

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARCHITECT PATRICK BLANC



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Mother Nature is found in every aspect of life; We are Mother Nature and Mother Nature is us. Patrick Blanc has explored this relationship throughout his life's work, most famous for his vertical gardens that infuses concrete walls with plants, flowers, and weeds, and has now taken root into the hearts and minds of city life. Blanc is an artist of nature; A Botanist who centres his life in nature no matter where he is, be it his jungle-esque home in Paris or growing vertical gardens in China. We had the chance to find out more about his inspiring work, his discoveries, and how we can also help bring back nature into our cities.

As a Botanist, plants, flowers and gardens make up your daily life. Tell us how this passion for nature started and how your work soon emerged into an art form?

First of all I'm a scientist, a botanist and not at all a landscape architect or a gardener. I was first fascinated by aquarium fishes and then by the aquatic plants because they were essential for the general aquarium equilibrium. Later, when I was about 13 or 14 years old, I was more and more interested in these aquatic plants. I also remember that, when I was very young (between 5 and 12), I did go every Thursday with my mother in the Bois de Boulogne, near Paris, where there many very interesting little rivers and waterfalls were built by 1900. These waterfalls were covered by mosses and ferns and I was truly fascinated by these plants

growing outside the soil. Later, after my first years at university, I wanted to study tropical botany. My interest for tropical plants originates thus first through aquarium plants and then through the plants growing in the shady and humid environments. I was thus fascinated by tropical forest the first time that I did go in the tropics, in Thailand in 1972 and I was 19 years old then. I did stay in Khao Yai National Park and I did look at all the plants growing out of the soil: on tree trunks and branches, on the rocks in forest understory, on the cliffs... The Vertical Garden is derived from the many observations I made in natural places, mostly in tropical areas, now a long time ago. 23 years ago I became famous for my exhibition of Vertical Gardens at the Chaumont sur Loire festival in 1994. This was my first important exhibition and this when my work emerged as an art form. Afterwards, during some years, I have been mostly invited by contemporary art museums and exhibitions to create my vertical gardens. Then in 2001, Andrée Putman invited me to create a vertical garden all along one of the highest façades in Paris, and this is the 32 m high vertical garden at the Pershing Hall hotel. Since this realisation, many architects have been interested by my work. In 2004, the Quai Branly museum with Jean Nouvel has been a new decisive step in my work due to its huge size and the dialogue with Jean's modern architecture and the traditional stone façades of the Haussmannian buildings. From then on I started creating vertical gardens all over the world

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QUAI BRANLY MUSEUM, PARIS

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Your creative vertical gardens bring Mother Nature back into our concrete jungles, reminding us of the importance of plants in our eco system. How important do you feel about our relationship to Mother Nature and do you think we can do more to reinforce this in our cities?

We all have to reconcile nature and man to a much greater degree. Simply because we have no alternative. Now more than half people of the world are living in towns and most of human beings have now lost all contacts with nature, but people all over the world are still very interested by natural environments, it is now something like a dream. And my work is to bring

back some kind of piece of nature inside the towns. Depending on the project the piece can look like, for instance, a cliff, a waterfall or a rocky tropical rainforest understory

How sustainable are your designs?

Thanks to my Botanical knowledge I select the right plant species according to each location.

This is the most important. Selecting the right species make my work sustainable because there is then no need to replace plants. Of course, a right botanical selection allows a good water use. Excess water can be easily collected at the bottom of the Vertical Gardens and then recycled. A vertical garden has to be much more sustainable than a horizontal one because maintenance is obviously more difficult because of the uneasy access. The vertical garden is a

kind of living piece of art evolving slowly by itself year after year. The Vertical Garden structure is made of three parts: a metal frame, a foamed PVC layer and a layer of felt. The metal frame is hung on a building wall and provides an air layer between the Vertical Garden structure and the building wall. This air layer, the foamed PVC, the felt and the many layers of plant leaves all act as a very efficient thermic and phonic insulation system. This is a very point when speaking about sustainability.

To get the perfect vertical garden you use artificial materials that are non-biodegradable. Can you explain your reasons behind this?

The Vertical Garden is a long lasting creation. It's not supposed to decay! This is why I use non-biodegradable PVC and felt. Should they be biodegradable the whole Vertical Garden would finally fall down. In 2011, you discovered a new plant species, the Begonia Blancii, found on rocks in Palawan, Philippines.

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PONT MAX JUVÉNAL, AIX-EN-PROVENCE

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Tell us about this exceptional journey and are there any other places in the world which offer such exotic vegetation?

Begonia blancii is known only from very few rocks around a single waterfall. This species, along with many others, is rare in nature not because of very special requirements but simply because seeds dispersal is done only over short distance. There is a high level of plant biodiversity in Palawan but, luckily, there are other such places on Earth.

You live in the most amazing house that looks like an indoor rainforest, set in the middle of Paris! How can we help to bring Mother Nature back into our very own small city apartments?

It's possible for everyone to create a Vertical Garden at home like I did about 40 years ago. Synthetic felt, PVC boards and a pump are necessary and easy to purchase. Selecting the right species makes the Vertical Garden easy to maintain.

What's in the future for Patrick Blanc? Are there any new and exciting projects you're working on?

Each new installation is an exciting project. The next installation is scheduled in a couple of weeks in China. It will be outdoor and more than 120 plant species will be displayed.

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VILLA, PALMA DE MAJORQUE

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Interview by Jade McSorley