

URBAN OUTFITTER

A MANHATTAN DESIGNER
CREATES OUTDOOR OASES
IN THE CONCRETE JUNGLE

BY KIM COOK

VISION

When a boy born in Canada's northern prairies creates a thriving design practice in one of the world's toughest cities, you know he's talented. But designer Michael Wood says a little luck helped him along the way, too.

"Some call it luck, others call it timing," laughs Wood, whose eponymous firm is situated in Manhattan's design-centric Flatiron District.

While he'd been a partner in a Calgary design firm, Wood came to New York as a project manager for a custom mill-work and exhibit manufacturer.

"I wasn't actively designing," he says. "When I was directed to a friend of a friend who was contemplating some cosmetic changes to his West Village loft, I offered some advice, and the next thing you know we were gutting the place."

The client was an up-and-coming Wall Street executive, and his friends started calling on Wood. Before he knew it, he had several jobs, and the business took off.

Wood's projects range from townhouses and apartments to lofts and terraces in trendy neighborhoods like the West Village, Tribeca, Madison Square Park and the Upper West Side. To each, he's brought his signature ease and élan.

Designing and building outdoor spaces in Manhattan poses unique challenges. What are some that you've had to address?

There's a wide range of Department of Building requirements, some of which were updated after Hurricane Sandy. Building management requires that no elements be permanent so they can access the roof and structure for repairs. But they also require that everything be secure enough during inclement weather. We solve that dilemma by rethinking the concept of permanence—attaching fencing to planters weighted with soil or gravel, etc.

What are some other hurdles that impact urban design?

Construction costs for an outdoor kitchen often exceed those of the cabinets and appliances. Some





buildings won't allow a sink at all, but if they do, we need to run the drain through exterior walls into the waste line. It's important to consider these factors before getting too far down the road with the design.

How do you handle privacy concerns for residents with a city terrace or rooftop?

Everyone's perception of privacy is unique, so we take direction from the client. There are building and code restrictions, like a max 6-foot fence. When a fence isn't the answer, tall planters with boxwood or arborvitae make an effective screen.

You've got some very substantial planters on the West Village terrace. How do you handle weight concerns?

We sometimes have to provide a load calculation letter to the building before construction. One solution is to replace existing concrete pavers with lighter wooden deck tiles. While some of the man-made products have come a long way, I prefer ipe for its durability, flexibility and natural weathering qualities.

What are some design elements you like to bring to New York's lofts and terraces?

We might design a fence with varying widths of horizontal planks to interpret ipe in a modern way. We might ease or chamfer the planks, or create a radiused seat edge on a bench. The furnishings are often built-in, and we always incorporate some custom upholstery elements

to personalize the space. There are so many outstanding outdoor fabrics from Perennials and Sunbrella.

You incorporate some interesting sconces and integrated wall lighting into your designs.

In some locations the city offers a good deal of ambient light, but I like to enhance the space with integrated wall and deck lighting. A lot has to do with the type of mood the client prefers.

What are some design considerations urban homeowners should think about when it comes to outdoor living spaces?

You really have to think about durability if you want a solid return on your investment. The forces of nature take their toll quickly, so after not too long, poorly designed furnishings and finishes will start to show. Read the history of reviews for outdoor furniture carefully. The longer a product has been in production the more you'll understand how well-designed it is.

What should potential clients know about your approach and your design philosophy?

What I hear most from my clients is their appreciation for our one-stop shop—interiors, terraces, architecture and project management—we're their advocate throughout the process. Ultimately we all want the same thing: a beautiful project that you'll love forever, to time and to budget. □