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Patrick Blanc: Pioneer Of The Vertical Garden



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Patrick Blanc has created hundreds of urban garden walls around the world, as a way of restoring natural diversity in our cities.

With his flowing, emerald locks, his signature green-and-khaki shirt and his love of jade jewellery, Patrick Blanc resembles one of the exotic plants in the vertical gardens he is famous for. It is not hard to see why the French botanist is called ‘The Green Man’ by his friend and regular collaborator, architect Jean Nouvel.

“My green hair started off as a joke,” he laughs. “Everyone thinks it is because of my job but it was when I met my partner in 1986, before I became famous. We dared each other to dye our hair for one week — his blue and mine green — but I ended up keeping it for 30 years.” As Blanc talks animatedly, he rakes his hair with inch-long, pointed fingernails, turned a greenish hue from the dye.

Blanc’s appearance is remarkable. But it is far from the most remarkable thing about him. Considered the modern-day father of the vertical garden, the 62-year-old French botanist has designed around 300 green walls all over the globe. This includes the world’s tallest vertical garden and those in desert climates such as Riyadh and Bahrain, where it can reach 60°C.

His obsession with exotic flora and fauna stems from his childhood. “As a child I had tropical fish in an aquarium at home. The tank had aquatic plants to filter the water, and I was fascinated that plants could grow without soil. The soil is nothing more than a mechanic support. Only water and the minerals dissolved in it are essential to plants, along with light and carbon dioxide.”

After completing a degree in tropical botany he joined France’s National Center of Scientific Research to write a thesis on tropical rainforest understory species that clinched him a botany prize from the French Academy of Sciences. In 1988 he created his first green wall at the Museum of Science and Industry in Paris, which is still thriving. “At that time, the public couldn’t believe that plants could live out of the soil,” he recalls. Blanc’s major break came in 2001 when architect Andrée Putman invited him to create a huge installation on the wall of the Pershing Hall Hotel in Paris. Since then he has been sought after by famous architects from Jean Nouvel to Herzog and De Meuron.

One of his most famous works is the exterior façade of the administrative building of Quai Branly Museum in Paris, which includes 15,000 species of plants from China, Japan, the US and Europe. With more than 50 percent of the planet’s population now living in urban areas, Blanc says that vertical gardens are a way of restoring natural diversity in cities. Blanc goes to great lengths to ensure an abundance of variety in his walls. “I like the natural look, which means you need many different species of plants. It’s important to keep a high level of biodiversity visually, as well as ecologically, especially in cities. There are almost no predators in cities so by having many varieties it encourages different animals to live within the plants,” he says, pointing to a photo of a family of birds nesting in one of his gardens. “The result is beautiful — different shapes and colours of plants side by side.” Other benefits include improved air quality, equating to lower energy consumption in buildings, he adds.

“The design of vertical gardens is a mix of science and aesthetics. For example, designing a garden for a tall building means you need shade-loving plants at the bottom and light-loving plants at the top. Then you need to ask whether it is north or south facing, the climate, outdoor or indoor, the use of the building, and many other questions.” In 2014 Blanc won many awards for creating the world’s tallest vertical garden at One Central Park tower in Sydney, a 160m building designed by Jean Nouvel. He used 450 different types of plant, of which around half were local species.

One might assume a vertical garden would be more challenging to maintain than a horizontal one, but Blanc says the opposite is true. The garden is built on a system comprising a layer of PVC and felt within a metal frame that is light enough to be hung on a wall or suspended in mid-air. “The gardens only need to be maintained three times a year with an exterior gondola,” he says. “They are watered with nutrients every day automatically through a pipe with holes every 10cm.” Vertical gardens are just as happy indoors as out, with artificial lighting, he adds.

The other beauty of using plants as a building material is that no two walls are ever the same. For the National Theater of Taipei, he populated a green wall using solely Taiwanese orchids. In a garden for a friend, he planted only edible plants and herbs so his friend could cut leaves from the wall of her home to season her lunch. He has branched outside of walls, with a spectacular Rainforest Chandelier that spirals down over 100m from the roof of the EmQuartier, a luxury shopping mall in Bangkok.

But one of Blanc’s favourite stories was when he discovered a new species of begonia while on a field trip to the Philippines. The plant only grows vertically on boulders and, unlike other members of its species, gathers nutrients from the air. The plant was named after him, which he finds deliciously ironic. “It was named *begonia blancii* after my surname, Blanc, even though its leaves are black.”

by Tara Loader Wilkinson