

AIR  
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# AIR

A QANTAS MAGAZINE

**Add water, then stir**  
Patrick Blanc's off-the-wall garden art

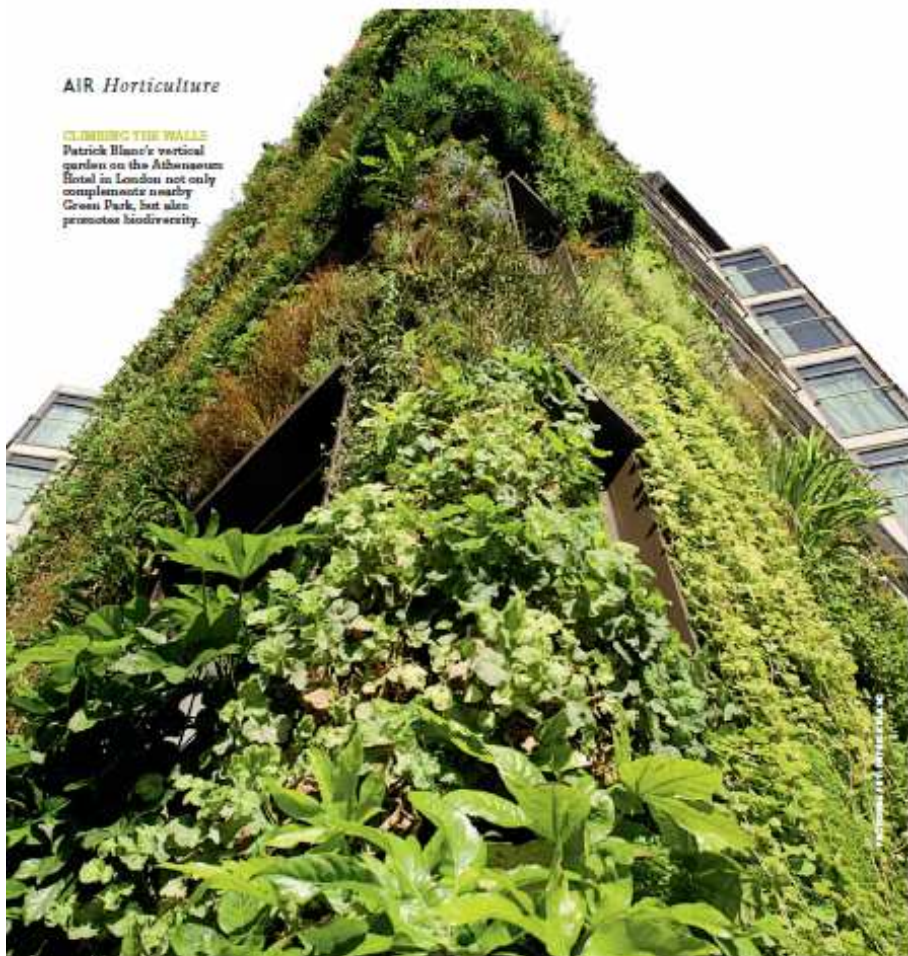
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A QANTAS MAGAZINE

## AIR Horticulture

**CLIMBING THE WALLS**  
Patrick Blanc's vertical garden on the Athenaeum Hotel in London not only complements nearby Green Park, but also promotes biodiversity.



For botanist and vertical garden designer Patrick Blanc, the grass is always greener when the only way is up.

# UPWARDLY MOBILE

— Words TONY MAGNUSSON —

**T**HERE AREN'T many botanists who can lay claim to having designed haute couture with Jean-Paul Gaultier and collaborated with Jean Nouvel on a landmark building, but Patrick Blanc is one of them. The chatty Frenchman with the blond hair (often streaked green) has installed some 200 of his vertical gardens in various locations around the world, including Qantas First lounges in Sydney and Melbourne, and the demand for his innovative creations is increasing by the day.

Blanc built his first "living wall" in 1986 for the Musée des Sciences et Techniques de la Villette in Paris, but it took a while for the world to catch on. "For many years I focused solely on my botanical research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique because nobody was interested," says the 57-year-old of his wilderness period, which nevertheless saw him conceive a "living" wedding dress with Gaultier in 2002. "Then I was invited to the Festival International des Jardins de Chaumont-sur-Loire in 1994, where I made a new vertical garden. Suddenly everybody was interested." He has barely had time to come up for air since.

Even those who haven't visited the Qantas First lounges may have seen one of Blanc's lush tapestries, which call to mind a densely wooded forest as seen from the



**VERDURE BLANC**

The last work of Patrick Blanc (centre top) includes Sydney's Queen's Forest bridge (above) and recently Musée des Arts Premiers (Paris Brandy in Paris (see right top); CaixaForum Madrid (see right bottom); "Robe Végétale" for Jean Paul Gaultier (right).



BLANC, CALZADILLA, HERRERO / VEGE BLANC (COURTESY OF PATRICK BLANC); QUEEN'S FOREST BRIDGE



“BLANC WANTS PEOPLE TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE RATHER THAN CONCRETE OVER IT.”



air. He has installed them in shopping malls from Bangkok to Tokyo, fashion boutiques from New York to Milan, along the outside of Jean Nouvel's acclaimed Musée des Arts Premiers Quai Branly in Paris, skyscrapers in Kuala Lumpur and Qatar, and recently on the Trio North apartments in Sydney's Camperdown.

Last year he created a 260sq m vertical garden for the exterior of London's five-star Athenaeum Hotel. Completed just in time for the English summer, the 10-storey structure echoes the verdant spaces of nearby Green Park and, like all Blanc's external gardens, promotes biodiversity by attracting wildlife and insects (but, thankfully, no pigeons or mosquitoes). Comprising more than 200 species - about 10,000 plants in total - the garden can accommodate an unusually large variety thanks to London's humid, relatively mild climate. His selection includes *Ficus virens* from Brazil and, one of Blanc's favourite plants, *Iris japonica* (Japanese iris). "Their leaves are shiny and very beautiful," he says. "They have a very elegant shape, like drooping fingers."

Each vertical garden consists of a metal frame attached to a facade or interior wall, a 1cm-thick PVC layer riveted to the frame and a layer of polyamide felt, into which plants are placed. Instead of soil, an automatic irrigation system provides water and nutrients absorbed >



**BY YOUR LEAF**  
Patrick Blanc with the  
Musée des Arts Décoratifs  
Quai Branly in Paris.

through the felt. And as the weight of the structure is less than 30kg per square metre, a vertical garden can be installed almost anywhere.

Blanc, who studied philodendrons for his PhD, is fascinated by the way plants have adapted to survive in environments where they can't access soil. His vertical gardens – which he likes to think of as living paintings – draw heavily on this specialist knowledge, all the way down to their aesthetics.

“When you look at a cliff, the plants are usually growing in oblique cracks, so that's why I like oblique shapes, not horizontal or vertical, on my walls.”

It's also an eye-catching contrast to the rectilinear order of the constructed environment.

Now a television star and published author in his home country, Blanc has collaborated with everyone from Herzog & de Meuron to Australia's Marc Newson. In 2005, Blanc was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. The accolades are all very well, but Patrick Blanc is simply doing what he loves: encouraging people to live in harmony with nature rather than concrete over it.

“More than half of us live in towns and cities,” he says. “People yearn for contact with nature, but because there's less and less of it, real contact can be expensive. A vertical garden is like a living cliff suddenly appearing in your city. Psychologically, it's invaluable for us to be able to have these experiences.” ❖