



# OMNI-BOSS

**AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN, URSULA HOSKINS IS TURNING UP THE LANDSCAPE AGENDA AS THE CHIEF OF MAJOR PROJECTS, AMONG THEM A NEW FOCUS ON FOOD SECURITY AND AN EXHIBITION ON ROBERTO BURLE MARX.**

BY KIM O'CONNELL

**I**N A CLOUDLESS SPRING MORNING, Ursula Hoskins, ASLA, stood on a curving new pedestrian bridge overlooking a section of the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG), a historic ensemble of horticultural collections, gardens, and landscapes that has long set the standard by which other public gardens are measured. With the sun glinting off her blue eyeglass frames, Hoskins was talking about orientation and circulation, the kinds of things that consume landscape architects but that the public just experiences intuitively. As NYBG's vice president for capital projects, Hoskins is responsible for implementing complex projects at the garden that span both architecture and landscape architecture. As a landscape architect—the first landscape architect to hold this position in NYBG's nearly 130-year history—Hoskins brings a holistic, land-first ethic to a role that has traditionally been filled by architects or engineers.

**OPPOSITE**

With a background in forestry and landscape architecture, Ursula Hoskins, ASLA, brings a deep understanding of landscape and ecology to her role as NYBG's vice president for capital projects.

MARLON COO THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN



**ABOVE**  
Hoskins has overseen new circulation paths and overlooks near such notable landscape features as the Steinhardt Maple Collection.

**OPPOSITE**  
This spring saw the start of a restoration of the Palm Dome at the historic 19th-century Enid A. Haupt Conservatory.

After earning a bachelor of science in forestry, Hoskins earned a master's in landscape architecture at Cornell and began her professional career at the Central Park Conservancy, where she was a project manager for the Great Lawn and other major landscape restorations. From there, she served as a project manager at the private landscape architecture firm of Abel Bainnson Butz, working at Hudson River Park, including the first 3,300-linear-foot segment of the four-mile-long waterfront park to open, and the historic Madison Square Park. She took a position as director of capital facilities planning with the State University of New York in Purchase, New York, to be closer to home as she and her husband were raising their three sons, but eventually returned to Abel Bainnson Butz as a senior associate. In 2012, she joined the staff of NYBG (becoming vice president for capital projects within a year of her arrival), where she oversees a staff of seven charged with long-range planning, design, construction, historic preservation, and sustainability—and, in particular, the implementation of an \$80 million strategic plan that will guide the garden through 2021. She also regularly serves as a liaison be-

tween her team and consultants, other NYBG staff (particularly the horticulture department), and city and federal agencies.

In addition, Hoskins must do this work in public view, in a space that justifiably draws a lot of attention. Dating to 1891, the NYBG encompasses 250 acres in the borough of the Bronx, making it the largest botanical garden in any U.S. city. Ornamental gardens, thick woodlands, curving paths, and water features can all be found here, where historically significant landscape architects and designers such as Beatrix Jones Farrand and Penelope Hobhouse have worked, and whose striking, domed Enid A. Haupt Conservatory was built by the well-known 19th-century greenhouse designers Lord & Burnham. The Bronx River snakes through the garden, surrounded by the Thain Family Forest, which contains some of the last remaining old-growth stands in New York City and provides an essential bit of wildness in an urban area. Since 1967, the entire garden has been designated a National Historic Landmark. During the dedication ceremony, George Hartzog, then the director of the National Park

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—URSULA HOSKINS, ASLA

Service, called the garden a “superb example of American science” and a place offering “exceptional value in commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States of America.” In 2018, NYBG’s longtime CEO and president Gregory Long, Honorary ASLA, stepped down after 29 years, succeeded by Carrie Rebora Barratt, a PhD and the first woman to take the helm.

Although Hoskins enjoys the challenges of her multifaceted position, at root, she is happiest when she dives deep into the projects she manages. “I’ve always been a project junkie,” she said. “At the same time, I take a big view of the garden and think of it as a whole.”

**I GAINED A SENSE** of the garden’s breadth when Hoskins showed me around the remarkable number of projects she has overseen. Our first stop was the Edible Academy, which opened in June 2018. Designed by the architecture firm Cooper Robertson in collaboration with Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects (now MNLA), this three-acre campus has the feel of a working farm, albeit a modern, technologically advanced one only a few miles away from Yankee Stadium.

Out of New York City’s five boroughs, the one with the highest incidence of food insecurity is the Bronx. More than one in four residents, according to the nonprofit organization Hunger Free America, lack reliable access to fresh produce ↘

**RIGHT**

The garden beds at the Edible Academy provide a profusion of vegetables that students can plant, nurture, harvest, and learn about.



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**BARNSELY BEDS**  
Designed by Towers | Golde, the Barnsley Beds are a semicircular arrangement of ornamental vegetable gardens in the style of the English garden designer Rosemary Verey.



**ABOVE**  
As part of a dramatic new vision for the garden's east side, a new path from the East Gate gently brings visitors to a curving pedestrian bridge that leads directly to the Edible Academy.

**OPPOSITE**  
Combining sunlight, green vegetables, and bright faces, the Edible Academy greenhouse is a fun place to learn.

→ and healthy food options. NYBG could have been content to be merely an urban ornament and a refreshing respite—not an unimportant role to play. But with the Edible Academy, the garden is addressing the food insecurity of its neighbors head-on.

The academy contains both indoor and outdoor spaces for schoolchildren and families to learn about growing and preparing vegetables, fruit, and herbs. Its campus is built around the garden's existing Ruth Rea Howell Vegetable Garden and now includes a 5,300-square-foot classroom building (which has a thriving green roof), a demonstration kitchen, a teaching greenhouse, and a terraced amphitheater, among other features. Studies have shown that children who are exposed to gardening and the outdoors are more likely to eat vegetables and tend to experience the same benefits as being outdoors generally, such as a greater sense of calm and well-being.

"It was important that we make that connection for children between the environment, nutrition, and sustainability," Hoskins said. "People don't know where their food comes from. With the

Edible Academy, we can double the annual capacity of our educational program from 50,000 to 100,000 visitors."

As we talked, a group of schoolchildren was nearby, not sitting indoors listening to lessons projected onto a whiteboard or looking at tablets, but outside, bent over a garden bed, digging in, and getting their hands dirty. Others sat at a picnic table learning about how to grow and cultivate crops, making the essential connection between earth and farm and table, Hoskins observed. At harvest time, children can bring fresh food home.

"[T]here's more food than we could possibly use in America, but not enough of it gets to the right people, and a lot of the food that does get to people is not healthy enough," New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said in remarks during the Edible Academy's grand opening. "And here you're righting that wrong, you're teaching our young people what healthy, natural food is from the very beginning of their lives, you are teaching them how to grow it, and that makes it very personal. It makes it very real."

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Other features of the academy include the Solar Pavilion, with an array of photovoltaic panels, and the Pauline Gillespie Gossett Overlook Pavilion, which provides a view of the Bronx River—a visual link between the sustainable, programmed features of the vegetable garden and the wildness below. The garden recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Royal Bank of Canada to plant trees and shrubs on about 40,000 square feet of land along the Bronx River to prevent erosion and reduce stormwater runoff. ("I'm a landscape architect, so stormwater is second nature to me," Hoskins notes.) She ticked off a list of creatures

for which the garden provides habitat—rabbits, squirrels, beavers, deer, red-tailed hawk, and great horned owls, among others—welcome biodiversity in a place where people are by far the dominant species.

Although respectful of historic precedents, Hoskins has nonetheless been motivated by a desire to make the garden more modern and interactive, such as with the construction of a renovated and expanded Native Plant Garden designed by Oehme, van Sweden that includes a modern three-pool water feature. She is equally interested ↘



**LEFT**  
The new Edible Academy campus is helping to address food insecurity in the Bronx, whose residents routinely lack reliable access to fresh food.

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## HOSKINS'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MORE GRANULAR ASPECTS OF THE WORK HAS BEEN HELPFUL.

an important democratizing element, Hoskins said. We watched as a handful of visitors, including mothers pushing their strollers, walked up and down the gentle path.

Just as significant as the new circulation is the fact that it takes visitors past work areas that would have once been hidden, such as the Green Zone, which includes the Green Materials Recycling Center (also designed by Towers | Golde), where the garden's plant-based debris and other organic materials are recycled into compost and mulch. There are also restrooms here featuring composting toilets—extending the theme and elevating the importance of formerly back-of-house, out-of-mind operations.

Working with Hoskins is productive and fun, says Shavaun Towers, FASLA, a landscape architect with Towers | Golde, which has collaborated on several NYBG projects (work that Towers considers a “significant honor” to do). Hoskins's understanding of the more granular aspects of the work—particularly landscape detailing, construction sequencing, and budgeting—has been particularly helpful to Towers and her colleagues. “It is an enormous pleasure to work for and with a landscape architect who shares our values and understands what we are trying to accomplish,” Towers said. “We of course work closely with all clients, but she has been more of a partner than a client.”

↳ in drawing a wider range of visitors to all aspects of the garden, particularly the more pastoral side, away from the gift shops and conservatory. In NYBG's Lilac and Maple Collections, Hoskins oversaw new circulation paths, overlooks, and plazas that gently push into the landscape, offering a more meaningful, immersive experience instead of giving visitors only a distant postcard view. Even so, this side of the garden offers more solitude than the areas around the conservatory, and it's important too, Hoskins said, that the garden offer places for everyone, including those who seek solace away from the crowds.

In 2017, Hoskins oversaw the redesign and re-launch of the Garden's East Gate, designed by Towers | Golde Site Planners & Landscape Architects, an important pedestrian entry point to the neighborhoods east of the garden as well as visitors who arrive via the Number 2 subway line. Where there was once a formidably steep path and a rather banal approach, there is now a gradually sloping, curving, and wheelchair-accessible path that brings visitors toward a pedestrian bridge that leads to the Ruth Rea Howell Vegetable Garden. No longer an afterthought on the back side of the garden, the East Gate is now

### ABOVE

The Burke Amphitheater provides a more formal outdoor learning and event space surrounded by the garden's wildest areas—the Bronx River and the Thain Family Forest.

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**ABOVE**  
 NYBG's Lilac Collection, which dates to the 1890s, was expanded in 2016 to include new disease-resistant lilacs, tree lilacs, and dwarf lilacs.

**OPPOSITE**  
 Hoskins considers that the NYBG draws visitors who will go only to the best-known areas as well as those who will find their own quiet niches.

**F**AR FROM THE SOLITUDE found on the quieter side of the garden, the conservatory, on the day I met Hoskins, was bursting with camera-toting visitors to its annual orchid show. This year, the show was celebrating the orchids of Singapore, the resplendent and delicate flowers formed into dramatic “supertrees” and arches in the Singaporean tradition. Although we took a walk through the show, Hoskins had really led me there to look way up to the top of the Palm Dome, the central volume of the garden’s Victorian-style glass house. This spring, work began on a long-awaited restoration of the dome, which is expected to be completed next May.

Completed in 1902, the conservatory underwent a complete restoration in 1997; this current restoration focuses solely on the dome, which includes a cupola, upper dome, compression ring (known as a drum), and lower dome. For the restoration, interior scaffolding and a temporary floor will be installed below the drum, which will allow work to proceed without damaging the plants below. As evidenced by the crowds, it was essential that the conservatory remain open during the restoration (only certain sections will close). Other work includes upgrading the misting, heating, and lighting systems, as well as the mechanics that control the dome windows.

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Painted wood around the drum will be replaced with visually identical but lower-maintenance aluminum. Hoskins, not surprisingly, took care to mention that the plants would be specially cared for during the restoration, with nearly 180 plants to be preserved in place or transplanted during the roughly yearlong project.

Over lunch in the Hudson Garden Grill—another Hoskins project, in which an existing “grab and go” café was renovated into a sit-down restaurant with a small but finely curated menu—Hoskins talked about what she brings to the garden as a landscape architect, and as a woman executive. “To make a site successful,” she said, “you have to protect it. I hope that I’m bringing a greater sensitivity to landscape to this position.”

Hoskins adds that she is working with more and more women in landscape architecture and architecture, but that most contractors she works with are still male. “As a woman, it’s sometimes hard to be heard,” she said. “You have to push a little harder. And yet I’m pleased to see many more women in landscape architecture firms. I

don’t want to generalize, but women tend to be interested in exploring all the options for a project, to do all that due diligence.”

**B**EFORE I LEFT THE GARDEN, Hoskins guided me toward the outdoor site of the current exhibit *The Living Art of Roberto Burle Marx* (which opens June 8 and continues through September 29 this year), located next to the conservatory. Hoskins was particularly excited to be working on an outdoor exhibition (given that exhibits are usually confined to the conservatory or the garden library), and especially one that celebrates the work of the noted Brazilian landscape architect, conservationist, and artist, whose life coincided with nearly the whole of the 20th century (1909–1994).

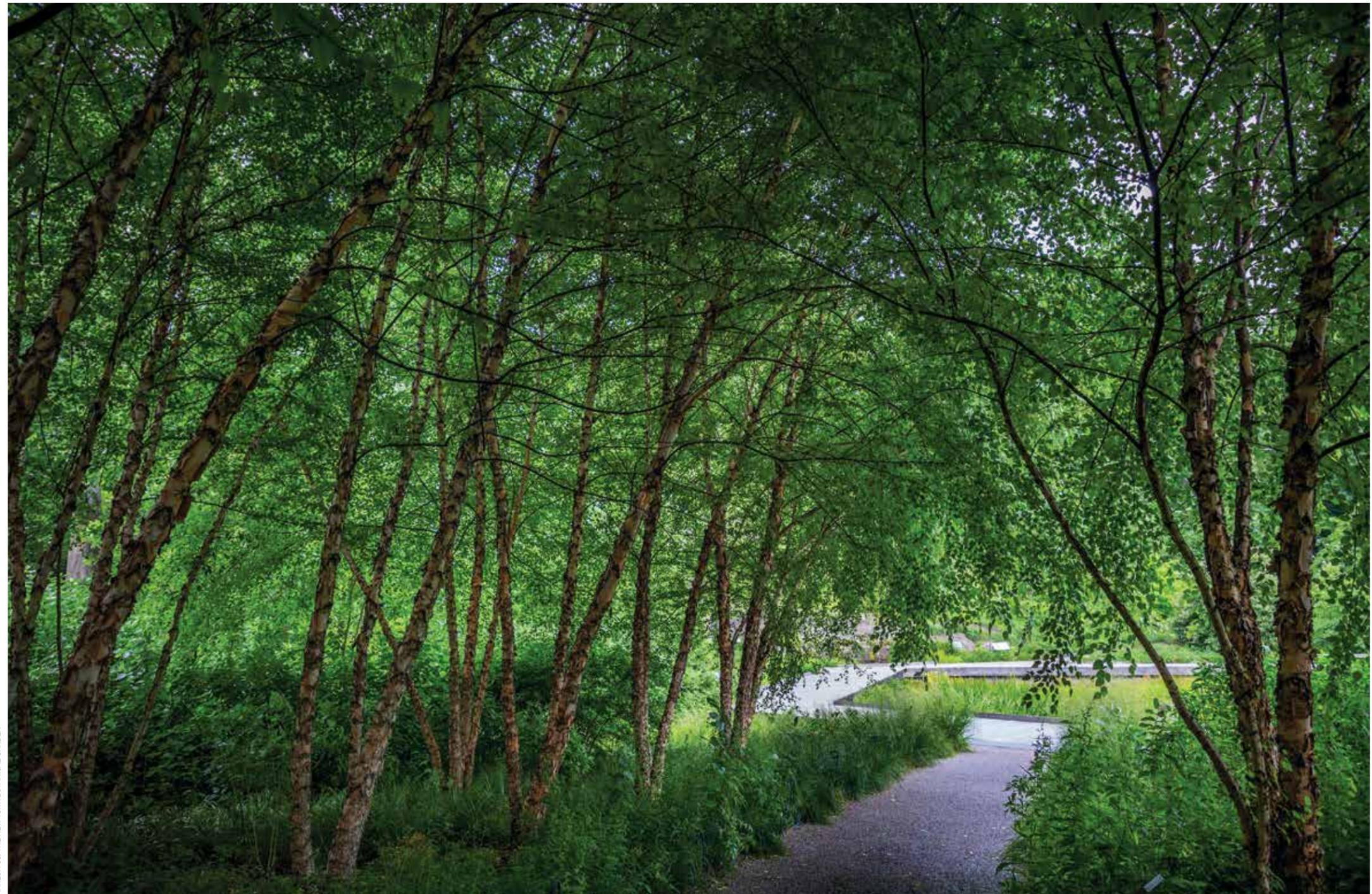
While I was there, earth movers were still grading and preparing the space for a large-scale immersive modernist landscape in the Burle Marx tradition, designed by the landscape architect Raymond Jungles, FASLA, a Burle Marx protégé. Here, patterned paths lead through curvilinear plantings to an open plaza and water feature.

Along with other nods to the Burle Marx catalog, the plant palette will include a combination of mature palms, bromeliads, elephant's ears, and *Victoria amazonica*, the giant water lily pads that recall Burle Marx's love for tropical plants and design.

"Interwoven throughout [a garden]," Burle Marx once wrote, "are the artist's outlook on life, his past experiences, his affections, his attempts, his mistakes, and his successes." Indeed, the stories and experiences interwoven throughout the history of the New York Botanical Garden are manifold. Now, with a woman CEO and a woman leading its capital projects division, the garden seems poised for a new era of garden design, albeit one that will undoubtedly face greater challenges with increasing visitation and the looming pressures of climate change. Over the past decade, Hoskins has interwoven her own outlook into the garden as well—one grounded in her own extensive experience and love of landscape, as well as her commitment to sustainability. "We have to do everything we can to lower our carbon footprint," Hoskins said. "With climate change, it is important to understand the relationship between what we build and what we leave for our children." ●

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**RIGHT**  
The Native Plant Garden, designed by Oehme, van Sweden, contains nearly 100,000 native trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses planted around a contemporary water feature.



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