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Big Town **Going Green**

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The POETS HOUSE: A green library with ecopoetry in downtown Manhattan

“On the last day of the world I would want to plant a tree.”

— W.S. Merwin

Take a stroll through the Poets House in Battery Park City, Manhattan, and you'll discover snippets of ecopoetry interspersed with a variety of works within books, journals, audio- and videotapes and digital media. First and foremost, the Poets House, one of the most renowned poetry destinations in the United States, is a green building.

The 50,000-volume library was founded in 1985 by Stanley Kunitz and Elizabeth Kray as a library and gathering place for everyone who values poetry to read, write, reflect and imagine. For 20 years, the library's home was in a loft on Spring Street until last fall when they relocated. The new facility is an 11,000-square-foot LEED-certified space. This designation, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a set of standards for environmentally sustainable construction. Due to the greening of Battery Park City and the Poets House's fulfillment of the requirement to build a green space, this nonprofit facility has a rent-free lease through 2069.

With the assistance of project management consultants Denham Wolf Real Estate Services, the design features a staggering double-height lobby with windows facing the Hudson River and an original Alexander Calder mobile hanging from the ceiling. A glass-enclosed gallery gives the illusion of floating when illuminated, and reading areas have views of Nelson Rockefeller Park and the Hudson River.

To create a natural backdrop for its gatherings, the first floor auditorium features a wall that opens to an outside space — Battery Park City's Tear Drop Park amphitheater.

“The space physicalizes our values,” explains Lee Briccetti, executive director of Poets House.

“Our entire first season is about ecopoetics and our connection to all of these issues,” adds Jane Preston, managing director. “It's a great connect. We have 11,000 square feet hunkering on the edge of the Hudson River with views from every window.”

To attain its LEED certification, the Poets House was required to use

highly recyclable, nontoxic products that were locally sourced (within 500 miles). To wit, more than 95% of all new wood products used came from forests and mills that meet sustainable forestry certification standards. Other energy-reducing features include recycled denim insulation, countertops made of recycled bottles, special green drywall, automatic day-lighting sensors and an ultra-efficient heating and cooling system. The project team also took advantage of advanced water-conservation systems, including low-flow faucets and lavatories.

“A very important part of our green building is the natural day lighting,” explains Jonathan Denham, co-president of Denham Wolf. “The system is managed and controlled by a fairly complex network of shading with sensors that adjust to artificial lighting.”

The windows have solar roll-down shades that reduce glare, heat and ultraviolet rays to both protect the large collection of books and naturally regulate the interior temperature.

“Somewhat atypical is the location of the site. Even though it is in the densest part of the city, we were able to make a direct connection of the space to the natural environment with the park and the river,” says Denham.

“We built this green space, and we are trying to align our mission and our home with new kinds of programs that get people to think about the world,” says Jane Preston.

In addition to the library, the Poets House offers a variety of outreach programs including the “The Language of Conservation,” a project aimed at heightening environmental awareness through poetry installations at zoos.

“We want people to bump into poetry and experience it with pleasure. Poetry helps people focus on what they are seeing,” adds Preston.

A few years ago, the Poets House installed a poet in residence at the Central Park Zoo. The poet's purpose was to select, design and plant signage using poems and poem fragments. It was discovered that the verses enabled people to experi-



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ence animals in a deeper way. The program is spreading to five zoos across the country.

“Fragments of poems cause you to experience nature because the voices of poets speak to these issues throughout time and throughout the world,” says Preston.

As an example, on a whooping crane exhibit, the following snippet: *Does not the heart need wildness?*

Does not the thought need something to rest upon not self-made by man...?”

— Margaret Tsuda

Or near the reptile exhibit: *I felt my slow blood warm I longed to be that thing. The pure, sensuous form.*

And I may be, some time.

— Theodore Roethke

Yet, whether you bump into poetry at a zoo or experience it through the Poets House, the message transcends time and place:

What we have loved

Others will love, and we will

teach them how.

— William Wordsworth.

And that's why it's called ecopoetry.

For information on the Poets House, call (212) 431-7920.

— Holly Reich

Upcoming Poets House Programs

For Children:

Saturday, May 1: “How Does a Bird Imagine? What Does a Tree Know?” A performance, art and writing workshop led by children's poet Richard Lewis.

For Adults:

Wednesday, May 12: “After Copenhagen: Poetry and Biodiversity.” A seminar with poet and ecocritic Jonathan Skinner.

About Big Town Going Green

Big Town Going Green is the first in a series of articles showcasing local companies and initiatives that support the environment through innovative “green” programs or services. Look for the next installment of Big Town Going Green on April 7.