

TACOMA

City Arts

FREE

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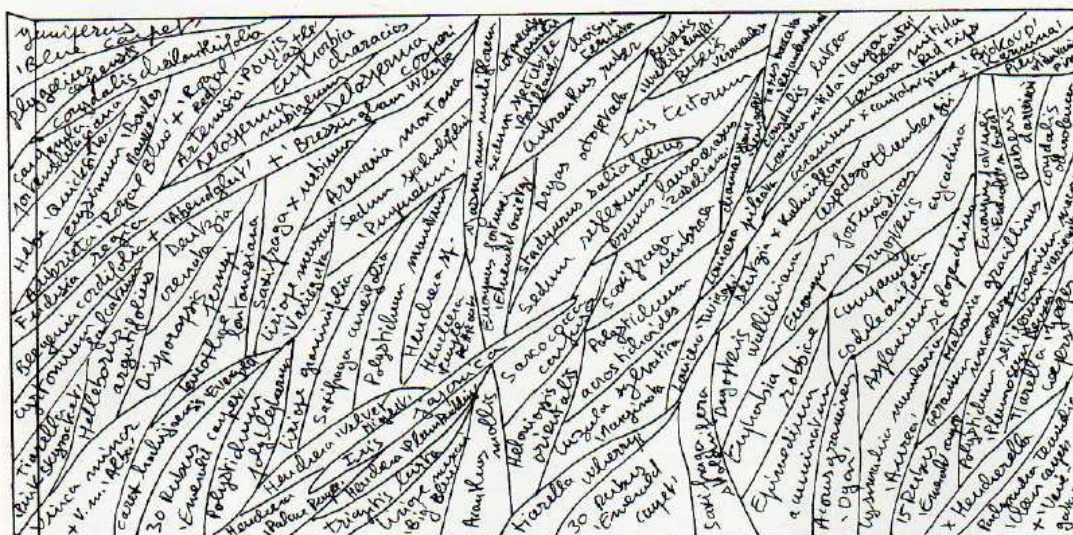
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A Green Giant's
Gift to Tacoma

GOODWILL

-TACOMA-



It is early September, and a handful of reporters, photographers, architects, horticulturists and executives are gathered in the parking lot of Goodwill's new Milgard Work Opportunity Center near Hilltop. Brilliant rays of sunshine reflect off the freshly poured asphalt. It feels good to bask in the glow. If Patrick Blanc, a celebrity French botanist/artist, wants to keep the crowd waiting, there are worse ways to start a day.

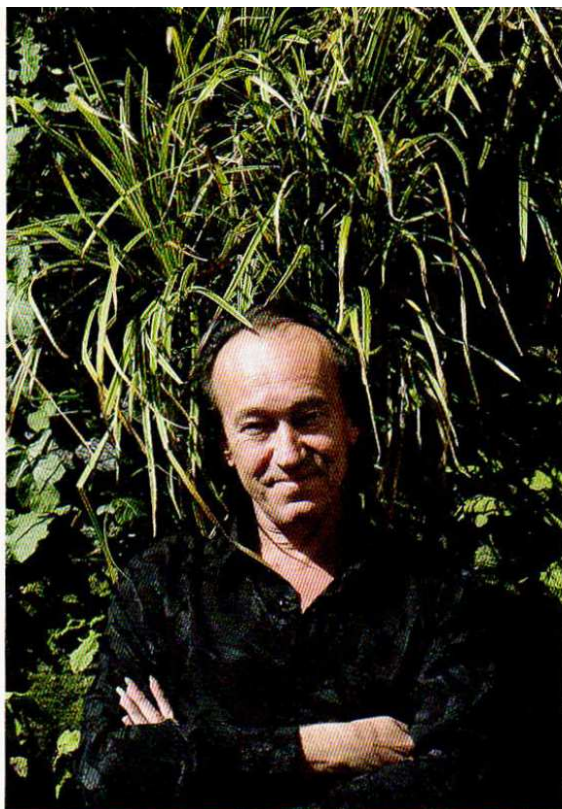
Blanc's fashionably late arrival provides time to contemplate his work: a twenty-by-forty-foot vertical green wall on the east side of the building at Tacoma Avenue and Center Street. The wall features nearly 2,200 plants from ninety-six different species arranged in a wavelike pattern that creates, according to the artist, an expression of "freedom." The installation of the plants and their supporting framework took two weeks. At summer's end there are few flowers in sight, but the diversity of color, texture and form is remarkable. From the palest gold-green leaves of creeping Jenny to the dark evergreen of a warty barberry, the wall is a resplendent multi-tonal field: plush dark purple leaves of cascading coralbells, tufts of stripy sedge towering above creeping raspberry, and the hot-pink petals of brilliant sedum that will bloom through the fall. The wall has also attracted hummingbirds, which have been stopping by for a sip of nectar.

The work displayed at Goodwill is one of the more modest of the verdant tapestries Blanc has created in the last ten years. Blanc's commissions span the globe from the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa to the Caixa Forum Museum in Madrid. The art world has embraced him, but museums aren't his only gigs. Blanc has covered just about every type of wall imaginable,

for clients ranging from luxury retailers to private homes to first-class airport lounges. While he has created two interior walls in New York — one for a Marithé et François Girbaud clothing boutique, and the other for Phyto Universe salon — the green wall in Tacoma is his first exterior project in the United States. A Patrick Blanc installation at the Tacoma Goodwill is big news.

At 10:15 a.m. a black sedan pulls into the south end of the lot. Blanc and his assistant, Jean-Luc le Gouallec, stride quickly toward the waiting crowd. Blanc takes his spot in front of his vertical garden and prepares to address the media. Le Gouallec observes from the sidelines. Back in Blanc's student days, when he was working on his PhD on the physiologic adaptation of tropical plants, Le Gouallec was his research assistant. With his dapper attire and fashionable eyewear, the statuesque point man looks less like a science guy and more like a model in French *GQ*. Blanc is less *GQ*, more *Rolling Stone* meets *Artforum*. His compact stature and shaggy hair recall Mick Jagger, though Blanc at fifty-six is a decade younger. Like Jagger in concert, the botanist exudes boundless energy. Perhaps it's the colorific vibrations emanating from his clothing: green corduroy pants, green alligator-print shoes and a shimmering black silk shirt embossed with a leaf motif. Even Blanc's hair is streaked with a broad swath of green.

"Hello everybody. So sorry to be late." Blanc's English is heavily accented and singsong. He smiles broadly and launches into his presentation, roughly fifteen minutes of rapid-fire information punctuated by clicking camera shutters. He hardly pauses to take a breath. Blanc says he is happy to have created a vertical garden for Goodwill: "It's a very interesting project and all of the people are very kind."



“The plants are the true artists, I merely translate their way of life.”

— PATRICK BLANC

Though no children were present at the lecture, Blanc conjured an image perfect for story hour. Standing in the projected glow of a digital slide that covered his face in a mass of glowing leaves, Blanc likened himself to “a giant with a knife cutting a big piece of nature from the hillside and carrying it to the city for the people to enjoy.”

With more and more of the earth’s population living in urban areas, the opportunities for people to commune with nature are diminishing. Yet Blanc is optimistic: “When you read the newspaper you think we are lost and nothing is possible — but it’s still possible to have a conversation between nature and the town.” “Do you ever talk to your plants?” he is asked. “Mais non! C’est stupide!” he replies. Plants can’t talk, he says, so why would he speak to them?

When Blanc talks about people having a dialogue with one of his vertical gardens, he doesn’t have words in mind. He points out that unlike a horizontal garden where we see only the leaves and flowers above the ground, the vertical garden gives us a view of the complete organism. We can see the roots.

In the vertical presentation, the plants claim their space. Roots intertwine. Relationships develop. “The wall is vertical as we are vertical. It’s right in front of you,” he says. “It’s not something you can crush with your foot like a horizontal garden, so you have much more respect.”

While Blanc modestly credits the plants as “the true artists” and says he is merely “translating their way of life,” he proudly takes credit for the foundational design and irrigation system that he perfected over four decades. The living wall is installed on a metal framework covered with PVC. The plants’ roots are layered between two sheets of felt and secured with long staples. Blanc explains how the felt on the new Tacoma wall is already transforming into “a perfect growing medium.” Just as the roots are able to flourish in thin layers of moss on a dead log in the forest, or in a few millimeters of organic matter on rocks in the mountains, so too will they thrive in his vertical garden. Many years of observation have informed Blanc’s design, and most of what he has learned can be found in his book *The Vertical Garden: From Nature to the City*, published last year.

Between photos of his many projects, Blanc recalls the joy of his childhood explorations in the Bois de Boulogne, an expansive park and wood on the outskirts of west Paris. He attributes his lifelong love of botany to those early days looking at plants near the park’s waterfalls. His first breakthrough occurred when he was fifteen. Attempting to purify the water in his fish tank, he clipped a piece off of his mother’s philodendron and placed the stem in the tank’s filtration system, positioning it just above the water line. The plant thrived and reached for the sky. Soon, the tank was on the floor and

Designed with a mix of native plants and nonnative species that grow well in climates similar to the Pacific Northwest, the green wall is progressing “very well.” At this stage the plants are very young, but Blanc promises interesting developments in the seasons ahead. There will be flowers in spring, summer — even a few in autumn. “It’s important for people to have flowers, but the insects and birds need them, too,” he says. “And I also think it’s important for the young people coming here and learning many new things, to see a piece of nature.”

Blanc speaks so passionately about nature that it would be easy to assume that he lives year-round in some remote wilderness in a straw-bale home. But that’s not the case. Born and bred in Paris, Blanc is a self-proclaimed urban denizen. True, his scientific pursuits take him to many exotic locations, but he prefers life in a big city. His art marries his passion for cities with his love for undisturbed natural habitats. For him, the vertical garden is an expression of freedom within the urban landscape.

Later in the evening, Blanc presents a slide show and lecture to architects and landscape architects at the Washington State History Museum. His first public realization of a vertical garden was in 1986, but it is only in the last few years that he says the concept has really taken hold. “At first nobody paid attention. Now, everybody thinks it’s really interesting. Other people are trying — and that’s great. I can’t cover all the walls of the world. And it’s always good for humanity when a good idea emerges.”