

Stormwater Runoff Can Be Beautiful, Actually

Brooklyn's Bergen project puts stormwater management in plain site with waterfalls and permeable gardens.

By [NATE TRAYLOR](#)



Darcstudio

New York City mandates private stormwater collection in most new developments. That almost always means underground reservoirs.

Brooklyn's Bergen project is an exception.

The residential development currently under construction features two waterfalls and a reflection pond that bring the process of controlling runoff to the surface, exposing bare the effects of climate change. But rather than serve as an ominous reminder of the consequences of intensifying weather, the designers intend for the project's landscape to demonstrate a way to adapt.

"Why is the response to dealing with this new reality something that always lives in the basement or underground?" asks Jordan Rogove, partner and cofounder of DXA Studio, who did the master planning on the project. "It's just a new reality and we should embrace it and, more importantly, provide people an opportunity to experience it in a really beautiful way."

The condominium project, designed by Frida Escobedo, presented Rogove and landscape designer Patrick Cullina a considerable engineering challenge: 45,000 square feet of surface area collecting rainwater in Brooklyn, "which arguably has the most outdated sort of stormwater conveyance system in the city," Rogove says.

However, the immensity of the site allowed for flexibility. By strategically massing the building, the team was able to create lush outdoor environments that serve double duty as water management systems and an amenity.



Darcstudio

"In New York, we have all of this impermeable space, and all that water runs off without being used to sustain a living landscape," says Cullina, a key figure in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and New York City's High Line urban park. "My thought was to develop and expand the possibility for permeability."

Rainstorms turn the landscape into a dynamic environment complete with plants that aid permeability. Water cascades down terraces and through channels into a reservoir that releases water into the public system once there's enough capacity.

"We're stacking benefits vertically. For the same nickel, you get stormwater management, air quality improvement, wildlife habitat, and aesthetic pleasure," Cullina says.

Bergen's design incorporates all four classical elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Earth is represented through the robust masonry of the building and the lush plantings. Air is celebrated with kinetic sculptures and the natural movement of plants swaying in the breeze. Water, as mentioned, is ever-present through a static mirror pond, runnels, and waterfalls, while fire is acknowledged with outdoor fire pits, adding warmth and gathering spaces for residents.

The gardens change with the seasons, creating a lively, evolving experience for residents.

"The idea that you can be in a park-like setting and still be in your home is extraordinarily unique for the city," Cullina says.

Bergen not only addresses the practical challenges of stormwater management and urban density but also offers a vision for how cities can adapt to a changing climate while enhancing the quality of urban life.

"Water is a beautiful thing," Rogove says. "Don't treat it like an enemy—embrace it."