

Giving Gardening a 'Heavenly' Touch

By Reema Moudgil



There may come a time when there won't be enough land for vegetation to grow upon. When we will have more buildings than trees and open tracts of green will be a fading memory. Look around you. It is already happening. The land feuds. The scramble to build concrete jungles where an overture to a connection with nature comes in the form of a few flowering pots in a balcony.

In big cities like Mumbai, a tree outside your window is a luxury few can afford and even the Ambanis had to build a skyscraper to get an uninterrupted view of the ocean. The distressing fact is that nature is fighting a losing battle to keep a semblance of balance as we mow down forests and green belts for progress but around the world conscientious architects are trying to find ways to incorporate green elements in buildings so that we do not completely lose touch with our roots.

Last week, this column mentioned how a hospitality space used the idea of green walls within the property. The idea of vertical green walls turns the idea of gardens on its head as a wall is used as a backdrop for vegetation.

Soil and an integrated water delivery system are used to keep the idea flourishing and make a green statement unlike any other.

These walls can be created within a building or outside as a facade, can be of varied sizes, can even be free standing. Patrick Blanc, a French botanist, is widely recognised as the 'modern innovator of the green wall' but the earliest record of a vertical garden can be traced to Professor Stanley Hart White at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 1938. He is said to have patented the idea that first threw up a 'Vegetation-Bearing Architectonic

Structure and System' but it will not be far fetched to say that Blanc gave a modern twist to the idea and made it accessible. At first glance, the whole concept seems a bit too impractical but a closer study shows how such an idea can be used in homes and office spaces.

Google to find out more about just how a load-bearing wall accommodates a metal frame that in turn supports a PVC plate (0.39 in) and how two layers of polyamide sheaths support the roots of plants and a network of pipes controlled by valves provides dissolved minerals to nurture the plants. But the idea that the roots of the plants soak up enough nutrients to grow on a man-made structure, or that a closed circuit system provides both enough water and nutrition to the plants is nothing short of miraculous.

The first man to get the hang of this idea, Stanley Hart White called this invention, "Botanical Bricks" and developed many versions of it in his backyard in Urbana, Illinois. White's brother once wrote about this discovery to a relative, "Stan, by the way, has taken out a patent on an invention of his called 'Botanical Bricks,' which are simply plant units capable of being built up to any height, for quick landscape effects, the vertical surfaces covered with flowering vines, or the like. He thinks that the idea has great possibilities for such things as world fairs, city yards, indoor gardens, and many other projects. I think perhaps he has got hold of something, and have written him for more information. He certainly deserves a break."

Blanc used the idea with many new inventive techniques. French architect Jean Nouvel's One Central Park residential tower in Sydney will celebrate the world's tallest vertical garden helmed by Blanc who has been fine-tuning and reinventing the concept for the last 30 years. Blanc has been working with Nouvel to put plants and vines up the 166-metre façade, which will be the tallest living wall in the world.

As the sprawl of green on the earth becomes scarce, maybe the way for us is towards the sky and to create floating gardens that defy gravity and remind us that while the worst among us violate the trust that the earth has in us, the best try to restore it any way we can.