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## Botanist builds living wall at San Francisco's Drew School

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French botanist Patrick Blanc examines the progress of workers installing a “vertical garden” on a new building at the Drew School in Pacific Heights. (Dan Schreiber/Special to The Examiner)

His shoes, shirt, glasses and hair are green. His thumbs? Ditto.

One look at the jet-setting botanist Patrick Blanc and you know he is the reigning rock star of plants.

Having scoured many of the world’s tropical jungles for rare species, the eccentric Frenchman appeared at the Drew School on Thursday morning before a crowd of teachers, students and media to hail the installation of one of his famous “vertical gardens” on the school’s new building, which is under construction.

Billed as his largest outdoor display in the U.S., Blanc’s work is coming to the Bay Area for the first time at the 250-student private high school in Pacific Heights.

Equal parts artist and botanist, Blanc is inspired by the way plants interact with natural vertical spaces such as bluffs and waterfalls. His patterns create a “living wall,” characterized by a flowing aesthetic designed to give off a sense of freedom.

And that is his point — urban space should do more to reflect and restore the natural world by bringing back bits of forgotten whimsy, such as hummingbirds, into city habitats.

“More than ever, people are living in towns,” Blanc said, speaking excitedly in a thick accent. “They are more aware of the nature, but they have less contact.”

When he started all this in the mid-1980s, Blanc found few takers on the concept of vertical gardens, but now the green-building movement has made him popular with forward-thinking architects worldwide.

On the heels of grandiose public installations such as Madrid’s post-modern gallery CaixaForum, and humbler spaces such as a Goodwill store in the blighted Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, Wash., the San Francisco project is aimed at using vegetation to reduce heating and cooling needs.

The Drew School connected with Blanc through the project’s architects at The City’s ROMA Design Group, led by two Drew-alumni parents.

“He’s just one of those lucky people who is doing on earth what he was put here to do,” said Sam Cuddleback, the head of the school.

Teachers at the Drew School have already incorporated the project into curriculum. Chemistry classes will be using the wall as a living laboratory, with sensors in place to measure the nutrient intake of plants.

Physics classes will be quantifying the energy saved by the green technology.

Cuddleback said the possibilities of using the wall as a learning tool are just beginning and will grow when the vertical garden is completely in place next week.

"The science and the arts are going to flourish for this city's kids because of what we were able to build here," Cuddleback said.

## How vertical gardening works

- A metal frame is installed to hold up two major support layers, a PVC sheet and a felt layer of irrigated polyamide for the plants to set down roots since there is no soil.
- A hose atop the structure directly feeds the roots of the plants five times daily with a mixture of water and nutrients.
- The garden is maintained as any other would be, with pruning and replanting using, perhaps in this case, the occasional cherry picker or scaffolding.

## Alive and well

**14,500** Square feet in the Drew School's new building

**1,720** Square feet of planted area

**100-plus** Native California plants

**4,150** Individual plants

**30** Plants per square meter

**15%** Savings on heat in winters

**85%** Savings on cooling in summers

*Source: The Drew School*

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