Furbish Company: Using Plants to Create Sustainable Structures

by Talia Goldman

MANY BUSINESSES are hastily jumping on the "green" bandwagon, but Furbish Company, the most recent addition to the American Horticultural Society's corporate member program, clearly practices what it preaches. This sustainable building company's headquarters in Brooklyn, Maryland, abounds with examples of eco-friendly building methods. These include a heating and cooling system fueled by a geothermal heat pump and solar panels, and pervious pavement—which allows water to pass through it rather than running off into stormwater drains—in the parking lot.

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

An industrial engineer by training, **Michael Furbish** started the company in 2003 because of his strong commitment to sustainability through designing more efficient buildings. The company works on targeted projects, where the design/construction focus is "sustainable."

In particular, the firm provides subcontract services for specialty green building components such as living roofs, biofilters, and vegetated retaining walls. Benefits of these components include the mitigation of air and water pollution and reduction of the heat-island effect of impervious surfaces in urban locations. The goal is to do more than reduce the negative impact of buildings on the environment—it is to create regenerative buildings that produce energy, improve air quality, and allow a natural habitat to be maintained.

"When we started out, we had no idea we would be working primarily with various plant-based building systems," says Furbish. "We started with living roofs, which led to vegetated retaining walls, and then to biofilters." This relationship with plants is the common ground that Furbish Company and the AHS share. "The AHS promotes not only the beauty of plants but the functional capacity of plants, which is our focus. We are honored to be a part of the AHS community and look forward to actively promoting horticulture in the built environment," adds Furbish.

Furbish Company installs vegetated retaining walls, like this one, that feature native plants.

ENVIRONMENTAL ROOFS AND WALLS

Living roofs can range from sloping to flat, from extensive roofs planted with a colorful variety of sedums—shallow-rooted, drought-resistant plants that can survive in harsh conditions—to intensive roofs that allow for almost any garden concept on the top of a building.

Furbish Company has installed more than 60 living roofs in the mid-Atlantic region. These include a 5300-square-foot installation at Swarthmore College dormitory in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, and a 32,000-square-foot installation atop the new Hilton Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland. Two examples of the company's green roofs can also be seen at the AHS's River Farm headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. Both of these are designed to demonstrate the beauty and functionality of the living roof concept in a home garden setting.

Later this summer, Furbish will be installing a vegetated retaining wall at River Farm. It will use a variety of plants native to the mid-Atlantic region that attract wildlife, such as summersweet *(Clethra alnifolia),* switch grass *(Panicum virgatum),* and northern bayberry *(Myrica pensylvanica).*

"There is a significant difference between a traditional retaining wall and what we build," says **Jimmy Dick**, sales and marketing director of Furbish Company. "Instead of looking at a concrete wall, one sees a vertical garden. It uses 40 percent less concrete and reduces both the heat-island effect and stormwater runoff. And planting with native species contributes to restoring the ecosystem."

All of the systems that Furbish Company utilizes work toward the conservation of the environment in ways big and small. The company tracks its successes in sustainability with an up-to-date counter on its website. You can watch the count of gallons of stormwater diverted, vegetation grown in place of hardscaping, and indoor air purified climb higher and read more about Furbish's goals and projects at *www.furbishco.com.*

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For more information about becoming an AHS corporate member, contact Stephanie Perez at (703) 786-5700 ext. 127 or sperez@ahs.org.

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