

Raise the Green Roof

TOPICS: Garden, Green Roof, Rooftop



The Montaje Sky Deck & Courtyard. Photo by Patrick Rogers Photography.

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A Q&A with Recover Green Roofs Co-founder Brendan Shea

Tell us about yourself and how you got to the point of founding this company.

I started working for a wastewater engineering company that used plants and bacteria to treat wastewater. We were using living systems to provide a traditionally mechanical function for a building.

I was cleaning a filter one day, which is really gross, and a piece came on WBUR about green roofs. They were also talking about a lot of the challenges involved in green roofs, in that they're very new, they're living, and basically all of the challenges they were

identifying of integrating new environmental technology were the challenges I dealt with every day at that job, but all those challenges involved rainwater and stormwater, not wastewater. And so I was like, “This sounds way better.”

We got into it to build stormwater management gardens and create green space. That focus has definitely evolved, in terms of the complexity of projects we’re doing now, we’re doing everything from large, half-acre stormwater management gardens to complex and high-end amenity roofs that are creating green space for people, and so basically building parks on the roofs of buildings and trying to bring purpose to underutilized space on a building in an urban area.

Can you define stormwater management?

Stormwater management refers to rainwater that is falling on impervious surfaces in a city, so that could be roofs, that could be sidewalks, parking lots, and basically that surface water runs off into the sewage system. In old cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, we have what’s called a combined sewage system, and that means the water from our sinks, showers, and toilets leaves a building and goes out under the street and enters the same pipes as the sewer grates that collect rainwater. So rainwater becomes contaminated as soon as it enters the sewer systems, and any time it rains in Boston more than three-quarters of an inch in 24 hours, we’re getting sewage released into the Charles River, the Mystic River, and Boston Harbor. So stormwater management refers to the goal of trying to reduce rainwater from entering that waste stream.

It is something that we’re trying to raise more awareness of. People don’t realize that our waterways are regularly being polluted. It’s an environmental issue, it’s a people issue, and it’s an economic issue.

You said stormwater management was where you started—what has been the evolution?

Stormwater management and habitat creation were the two things that we were most attracted to in green roofs, basically helping deal with stormwater and also creating places for pollinators, birds, and people.

What has evolved from that people-and-environment focus has been rooftop farming, which is something we totally didn’t expect to have such quick growth in popularity, and it’s like what people are most interested in when they learn about Recover. We built a half-acre farm on a Whole Foods, we’ve worked on putting farms on a number of restaurants, different office spaces and private residences, adding lawns and gardens and usable space to what was underutilized property. And the other is creating amenity spaces that are places for people to congregate, whether that’s outside an office building or in a high-rise apartment building.

What are some of the other benefits to having a green roof?

There's both environmental benefits and economic benefits. It protects the waterproofing from sun exposure and temperature fluctuations, which makes your waterproofing last longer. It can keep your building cooler in the summer months and reduce air conditioning costs. It increases real estate values. It helps battle heat island effect, which is the warming of a city in summer months—basically, large paved areas or areas with a lot of roofs get much hotter, and they stay hot overnight.

A lot of our favorite projects these days are trying to create native species meadow roofs, where we're often allowing the roof to evolve with nature, and we're helping to try to guide that evolution, but we're not trying to keep a rigid design and plant pallet in place.

I'd love to hear about some of your Somerville projects.

We've done over half a dozen projects over at Assembly, as well as a number of projects in Davis Square. We have some roofs over at Assembly, like on the Caffè Nero, that are not open to the public but are just helping keep the building cooler, protecting the building's waterproofing, and absorbing stormwater. But across the street, at places like the Montaje, we have roofs that have mature, 20-foot-tall trees and large native shrubs and lawn and recreation space. It's more space that's meant for biophilia and entertainment.

Ideally, we're trying to build spaces that are meant for people to relax, to find some connection to the natural environment within the density that is Somerville. There are many ways we can [increase green space], and green roofs are not the sole solution, but they're one of many—more street trees, bioswales, more support from local government to create green space, whether it's on a roof, whether it's in a public park, whether it's at street level.

Recover Green Roofs is located at 9 Olive Square. For more information, call (617) 764-1310 or visit recovergreenroofs.com.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and conciseness.

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