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PATRICK BLANC, FRANCE'S VERTICAL GARDENER



PATRICK BLANC likes nothing better than trying to overrun the walls of buildings with plants. And his latest work is taking over the walls and beginning to cascade down from the window boxes of a new 33-storey apartment development in Sydney designed by his French compatriot, architect Jean Nouvel with Australia's PTW Architects.

Blanc is a scientist and artist who likes to call his work "a living painting" rather than a garden. In French the name for his extraordinary innovation is *le mur vegetal*, or plant wall. Blanc lives in Paris and the internal walls of his home are covered in wall-hugging varieties. It is, he says, like living in the environment of our ancient ancestors.

"It's the same kind of habitat as the one we had about ten or 20 thousand years ago when we were living in caves or on the cliffs where plants were found around the holes," says Blanc, 60. "I think my vertical gardens are so important for people. I think in some ways it's a reminding of our old habitats when we were living in caves."

Blanc has built his reputation on a magnificent series of vertical plantings, stretching back to 1988, on buildings across the globe. Perhaps the most famous of these are the outer walls of Paris' indigenous art museum Le Musee du quai Branly, on the banks of the Seine near the Eiffel Tower.

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At [One Central Park](#) in Sydney, East and West towers, the site of his latest vertical garden, there's no chance the residents will feel like they're living in a cave of their ancestors. Instead they'll be living in one of Sydney's latest and most exclusive addresses. Blanc's gardens at One Central Park consist of 24 individual vertical garden panels, the tallest of their kind in the world. The largest stretches 13 storeys high and they cover a wall area of over 1000 square metres.

The gardens face Broadway, the main road west out of the city and will be subject to the full brunt of the harsh Australian sun. Growing them successfully up these massive panels is an extraordinary feat — keeping them alive will be another. Luckily that won't be left up to the residents (that is to say how often do you see healthy plants on an exposed high-rise balcony?).

The secret to a vertical garden's success is, it seems, choosing the right species and the fact they don't need soil. Blanc scours the planet for the perfect specimens for each particular project and that are typically "found to be growing wild on maritime cliffs or along the cliffs and rocky slopes in mountainous areas," he says. At One Central Park the approach is the same — scores of native plants that thrive in full sun and windy conditions now hug the huge panels up the sides of the new Sydney building.

The panels themselves are a system Blanc has invented and patented and are made from a very strong, multi-layered felt that's covered in mesh (and which doesn't biodegrade) and to which the plant's roots cling. The felt is kept perpetually damp and holds an enormous amount of water, which drips down during the day from huge rainwater tanks collected on the site. The water, containing dissolved minerals, makes it down the bottom of the panels and is recycled back into the watering system. A specialist maintenance team devote their time to making pruning and weeding and making sure the plants are healthy.

