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A better bird's-eye view of High

New plant installation on roof of art museum complex improves high-rise scenery and could reduce utility bills.

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David Harris just wanted to improve his view, but he ended up getting the High Museum of Art to install one of the largest "green" roofs in Atlanta.

The High recently finished work on the roof, a 6,680-square-foot expanse of interlocking trays containing colorful varieties of sedum, a drought-tolerant plant. The \$100,000 green roof — paid for with grants — tops the High's administrative building. Once the plants mature, they will lower the High's heating and cooling bills and help reduce what's known as the urban heat-island effect, which makes cities such as Atlanta warm up faster than the planet as a whole.

But Harris says the roof is just the beginning. He is raising money to install similar vegetation on the much-larger roof of the Memorial Arts Building next to the High, as well as the adjacent restaurant, Table 1280.

It all started because Harris, a lawyer whose high-rise office overlooks the museum and its parent, the Woodruff Arts Center, got tired of seeing all those blank, flat roofs. As a Woodruff trustee, he complained loudly, he says.

"I've been looking down on those roofs for a lot of years, and raising hell about them," says Harris, a partner at Smith, Gambrell & Russell. "They finally said, 'Go do something about it.' "

Harris began researching options, and became convinced that the museum should install something that's not only pretty but functional.

"It will have a nice visual effect, but the environmental parts of it are much more important," he said.

Georgia Tech professor Brian Stone said there are very few true green roofs — as opposed to roof gardens — in metro Atlanta. The city halls of Atlanta and Decatur have green roofs. Atlanta's roof is about 3,000 square feet. Gwinnett County's Environmental and Heritage Center in Lawrenceville has a green roof topped with recycled paper, dirt and sedums.

"I'm a huge advocate of these things" as a way to reduce energy bills and cool down the areas around the buildings, said Stone, who has studied the warming trends of large cities. His research was published last year in the International Journal of Climatology.

Stone found that large U.S. cities are warming at a faster rate than the planet as a whole. That's because of added surface heat created by the concrete and buildings. He estimates that Atlanta is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the planet.

The roof was installed by Weston Solutions and paid for with grants from the Kendeda Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency. Weston will nurse the plants until they are established, at which time they will require no fertilizer, no pruning or watering, and will be fine in the winter.

Like most green roofs, the High's rooftop isn't accessible to employees or the public. But it will provide an ever-changing display of color to the many people who work and live in neighboring skyscrapers. The High held a competition among art students at the Savannah College of Art and Design to come up with a pleasing arrangement of the sedums.

"There are five different sedums, and all of them offer different colors," Harris said. "Every season, the view of the roof will be different."

Kevin Streiter, the High's manager of facilities and logistics, hopes some of those onlookers will be inspired to install their own green roofs.

"We're hoping that other decision-makers in the neighboring buildings will look down on this, and that it will plant a seed."

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