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Lifestyle Feature

Private Eye

Joshua Levine, 10.22.10, 06:00 PM EDT

ForbesLife Magazine dated November 08, 2010

Patrick Blanc's flamboyant, Edenic vertical gardens festoon homes, museums, and chic boutiques, blurring the lines between outside and inside, urban and wild.



The I Guzzini Illuminazioni showroom in Paris.

I love putting nature in a city, where you least expect it," says Patrick Blanc, the green-haired Parisian master and sage of the mur végétal. Blanc's complex botanical creations adorn museums, office buildings, private homes, and, most recently, a resort in Bali.

One of the most romantic spots in Paris is the courtyard restaurant of the Pershing Hall hotel on the rue Pierre Charron. The 18th-century building is elegant itself, but what makes the courtyard so striking is its adjoining wall, which is nearly 100 feet high and covered top to bottom with a swirling, seething mass of plants, trees, vines, and ferns. It's as if the forest primeval had declared war on the ancien régime, an unsettling effect that works spectacularly well.

"A Frenchman took me there on a date three years ago, and I was overwhelmed by how lush and otherworldly it was," says Jennifer Murphy, an American writer living in Paris. "I never saw the guy again, but now I try to get all my dates to take me there."

This being France, and Patrick Blanc, there's nothing natural about the Pershing Hall naturalness. Everything is as meticulously planned as Le Nôtre's gardens at Versailles, even if it ends up looking more like the Garden of Eden's revenge. There are about 300 species here, far more than you get in a typical horizontal garden. (And anyway, Blanc says, "since the world's horizontal spaces are all used up, the only way to get nature back into the city is vertically.")

Blanc greets a reporter at his house in a gritty Paris suburb wearing a Hawaiian shirt and no shoes on a cold, gray day. It's a lofty place that used to be an industrial workshop. Since Blanc moved in, the jungle has reclaimed a sizable chunk of it. Little chirpy birds flit among the vines that line his living room, and lizards slither down the back wall.

Blanc stumbled on the basic principle of his mur végétal when he was a 12-year-old crazy about plants. He had read somewhere that it was a good idea to dip the roots of houseplants in an aquarium and promptly plunged his mother's philodendron into the family fish tank. The philodendron loved it and so did the fish. It wasn't long before he strung a makeshift grill above the fish tank and fed a variety of houseplants on the nitrate-rich fish poop. Voilà! The first mur végétal.



Over the years, Blanc refined the basic method for today's mur, but it remains deceptively simple. Take a wood or metal frame, staple a polyurethane backing on it, attach two layers of synthetic felt, and start stapling your plants to it. The felt acts like a kind of man-made version of the sappy moss you see nourishing plants on a cliff. All you really need to do is water the felt a bit and add a little fertilizer if you don't happen to have fish underneath it (as Blanc himself still does at home).

For Blanc, a bare wall is an empty canvas. "I choose plants the way a painter chooses colors," he says. He figures he's used between 2,000 and 3,000 species thus far, arguably the biggest palette in the business, and getting bigger constantly.

Blanc's career as a vertical landscaper is mostly a happy accident. He is first and foremost a botanist, having ascended the academic ladder to France's prestigious Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, where he works today (his specialty is plant life on the dim forest floor). Blanc made murs for his own home, for his friends, and as a kind of glorified science project to show how plants could live outside the soil. "It was never my intent to make murs végétaux. It just kind of happened by itself," he says.

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It took a few farsighted commissions to turn this hobby into a phenomenon. In 1998 the Fondation Cartier hired Blanc to liven up its glass-and-steel Jean Nouvel building in Paris with a blast of greenery. Andrée Putman, the interior design genius, corralled him into making the Pershing Hall wall, and the world started taking notice. By the time he carpeted Nouvel's Musée du Quai Branly, his reputation was, pardon the expression, cemented.

Today, his walls seem to be everywhere, although Asia has taken to them with particular enthusiasm. Blanc's Bali project is a 25,000-square-foot wall for the soon-to-open Sea Sentosa resort. He loves these excursions, since he always manages to return with a few new seeds or cuttings hidden in his pocket. In Bali, he stumbled across a magisterial *Elatostema paludosum* near a waterfall in the dense center of the island--"I had never seen one before with such giant leaves," he says rapturously. "That's where I get my ideas--from nature."

Blanc also does private homes. Olivier Châtel, who has a *mur* in his place on Paris' rue Pergolèse, says "I can't imagine living without one." If you're thinking of commissioning a vertical garden, expect to pay somewhere in the neighborhood

of \$80 to \$100 per square foot. But keep in mind that Blanc often produces only one project a month. "If you do much more, you risk automatizing the process," he says. "Before anything else, I am a botanist."

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