

French artist unveils new vegetal walls

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A French artist unveiled two living walls composed of orchids at the National Theater Hall in Taipei Friday, vertical gardens that the environmentalist said are aimed at paying homage to both the flower and orchid growers in Taiwan.

Patrick Blanc, a botanist and the artist who invented the vertical garden concept, said his creations can appeal to people of all ages and professions and hopes to encourage the audience to think more about nature.

"What I like, actually, is to try to put plants where people are not waiting for plants," said Blanc, who calls his version "vegetal walls," from the French "mur vegetal."

"I want to show that life can be installed everywhere," added the 56 year-old artist, whose passion for plants is self-evident — his hair has been dyed green for the past 25 years and he dons green pants and shoes.

His two latest vertical gardens, both measuring 8.15-meters long and 5.7-meters wide, were unveiled at a ceremony Friday.

Blanc, who erected the first vertical garden in the National Concert Hall in 2007, noted that the two new walls at the National Theater Hall reflect the diversity of native orchid species in Taiwan and Southeast Asia and recognize the achievements of Taiwanese orchid hybridizers in developing unique, high quality orchids.

The first wall, titled "The Wild Dance," was made of 25 native Taiwanese orchid species and others from Southeast Asia to exhibit the diversity of structure and growth habits of the orchid family, which contains about 22,500 species.

The second wall, "The Butterfly Dance," composed of 46 colorful varieties of phalaenopsis orchids, pays homage to the work of Taiwanese orchid hybridizers.

Over the past 20 years, most of the new phalaenopsis hybrids were created by Taiwanese horticulturists in the southern part of Taiwan.

The most challenging part of the project, Blanc remarked, was to find native orchid species, but he admitted to enjoying putting together the living walls because everybody involved was knowledgeable and very easy to work with.

Blanc stressed that the living walls are appropriate in both indoor and outdoor settings, but each requires a different approach and a different set of conditions.

While outdoor walls are more about choosing the right plants for the right place based on prevailing weather conditions, indoor walls are more about design and aesthetic values.

The benefits of living walls include increasing humidity and purifying the air in indoor spaces and moderating temperatures and noise when used outside buildings, Blanc said.

Having installed some 200-250 vegetal walls around the world, Blanc explained that he tries to visit each of his works every two to three years, no matter how far away they are, or asks their keepers to send photos to help him keep track of how his walls have evolved.

Some of the original plants used in the first vegetal wall he created at his home in 1982 are still alive; an indication, Blanc pointed out, of how easy the vertical gardens are to maintain.

Outdoor walls only need to be checked two to three times a year, while indoor walls need to be checked every 45 days to two months.

Since Blanc's first public vertical garden was unveiled at the Museum of Science and Industry in Paris in 1988, the designer has created many other vertical landscapes around the world, including green walls at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Siam Paragon shopping mall in Bangkok, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan. ■