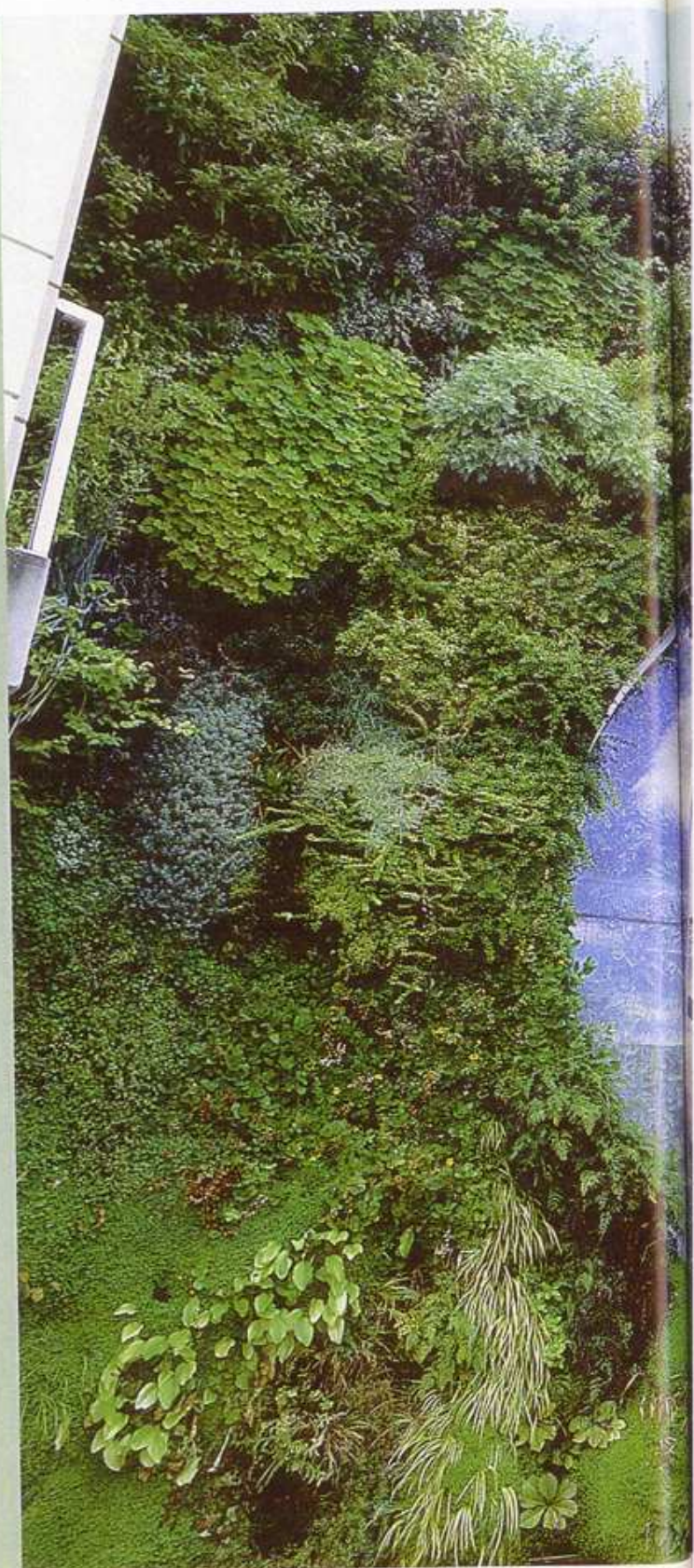


DESIGN

vertigo

AT FIRST GLANCE IT SEEMS LIKE YOUR EYES
ARE PLAYING TRICKS: A BUILDING WITH A
WALL COMPRISING PLANTS USUALLY FOUND
IN GARDEN BORDERS. KIRSTY FERGUSSON
MEETS THE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR BEHIND
THESE GRAVITY-DEFYING MURS VÉGÉTAUX.
Photographs by Le Scanff-Mayer





For a moment, it is not clear what we are supposed to be looking at. The smart Hotel Pershing Hall, just off the Champs Elysées in Paris, is in the final stages of refurbishment and the colonnaded cloister we have just entered is still busy with decorators. But the man with green hair gestures to his left, and turning, my stomach gives one of those lurches familiar to anyone who has been in a lift that drops five floors without warning.

What I can see is a wall of plants, reaching up to the sky, 30 metres – 30 metres – above our heads. Spatially, it is like being in the sunlit shaft of a cave, or the floor of a jungle rainforest, an idea reinforced by the presence of ferns, bromeliads and epiphytes on the lower reaches of the wall. Craning my neck, I can see white carnations and dusky pink sedums, evening primroses and irises, and higher still, geraniums, begonias, antirrhinums and echiums. Beyond that, it dissolves into an indistinct tapestry of foliage and flowers, which I can only guess at. Is that a campsis eight floors above? It is. But it's the only climbing plant on the wall; everything else is the sort of plant you would expect to find in a border composed predominantly of perennials – except that this border has been tipped up, so that it stands vertical.

The frame is a grid of galvanised iron; the planting medium is a sheet of synthetic felt, which draws water and nutrients up from a basal trough, from which water is also pumped to trickle down from above. Staples are attached to the back of the felt around each plant (which is simply inserted into a 'pocket' in the felt) so that the roots can get a grip of something before they begin to mesh with each other. It does take a little time to make the necessary mental adjustments, but eventually you begin to appreciate how wonderful it is to be looking up at plants we are used to looking down on.

Forty-eight-year-old Patrick Blanc, the man with green hair, the creator of this *mur végétal*, is pleased by the reference to the jungle, for rainforest understoreys are his speciality. Blanc's interest stems back to his urban childhood, when he began experimenting with an aquarium to see which plants he could grow without soil,

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE FORUM CULTUREL DE BLANC MESNIL, WITH ITS CIRCULAR WINDOW LIKE A RAINFOREST POOL. ABOVE: THE VERTICAL GARDEN OF HOTEL PERSHING HALL REACHES 30M HIGH.



in water enriched with nitrogen. Orchids, ferns and bromeliads were soon growing up his bedroom wall on capillary matting attached to posts, which provided a similar, though miniaturised, adaptation of their native rainforest habitats, where plants fill every niche available, colonising even vertical surfaces such as tree trunks and rock faces. As a student botanist, Patrick continued to develop his understanding of how jungle plants adapt to these conditions, and as a postgraduate he began to travel to the rainforests of the world in the course of his research. He is now a professor at the University of Jussieu in Paris, and a member of the prestigious Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

His own house and garden, in a concrete suburb of Paris, have become an astonishing record of his experiments – and of his flair for design. The single-storey building and the walls of the garden are enveloped by plants, growing at all levels: lush curtains of tropical foliage containing both rare and exotic specimens brought back from his travels, all sorts of abutilons, of which he is very fond, as well as commonplace ferns and fatsias. But the planting is far from random: sun-loving, hardy plants occupy the uppermost niches – buddleias, spiraeas and berberis – and these give protection to their less-hardy neighbours on the next floor down, which in turn provide shade for the ground-floor tenants.

Indoors, it is as though you have stepped into a jungle hut: the air is warm and humid, finches flit across the rooms and frogs hop across the floor. Nearly every wall is filled with a dense, vertical planting of jungle exotica, supported by capillary matting rising from shallow concrete troughs of water. In the basement, water, heating and the flow of nutrients are operated from a complex control panel of Patrick's own devising. Although he continues to build upon his experiments here, the garden was mainly created in 1991. Two years later, after a little encouragement from friends and colleagues, Patrick unveiled the first of his *murs végétaux* to the public gaze at the Chaumont Festival. Such was the impact of the 3-metre wall that it became a part of the permanent gardens at Chaumont. The impact upon Patrick's life was significant also, as commissions started to roll in. "I never saw myself as a



garden designer," he smiles wryly. "I was – and still am – a university professor, who likes to spend as much of the vacations as possible out in the rainforest doing research."

Permanent vertical wall gardens in public spaces in Paris, such as the Forum Culturel du Blanc Mesnil, the Parc de Bercy and the Fondation Cartier, as well as the dazzling *mur végétal* at the Hotel Pershing Hall, have made Patrick something of a household name in France these days. Both the Forum Culturel and the Fondation Cartier are glass and steel buildings designed to accommodate exhibitions of contemporary art; a circular window glimmers at the heart of the former, while a huge panel of eucalyptus and fatsia, fuchsias, tamarisks, euphorbias, pittosporum, weigelas, abutilons and elms hangs dramatically over the entrance to the Fondation Cartier, for, almost unbelievably, shrubs can be planted in the same fashion. There are small plants too – begonias and tradescantia – and Patrick points out how, in a vertical garden, small plants can be grown beside much larger ones, without being swamped. "I learned this while observing how plants grew up the sheer rockface of a tropical waterfall," he explains. Maintenance appears to be a minor issue (just as well, given the scale of the Hotel Pershing wall). Watering is computerised, weeds don't occur in a vertical, soilless situation and pruning is an annual event. He notes how well-behaved a sprawling plant such as sedum is when grown vertically, remaining upright in its efforts to defy gravity.

Patrick's ideas are particularly suited to city-dwellers, where space is at a premium, and his techniques are starting to gain currency among France's new wave of adventurous gardeners. Patrick's services are in demand, but his heart remains clearly in the rainforests, where the story and the inspiration began. ■

Parc de Bercy, rue Joseph-Kessel, Paris • Fondation Cartier, 261 boulevard Raspail, Paris • Hotel Pershing Hall, 49 rue Pierre Charon, Paris • Forum Culturel du Blanc Mesnil, 1/5 place de la Libération, Paris

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: THE FORUM CULTUREL. PATRICK IN HIS GARDEN IN CRETEIL, SOUTH-EAST PARIS. PATRICK'S GARDEN, WITH LUSH CURTAINS OF TROPICAL FOLIAGE. THE FONDATION CARTIER.

