

Making Murals Come Alive



Issue: Apr 11

Flamboyant, eccentric and hugely talented father of the Vertical Garden opens up about his green passion



Six Battery Road's vertical garden "Rainforest Rhapsody" is Dr Patrick Blanc's first project in Singapore and the largest indoor vertical garden in Singapore's Central Business District. The vertical garden is phase one of a S\$92-million asset enhancement plan for Six Battery Road. View a video of Six Battery Road's Asset Enhancement Initiative [here](#).

He's warm, enthusiastic, and grows on you – much like the tropical plants he enjoys working with. Frenchman Dr Patrick Blanc is the creator of *le mur vegetal*, meaning *vegetal wall* or the vertical garden. In person, the 58-year-old comes across less like the researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research he is than the rock star of the world of botany that he has become.



Dr Patrick Blanc's love for plants has grown on him even as his fashion statement as he is often seen decked out in his favourite shade of jade-green literally from head to toe

And rock the world he certainly has. Over 140 of his vertical masterpieces now grace the exteriors and interiors of some of the most acclaimed buildings across the globe, from Manhattan's Phyto Universe, Miami's Art Museum to Quai Branly Museum in Paris and Berlin's Galeries Lafayette.

He recently completed a vertical garden at the lobby of Six Battery Road, owned by CapitaCommercial Trust. The approximately 2,000-square-foot wall in the lobby of the Grade A office building at the heart of Singapore Central Business District (CBD) has about 120 species of plants native to the country and the region. Costing S\$750,000 to design and install, his eco art is aptly named Rainforest Rhapsody. The origin of the species is the tropical rainforests of Asia, Americas and Africa. Some of these species are Singapore natives such as *Asplenium nidus* (Bird's Nest Fern), *Davallia denticulata* (Rabbit's Foot Fern), *Ficus deltoidea* (Rusty-Leafed Bush Fig), *Pogonatherum paniceum* (Slender Tuft Grass) and *Scindapsus pictus* (Silver Pothos).

Blanc's vertical garden, a marriage of art and science, is pure genius in concept and creation. More than simply growing plants up a wall, Blanc's green architecture is horticulture at a whole new level. The vertical garden is anchored to the walls by a grid of metal frames, PVC plates and polyamide felt. A network of pipes feed nutrient-rich water



At the official opening of Six Battery Road's vertical garden are (from left) Mr Chong Lit Cheong, CEO of CapitaLand Commercial Limited, Dr Patrick Blanc, Botanist, French National Centre for Scientific Research, Ms Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for National Development and Education and Ms Lynette Leong, CEO of CapitaCommercial Trust Management Limited

to the plants from the top down and any excess water is pumped back up and reused. The technology has since been patented. This technique of growing plants simulates the way plants grow without soil on natural vertical cliff surfaces as well as epiphytically on the branches of rainforest trees throughout the world.

INSIDE speaks with Dr Patrick Blanc to find out how his vertical garden creations all began.

INSIDE: You have been called a botanist, scientist, organic architect, ecological engineer, inventor, designer and artist. Which best describes you?

BLANC: I'm first and foremost a botanist and a scientist. I spent many years learning about plant life - how they grow, where they best thrive and which species are native to which areas. It's my work as a botanist that has allowed me to recreate what I see in Nature.

Of course, some call me an artist because I know how to combine the plants to create something beautiful to behold. But I am only trying to imitate Mother Nature. She is the true artist. I am the scientist who understands plant habits, architecture and design in order to select the

right mix of plants for my vertical gardens.



Dr Blanc's vertical gardens grow out of the walls indoor (from left) in Phyto Universe in Manhattan and outdoor at Quai Branly Museum in Paris



INSIDE: How did your love for plants develop?

BLANC: Since I was eight or nine, I have been interested in Nature. My parents would take me to exhibitions or picnics in the park because they knew of my interest. When I was about 10, my parents brought me to an exhibition of plants in Paris. I got to see orchids and other exotic plants growing on trees there. I was

so impressed.

INSIDE: How did you come up with the idea of the vertical garden?

BLANC: When I was 12, I read in a German magazine that it was good for aquariums to have plants' roots reach inside the aquarium because these roots will help to get rid of the excess nitrates generated from fish waste. So I took some of my mom's plants and grew them such that their roots extended into the aquarium. It worked so well that I added more and more plants. After that, I had to find a way to hold up these plants. I experimented with a simple frame made of wood covered with plastic. I also tried different mediums for the plants to grow on like wool and coconut fibre before I decided to use polyamide cloth. They are not biodegradable so they can last a long time.

INSIDE: You started creating vertical gardens more than 20 years ago. Why have they become so popular now?

BLANC: More and more people are living in cities and they have less and less contact with Nature. They see the vertical garden as a chance to have a piece of Nature. What I am attempting is the evocation of Nature, to remind people that Nature is not only to be used but respected. Once they see that, they will think more about protecting Nature.

INSIDE: What were the challenges and considerations of designing the green wall for Six Battery Road?

BLANC: This was my first project in Singapore so I wanted it to be very interesting. I went to seven or so of the nurseries here to select the plants. What was good was that there were so many species available. Some have been in Singapore for over a century. Some are imported from the region. So I had no problems with a lack of selection. I ended up with 125 species.

INSIDE: Where do you get your ideas for your vertical gardens from? How do you decide which plants to use?

BLANC: I base my designs on the plants I can get hold of. Then the rest is up to my mood as well as the colours and shapes of the plants. I like to use as many different types of plants as possible - the greater the diversity, the easier the maintenance. If you have only one or two species and an insect takes a liking to any one species, it can destroy your work within a few weeks. If you have many species, even if the insect likes one species, it cannot destroy everything. This is a very common biological law.

INSIDE: You have done work in a host of countries. Could you tell us about the experience of working in different climates with different native plants?

BLANC: I try to use plants native to the country. In temperate climates, you have to choose plants that can withstand the cold if you are working on an exterior wall. The colder the climate, the more difficult it is to choose the plants. But I can always find some. In Berlin, for example, which gets very cold in winter, I use miniature coniferous trees.

But more than using native plants, I use plants that come from the same type of environment. It doesn't matter if they come from Africa, America or Asia, as long as they have the same growth habits and conditions for living. I would never put a sun-loving plant from Singapore with a shade-loving one, for example.

INSIDE: Would you recommend vertical farming?

BLANC: For my friend, I did a wall only with herbs: rosemary, sage, oregano and so on. Every morning she prunes her wall and gives the herbs to her friends. But I would not recommend growing vegetables because when you harvest them, you'll end up destroying the wall.

INSIDE: In 2002, you designed a wedding gown for Jean-Paul Gaultier. How did that happen?

BLANC: He contacted me and asked me to do it. I designed ivory tendrils to hang around the gown. Given the opportunity, I would do it again. The concept of the vertical garden has very few design limits.

INSIDE: You've said that the vertical garden is more a living painting than a garden. What do you mean by this?

BLANC: A garden is a place you can control. You can walk through it, remove plants and change it as often as you want. A vertical garden is a piece of nature you cannot reach or control. It is living art.

INSIDE: Could you please tell us the inside story of your green hair?

BLANC: I've had green hair for well over 25 years, even before I became famous for the vertical garden. My partner, Pascal Heni, wanted to have blue hair back then. So I decided to have mine coloured green. He lasted only a week but I stayed with it. It has since become my trademark.

INSIDE: Could you tell us about your home? Do you have a vertical garden there as well?

BLANC: Of course. I have many vertical gardens, both indoors and outdoors. I also have a huge aquarium, built like a platform right under my desk. It is 50 centimetres deep and seven metres wide. It contains 2,000 fish so when I work, I can see fish under my feet.

INSIDE: It's apparent you love all things green. So are vegetables your favourite food?

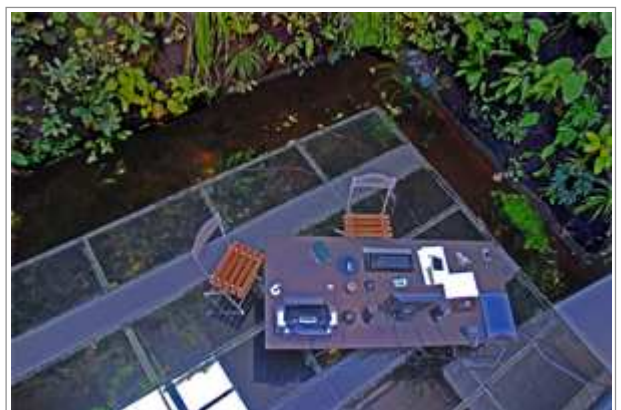
BLANC: I love plants too much to eat them!



The vertical garden at the entrance of Galeries Lafayette in Berlin where the plants have to be chosen based on their tolerance of the cold weather



With tendrils gently gracing the silhouette, this gown gives new meaning to a mobile garden



Blanc calls his home the "jungle bungalow" because it is overrun with plants and Nature

