

House & Home

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CURRENTS



Rendering by Chris Doyle

ARCHITECTURE

A Bucolic Meeting Place For City Park Volunteers

"We wanted a building with a certain exuberance to it," said James T. Dowell, executive director of the Riverside Park Fund, about the Volunteer House, left, a light-hearted folly to rise next year above a one-story storage building near 106th Street. Today, it is pink-painted limestone with patches of graffiti (Mike ♥ Dottie 4life) underneath a verdigris coating of moss. The group, founded in 1986 to help pull the park's socks up, sees a day when gardening classes and volunteers will flock to this airy space nestled against the cliff below Riverside Drive.

The problem has been how to encourage residents to enter the lovely park. The architect Jeffrey Murphy, of Murphy Burnham & Buttrick, who has designed Volunteer House, said, "It's a commitment to get down there." The park drops 45 feet below Riverside Drive to the building, then farther, to a broad promenade, then even farther, to the active sports area along the Henry Hudson Parkway. Recently, volunteers have adopted rambles and gardens, a dog run was built and the Hudson Beach Cafe opened near the new all-weather soccer field, skate park and basketball courts, much of which is the work of the fund. "For some people, the park is forbidding, but the whole area has seen a resurgence in the last few years," Mr. Dowell said.

LINDA LEE

In Riverside Park, Near 107th Street

Old Tool Shed Is Transformed For Volunteers

After the astringent smell of ponderosa pine greets you at the new Peter Jay Sharp Volunteer House near 107th Street in Riverside Park, what embraces you is a panoramic vista through tulip and sweet-gum trees down to the Hudson River.

Three years ago, this was a tool shed.

Now it is akin to an architectural "folly" — a structure meant to peek through the landscape and offer an unexpected visual delight — said James T. Dowell, president of the Riverside Park Fund, which built it, and Jeffrey Murphy of Murphy Burnham & Buttrick, who designed it. It is to open Sept. 14.

"Its superb design takes a humble but historic utilitarian structure and modernizes it," said Adrian Benepe, the commissioner of parks and recreation. "Yet it feels like it's been there the whole time."

What has been there since the late 19th century is a one-story limestone structure. Marred by graffiti and slathered in red paint, it was used in recent years as a supply and staging center for the volunteer program run by the Riverside Park Fund, which Mr. Benepe called the "biggest and best" in the city.

"We want to preserve the historic character of the park," Mr. Dowell said, "but if this building is going to serve its function, it needs to be bigger."

Expanding horizontally was out of the question, particularly if it involved felling trees. So the building grew vertically, though it had to stay low enough to be invisible from Riverside Drive. The floor area increased to 1,550 square feet from 500.

Not everyone was pleased. The Landmark West preservation group said in 2000 that the "precipitous height of the proposed building gives it the appearance of a ski chalet in Vail, Colo., rather than a park structure in New York City." But the plans were modified and eventually approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Art Commission.

The first floor, still a storage area, now has a mezzanine that will be used for plant propagation. The new second story is dominated by the Evelyn Sharp Room, an 18-foot-high space lined with knot-speckled pine and framed in Douglas fir roof timbers. The volunteers who care for the park will use this room for training, meeting and sharing ideas — unless their attention is diverted by the seven-and-a-half-foot casement windows wrapped around the southwest corner, which make the space feel like a grown-up treehouse. Because of a steep grade change, the second floor is linked to a nearby pathway over a footbridge.

Taconic Builders was the general contractor. The \$1.3 million project was financed by the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation (he was a hotelier and developer who died in 1992), the LuEsther T. Mertz Advised Fund of the New York Community Trust, the Booth-Ferris Foundation and the Evelyn Sharp Foundation (Mr. Sharp's mother). "Our hope is that the building becomes a stimulus" for new programs, Mr. Dowell said.

Mr. Murphy said another objective was to ensure, by the use of sturdy materials, that the building could last through a decade or more of deferred maintenance, if necessary. He also confessed to a personal goal in bidding aggressively for the job: he lives across Riverside Drive from the site. "The pain of seeing someone else design that," Mr. Murphy said, "would have been too great to bear." **DAVID W. DUNLAP**



Murphy Burnham & Buttrick

The new Peter Jay Sharp Volunteer House in Riverside Park (left and top) was a one-story tool shed three years ago (bottom), covered in red paint.