

GARDENS

A Different Perspective: Botanist's Vertical Works Transform Urban Walls

By MARINA ROZENMAN
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Paris

BACK FROM KOREA and on his way to Yemen, botanist Patrick Blanc suggests that we meet at the Brasserie de la Tour Eiffel—a cafe opposite his most recent Parisian project: an 800-square-meter wall of plants on the administrative building of a new museum of primitive art.

"You'll recognize me," he says, "I've got green hair." He's not kidding. Not only is his hair streaked with green, his thumbnails are green as well. His shirt and trousers are made from a leafy print.

"I'm a monomaniac," warns Mr. Blanc, 51, who's dedicated himself to tropical flora since his early childhood and now has gained fame for his remarkable "vertical gardens." You can find them dressing up parks, softening buildings—including shops, hotels and malls—and even bringing much-needed green to parking lots. Right now he is working on a wall for a restaurant in Barcelona. He has put up walls of living plants around the globe, from Europe to India (the French Embassy in New Delhi) to South Korea (a private residence in Seoul) to Japan (the contemporary art museum of Kanazawa) to the U.S. (a fashion store).

For the botanist, who spends much of his time hunting for new species in the deepest tropical forests, the installations are a way to bring nature into the city. "In cities, we need to keep horizontal space to walk around, to sleep on, to consume," he says. But vertical space is available.

His interest first began when he was eight years old, and his mother took him to the Floralies, Paris's international flower exhibition. The orchids startled him. "Imagine, plants growing on tree trunks," he says. But it was during his first trip to Malaysia and Thailand when he

Please Turn to Page F3, Column 3



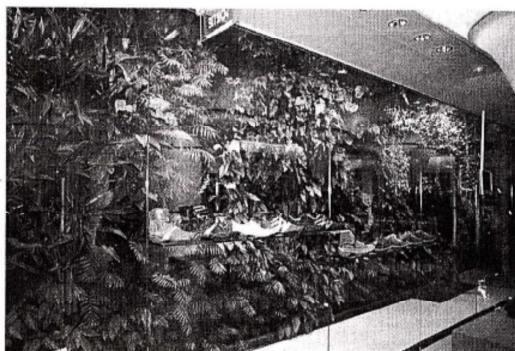
Patrick Blanc

Growing Up

Where to see Patrick Blanc's vertical creations in Paris

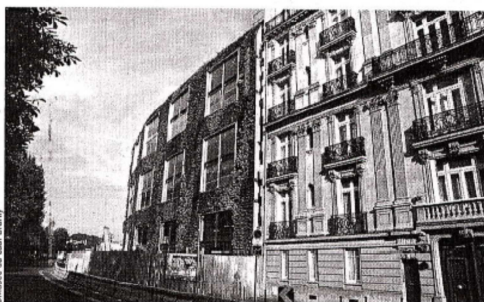
Pershing Hall Hotel ▶

The former Paris headquarters of the American Legion near the Champs-Élysées has been converted into a chic hotel designed by Andrée Putman (at 80, still considered as a diva of French diva). The building's Second-Empire facade hides a pure paradise: a 30-meter-high tropical cascade made of 260 types of plants, including palm leaves, vines, ferns, shrubbery, flowers and berries. Last summer, trendy designer Imaad Rahmouni revamped the bar-restaurant, which faces the plant wall. (Among recent celebrity sightings: actor Will Smith and singer Mick Jagger.)
49 rue Pierre Charron
Tel: 33-1-58-36-58-00
www.pershinghall.com



The Musée du Quai Branly ▶

The botanist's largest project ever is a plant wall that covers the 800-square-meter administrative building of the Musée du Quai Branly, a new museum near the Eiffel Tower dedicated to arts and civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and America. The museum only opens to the public next spring, but the plant wall on the facade can already be seen from the street: A 25-meter-high installation of 15,000 plants from 150 different species.
69 Quai Branly
(corner of the Avenue de la Bourdonnais)
www.quaibrnaly.fr



Marithe et Francois Girbaud

The Girbauds, one of French fashion's most avant-garde couples, asked for a green environment that would mesh perfectly with textiles at their shop in St. Germain des Pres. Their concept? To show there is no conflict between nature and technology (they're known for their advanced research in fabrics). The result: A selection of 250 types of exotic plants creates a green wall with hints of violet, brown and yellow, crossing all four levels of the shop. The staff loves it, as do architecture students who pop in regularly.
7 rue du Cherche-Midi
Tel: 33-1-53-63-53-63
www.girbaud.com

—Marina Rozenman

A Botanist's Vertical Works Transform Urban Walls

Continued From Page P1

was 19 that he became truly fascinated with plants growing vertically. Plants were hanging everywhere—from branches, from rocks—as well as growing in the pebbly beds of brooks. "I got interested in the idea of finding plants where you least expect them," he says.

They became his passion and life's work. Back in Paris, he studied tropical botany, specializing in how plants survive in the shade beneath a tropical forest's canopy. He earned a doctorate—working on philodendrons—and went on to become a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France's national center for scientific research. In France, he appears regularly on a popular television science show, teaching viewers about nature in the tropics. (His latest book, "Le Bonheur d'Être Plante," or "The Joy of Being a Plant," is being published this month by Maren Sell.)

He's most interested in plants that grow with roots attached to surfaces

rather than in the ground, catching the water that flows down, and thriving in the gloom under the trees. "In their struggle for light, these plants learn how to live together, generating astonishing strategies to adapt," he says. "They invent new forms and new behaviors."

These observations led him to an idea that was more artistic than scientific: installing a vertical garden without soil. In 1994, he showed his first vertical creation at the garden show Festival International des Jardins de Chaumont-sur-Loire. Early projects after that included an installation for an exhibit at the Paris art center Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain.

He has since moved on to create a variety of vertical gardens and acquire a patent on his method—which is the same whether the garden is being installed on the large facade of a public building or a wall inside a residential loft. He applies a sheet of PVC to a metal frame and staples a synthetic felt onto the PVC. (To prevent

any rot of the wall, the structure keeps the plants five centimeters away from it.) Seeds, cuttings or full-grown plants—about 20 per square meter—are put in pockets cut into the felt, where their roots will take hold and feed from the water and fertilizer absorbed by the felt.

Mr. Blanc chooses plants for their ability to live together, using an average of 500 species per piece. He says he could easily come up with 4,000. (There are more than 300,000 plant species on the planet, he says.) Plants are given spots on the wall suited to their need for (and tolerance of) wind, heat and light. Pierced hoses placed across the wall deliver water and fertilizer on a regular schedule. Costs for a plant wall run from €450 to €500 per square meter for large-plan projects (at a minimum of 100 square meters).

Mr. Blanc hasn't created a company for his plant walls (referrals are word-of-mouth) and insists that he's a botanist, not a landscape gardener. And while he

collaborates with architects on the plant-wall projects, "I've got total freedom when it comes to choosing the plants," he says. An assistant, Sylvain Bidaut, takes care of the practical side of things. "He knows very well how to read my handwriting," Mr. Blanc says, showing a map of one of his large walls, covered with plant names and formulas.

Recently Mr. Blanc made an exception and went horizontal, creating a 170-square-meter "experimental garden" for the new headquarters of the French Ministry of Culture, across from the Louvre Museum. (The garden can be seen from the intersection of the rue Montesquieu and rue des Bons Enfants.) In it, 100 plant species are "patchworked," as he puts it, to create a microforest with roots in New Zealand and Tasmania. Will he be repeating the experience? Not likely, he says: "We've been doing horizontal cultivation for 15,000-20,000 years, and I've been working on vertical cultivation for 20 years: I still have time to mess around."