

Urban Jungles

PATRICK BLANC, the man behind vertical gardens, is on a mission to green the world's cities. He chats to OLIVER GILES about the challenges of growing plants up the sides of skyscrapers

PATRICK BLANC IS a big name in the world of botany. So big, in fact, that he recently had a species of plant named after him. "One species I discovered on Palawan Island in the Philippines now has my name, *Begonia blancii*," he declares proudly. "At the same time I did also discover three more species, but only one has my name. It's very beautiful, it has very special shaped leaves, I like it very much."

Although it's native to the Philippines, there's no doubt that you can also find a few specimens of *Begonia blancii* in Blanc's

greenhouse-cum-study-cum-laboratory in his house on the outskirts of Paris. This wacky workshop is completely covered in exotic plants, with enormous ferns sprouting directly out of the walls and a tangle of long, stringy roots dangling from the ceiling. It's here, amid the muddle of leaves and branches, that Blanc dreams up vertical gardens for clients around the world.

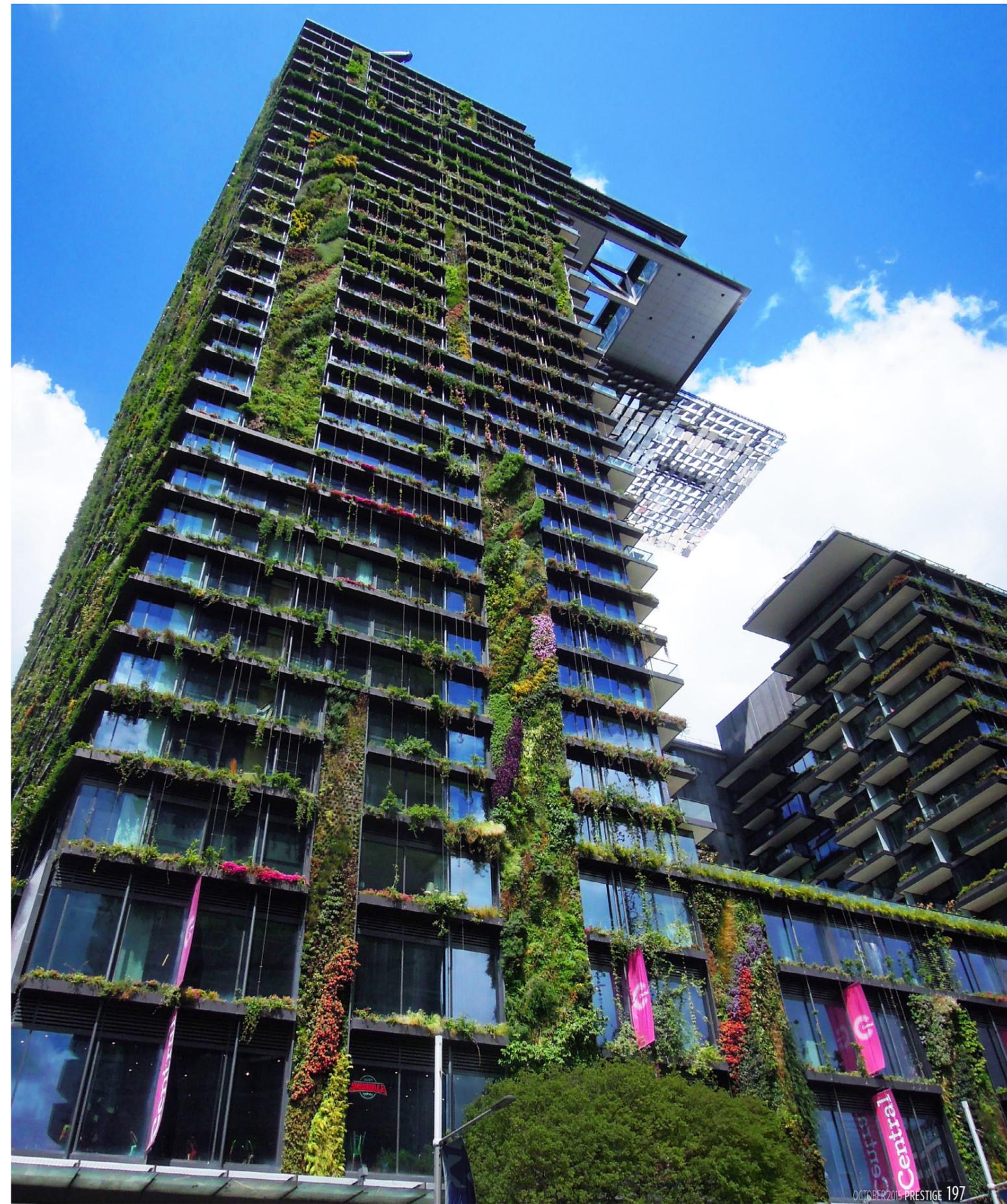
Vertical gardens, which are sometimes called "green walls" or "living walls," are plant-covered surfaces that are becoming popular features in hotels, offices and apartments. There's a lot of science behind them but, in layman's terms, they involve growing plants directly out of a felt-covered frame that is then attached to a wall. Remarkably, there's no soil necessary for

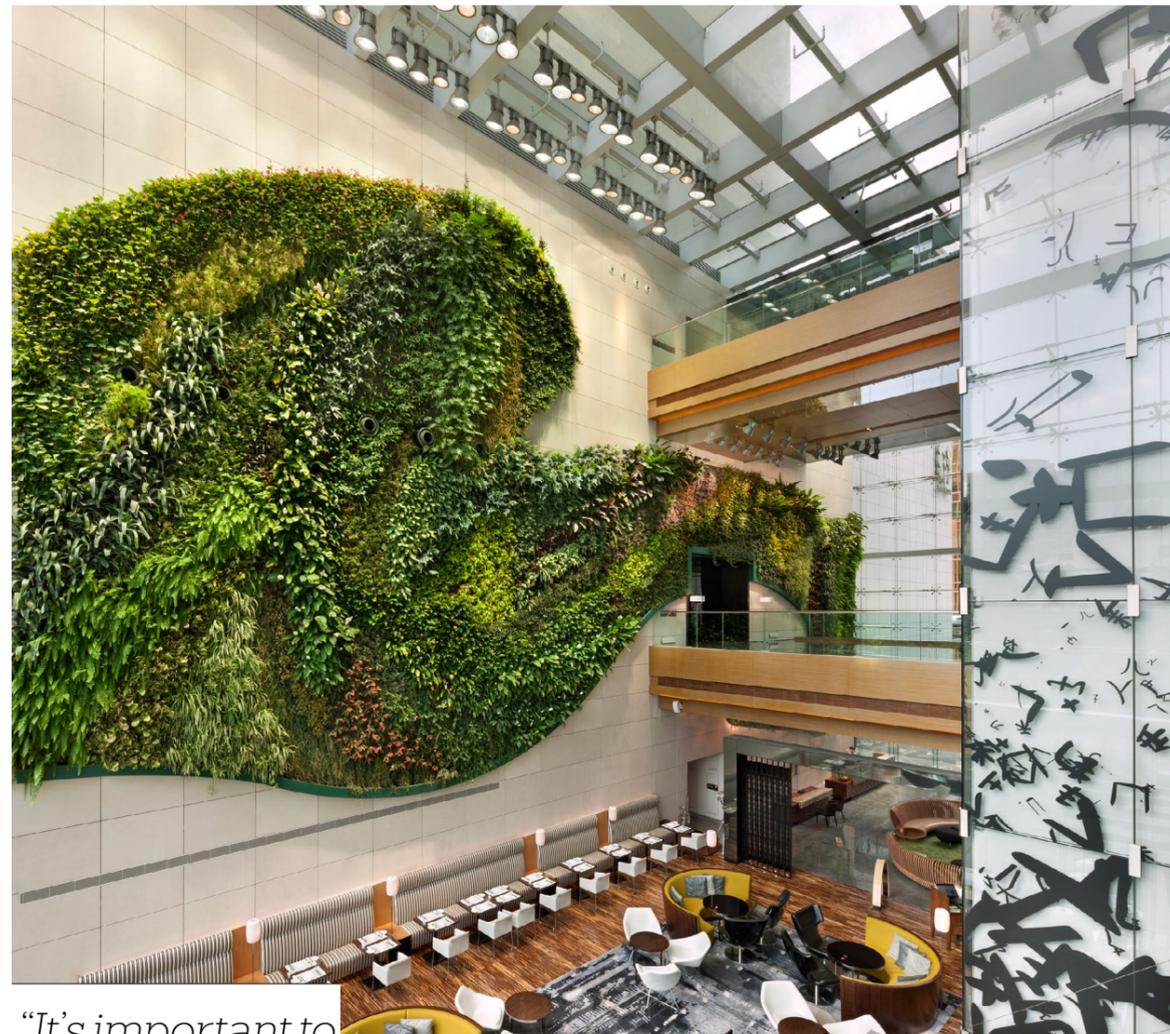
these plants to survive, and plenty of ground-dwelling species fare surprisingly well in this suspended position.

Blanc didn't actually invent vertical gardens, but he is single-handedly responsible for bringing them into the public eye. "Twenty years ago I was the only one in the world [making green walls] but now there are copies everywhere - but it's good because it means I had a good idea," Blanc admits with a laugh. "Now there are thousands of people doing vertical gardens - some are not good at all, but

ONE CENTRAL PARK IN SYDNEY

PATRICK BLANC AND JEAN NOUVEL





“It’s important to have a kind of nature coming back to cities”

some are really OK, so I’m very happy because I did create a new way to bring cities, people and plants together. I’m very, very proud of that.”

Although he started off in Europe, Blanc has now completed projects on six continents for more than 100 clients. One of Blanc’s best-known designs, especially within Asia, is his curvy vertical garden that arches along the lobby of Hong Kong’s Hotel Icon. There are more than 200 species of plants packed into that one indoor piece, and Blanc had some of them flown in from across the world. “There are some Asian plants in there, but most of the plants at Hotel Icon are actually from tropical America,” Blanc says. “Among the ferns there are some native species, because in Hong Kong in your forests

you have many interesting plants.”

Another unusual indoor vertical garden that Blanc has recently completed is an installation in the atrium of EmQuartier shopping mall in Bangkok. Here, Blanc has hung a 103-metre-long spiral frame from the ceiling, which has been completely covered by hanging plants that he collected from around Thailand and Malaysia. The vertical garden spans several storeys, and the idea is that dangling roots will eventually dip into a water feature on the ground floor. This indoor piece completely



As with buildings themselves, vertical gardens just keep getting taller and taller, and Blanc is currently working on the 200-metre-high Le Nouvel towers in Kuala Lumpur. “But in Kuala Lumpur it’s not really a vertical garden,” Blanc muses, “it’s plants climbing up successive planter boxes all the way up the facade.” Alongside that skyscraper project in Malaysia, Blanc is also working in Japan. “I have a big project at the Shinkansen train station and two years ago I did collect plants in the mountains around the city of Yamaguchi, so I’ve been using native plants of the Yamaguchi area for that project,” he reveals.

Blanc has taken his role as poster boy for vertical gardens to heart, and his green hair and love of floral shirts have made him something of a celebrity in the design world. But beneath his eccentric style lies a wealth of scientific knowledge about plants (he holds a part-time post in France at the National Center for Scientific Research), which is what makes him so sure that vertical gardens are the future.

“Now everybody is talking about the problem of global warming and you can see that if cities could have many more vertical gardens then the warming of the cities would be reduced,” he exclaims. “Of course with cars, the depollution of the air is very important. But what is most important, I think, is for people to have the feeling of well-being and the feeling of nature coming back to the cities. In Hong Kong you take a taxi and after 20 minutes you are on Hong Kong Peak and you’re totally inside nature. It’s important for places like Hotel Icon to have a kind of nature coming back to the centre of cities.” ■



transforms the space, but it does require a bit of maintenance. “Of course inside you need to have very [neat] plants, so usually every two months or one month you have just light intervention to remove some dead leaves,” Blanc explains.

Outdoor vertical gardens generally require less upkeep, though every project has its own particular challenges. Something that Blanc is contending with more and more frequently is height, as clients are starting to ask for green walls up the sides of skyscrapers. One Central Park in Sydney, a luxury apartment block that opened last year, was the first time that height was a serious issue, and Blanc had to be careful to select species that could survive the strong winds at the top of the 135-metre-tall green wall. That vertical garden has thrived so far, and One Central Park was last year named Best Tall Building Worldwide by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: BLANC’S VERTICAL GARDEN AT HOTEL ICON; PATRICK BLANC; BLANC’S GARDEN AT EMQUARTIER BANGKOK

OPPOSITE: PATRICK BLANC. OPPOSITE TOP: PASCAL HÉNI