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Patrick Blanc, the Master of the Vertical Garden

The inventor of the 'green wall' or vertical garden, Patrick Blanc, reflects on their growing popularity worldwide



HIGH CULTURE: Patrick Blanc in his home at Ivry-sur-Seine Stephane Remael for The Wall Street Journal

PATRICK BLANC'S HOME on the outskirts of Paris is his very own Eden. There are vertical gardens, or "green walls" as they are sometimes known, both outside and inside—smaller versions of the kind that the 60-year-old French botanist has become world famous for.

Exotic songbirds, creeping lizards and tiny frogs nestle among the dense foliage. The raised floor of Mr. Blanc's open-plan office is actually a massive aquarium full of tropical fish.

His architect friend and frequent collaborator Jean Nouvel calls him the "Green Man" and it is not hard to see why. From the tips of his dyed hair to the ends of his khaki-colored flip-flops, Mr Blanc has made himself a totem of the color green. Though thankfully the rosé we sip is of a different hue.

Taking time out from a busy schedule that includes his recent design of the world's tallest vertical garden, in Sydney, Mr. Blanc explains his magnificent obsession.

“ Instead of there being nothing or maybe a scrawl of graffiti, a simple wall can become something poetic ”

Where did this idea for vertical gardens come from?

I had an aquarium full of tropical fish and became very interested in ecosystems when I was about 8 years old. When I was about 13 I read in a German magazine that the best way to purify an aquarium was to have the roots of plants dangle in it. The original idea was to filter the water but what ended up fascinating me was to see that plants could grow without the need for any soil. I developed my first vertical garden in my bedroom when I was about 18. I irrigated it from a pump in my aquarium. The walls you see here are irrigated using exactly the same principle.



The vertical garden at the CaixaForum Madrid Marco Cristofori/Robert Harding World Imagery/Corbis

You've designed around 300 vertical gardens all over the world, including in desert climates such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Tell me about the One Central Park tower in Sydney.

The tower, which was designed by Jean Nouvel, is over 160 meters high, so it has been very challenging. Altogether there are 450 different types of plants, of which 250 are local species. When a building is that high there can be a lot of strong wind so I installed a metal grill with large meshing in front of it to make sure the plants are secure.

What are the advantages of a vertical garden as opposed to a horizontal one?

A vertical garden is like a shop window, where all the plants are clearly visible. It's quite different when you see a horizontal garden where everything is a matter of perspective. I think the biggest thing to highlight is the positive psychological effect vertical walls can have on those who look at them. Instead of there being nothing or maybe a scrawl of graffiti, a simple wall can become something poetic.

For the last 30 years you have had a parallel career as a researcher for the CNRS (the National Center for Scientific Research). How does this work help you to design vertical gardens?



A view of Patrick Blanc's desk, with a pond beneath it. Stephane Remael for The Wall Street Journal

Above all, I know all the different plants. It takes other people a lot longer to do what I do and even then they don't necessarily achieve a good result. Through my training as a botanic scientist I can immediately match a plant to an environment or climate.

How do you explain the increasing demand for vertical gardens?

There are a number of reasons. More than half of humanity now lives in cities, which is a relatively new phenomenon. The amount of space in these cities is increasingly at a premium so vertical gardens can provide a welcome oasis. There is also growing alarm about things like climate change and deforestation so anything that evokes nature is becoming increasingly sacred.

—Edited from an interview with Tobias Grey