be an instructor in the school's summer architecture program in Vicenza.

Woltz taught for five years in the program and also practiced with an Italian architect in Venice, and he ended up discovering his love of landscape architecture in that city, a place with essentially no natural landscape.

“I came to the realization that I had lived for five years in a city devoid of the things I had always considered landscape: forests, meadows, fields and streams,” explains Woltz. “Gardens were rare and often very small, mostly private places, leaving a landscape of stone, water and the occasional tree for the public realm. I came to realize that this was in fact a landscape, and that—thanks to the human scale, the detailing and the quality of materials—this abstracted form of nature could be a very gratifying way to live and a poetic way to design.”

With his newfound inspiration, Woltz returned to UVA to pursue graduate degrees in architecture and landscape architecture, eventually becoming the final name, in 2004, at Nelson Byrd Woltz.

Today, the small Charlottesville-based operation has a much different face. The firm now has a staff of 38, with offices in New York City and San Francisco and projects in 25 states and nine countries. “It's a really exciting moment to take the work that we've been doing for almost two decades and now have it truly in the public realm,” says Woltz. “That's the thing I'm most excited about—being in service to the public and building this relationship between the public and nature in a way that landscape architecture is uniquely capable of.”



A good example of this orchestration is the Hudson Yards Redevelopment Project, a colossal 28-acre undertaking that will transform Manhattan's West Side with 17 million square feet of mixed-use real estate, including a 6.5-acre plaza of Woltz's design. It's a massive undertaking that puts the lie to Woltz being nothing more than an “outdoor decorator,” as his job has been described to him.

Take the setting for the Public Plaza at Hudson Yards: a seven-foot-thick, air-cooled platform that will span six city blocks and serve as a roof to the train yards leading into Penn Station. To ensure that the natural and human elements harmonize will require “dozens and dozens of engineers involved in every aspect—ventilation, heat gain,

what trees can grow where, everything,” explains Michael Samuelian, vice president of Related Companies, the private development giant funding the project. “The train yard generates a lot of heat, so we need to make sure that basic things—like that the soil doesn't get too hot in the summer and kill all the vegetation—will actually work. It's enormously complex.”

When Hudson Yards is complete (the first building is scheduled to be finished by 2015), the public space will be the centerpiece of what's being called the largest and most ambitious real estate project in American history. “Lots of designers renovate spaces, but few people get the opportunity to design from scratch, especially to >

MAMMOTH EVEN FOR MANHATTAN
Renderings of the forthcoming Hudson Yards development, including a 6.5-acre plaza designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects; inset: the Hudson Yards site, circa 2008

LANDSCAPE WHISPERERS

Thomas Woltz isn't the only big name in landscape architecture; here, he tips his hat to three of his favorite fellow practitioners



MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH

Woltz says he loves “pretty much anything Van Valkenburgh,” including the most stunning sections of the 85-acre Brooklyn Bridge Park (above) and the restoration of Harvard Yard. Says Woltz, “His work artfully balances the highest level of design quality and a thorough understanding of ecology.”



JULIE BARGMANN

A master at reusing demolished materials in artful landscape design, Woltz describes Bargmann's work at the Philadelphia Navy Yard (above) as “transformative.” He adds, “Julie has been an inspiration for 20 years, creating beautiful spaces through the preservation and articulation of America's industrial and often toxic past.”



CHRISTY TEN EYCK

By working almost exclusively in the Southwest, Ten Eyck has developed an uncanny ability to know what will thrive in hardscrabble environs. Says Woltz, “Her work reveals the very specific character of the Southwest through regional horticulture and materials that underscore the subtle beauty of that very specific ecology.”



SKETCHBOOK *Woltz at the drafting table, sketching a design for the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Maine*

build a brand-new public space in the heart of Midtown Manhattan,” says Samuelian.

Yet Woltz doesn't seem to be bothered by the spotlight. Instead, he steers conversations from potential comparisons to Frederick Law Olmsted (the founder of landscape architecture in America and the co-designer of Central Park) to details that only someone intensely, well, nerdy about landscape architecture would care about, like looking at Hudson Yard's prehistoric geological formations for clues on what materials he should use for the plaza's concrete. “I love design that the public will find beautiful and not need to know any information about to enjoy,” he says. “But should someone want to scratch the surface, there will quietly be a very rich story there. I appreciate that subtlety.”

It's a characteristic on display at one of Woltz's other New York commissions, the long-overlooked—and

essentially undevelopable—Naval Hospital Cemetery Memorial Landscape at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which is scheduled to begin construction this spring.

Part of the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative that will eventually connect 14 miles of pedestrian-friendly thruways in the city's most populous borough, the Navy Yard memorial posed a much different problem than Hudson Yards.

“Even though all of the bodies were exhumed in the 1920s, it's still considered sacred ground,” explains Woltz. “So we had to come up with a method that did not require significant disturbance of the soil.”

Their solution? Scrape away the vegetation and use a planting technique that presses native seeds into the soil's surface, allowing them to take root on their own. “We wanted this project, which is a place of death, to use life as its memorial,” he says. “Design is one of those things that gets richer through limitations.”

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