

In Patrick Blanc's world of vertical gardens there are no substitutes



Patrick Blanc

By Tina Perinotto

In some ways Patrick Blanc, the designer of superior vertical gardens, doesn't mind the many imitations of his work that have sprung up around the world over the past three to five years.

In Sydney last week to add the final touches to planning for one of the biggest projects of his career at Central Park, previously Frasers Broadway, Blanc says some of the imitation green walls have probably helped his reputation.

"I should be not happy if I see something incredible, so beautiful, so perfect," says Blanc in his charming lilt, "but some are not very nice".

An exception has been a green wall in New Zealand, "a good one with good species, in a good place," he concedes. "But mostly it's terrible to see vertical garden species at the top which should be in the shade at the bottom, or plants that should live only in the soil placed horizontally. We use always plants that grow in the cliffs or on trees, in boulders and rocks."

In one project in the UK he felt sorry for the client, a school, when all the plants in a green wall died.

“They called me and I said I am sorry ... I don’t know how it was made, I don’t know the structure. I don’t know which kind of the irrigation, I don’t know which kind of plants [were used]. What can I tell you? I did not do it.”

Needless to say, there are secrets in working out how to make a vertical garden that has living, breathing plants.

The choice of plants, the position in which they are placed on the wall, the base materials that must contain the roots and allow an optimum feeding medium, and the watering systems are all critical elements – and for Blanc, worthy of intense and constant investigation and study.

In Australia, he has visited Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains three times in order to find local species that will suit his Sydney creations.

And he delights in the search. Wentworth Falls “is a very beautiful place”, he says, “you see all the species growing vertically ... so many species.”

He has also visited the Royal National Park south of Sydney and “several different forests” in Melbourne. The week after our interview, he was headed to Tasmania, with Cradle Mountain the centrepiece of his trip.

“Just six days ago I came back from Costa Rica in South America. I spent three weeks in the forest.”



Design for vertical garden One Central Park

One Central Park

At his Central Park project – a residential tower designed by Jean Nouvel, PTW Architects and known as One Central Park – the background work will come in very handy: it's his toughest challenge to date, he says.

His visit is to finalise the planning of the wall with the building team from Watpac, as well as the architectural and design teams.

“It is a day of finalising the design and collaborating, fine-tuning design and the planning.”

While in town Blanc was also about to check the progress of another vertical wall, also for Frasers, at Trio in Camperdown, which he expects to find healthy and well judging by recent photographs. At One Central, the design and work will be quite different.

“Here in this case, One Central Park of course is very, very special because it's very high, very exposed to the wind – 150 metres up.

“It is east and north facing. But north is good because if you have light, and so can have more flowers.”

Project architect Jean Nouvel has specified stronger colours than Blanc normally selects, fascinated as he is with infinite shades of green and the many variations in leaf patterns and plant shapes.

“What's interesting is the lower parts will be much more shaded, so you can use sun-loving plants [up higher] but also shade-loving plants for the lower parts ... you can use so many different species for the shade-loving plants.

“Because the situation will be different so for me, it is very interesting.”

The biggest challenge with the wind will be “mechanical”, Blanc explains: the danger of broken stems, broken flowers and dehydration.

“You can have dehydration of the leaves, so you have to choose smaller leaves so they are more resistant to the wind. And you cannot choose plants with longer stems which can break; you cannot choose those with bigger flowers.”

Imitations

So much to know, so much for the imitators to get wrong. So have the imitators hurt his business?

Blanc, predictably, is sanguine:

“I had a good idea 40 years ago. When you have someone with a new idea, when it's a surprising idea, everyone is very interested ... but people wait for many years to see whether it's sustainable.

“Suddenly in the [recent] three to five years, everyone in the world seems to want to do vertical gardens.”

But no, there's been no damage to his business. In fact his projects have grown in size.

“As there are more and more imitations, I have more and more big projects and less and less small ones.”

These days Blanc tends to do 12 to 15 projects a year. He has the help of one assistant, Jean Luc Le Gouallec, but no wish to expand and hire more people.

The job is tricky enough: anyone assisting him would need to be almost as highly skilled as he is so that they can not only interpret his fine pen-mark drafts but also decide, on the spot, if the quantity of plants for any specific position need to be changed or if one species needs to be substituted for another.

It's no surprise that Jean Luc is Blanc's former PhD student.



A sample vertical garden at Central Park

Singapore

In fact it was the many imitations of his work in Singapore that led to another new project, for Capitaland at 6 Battery Road.

“There a lot of imitations in Singapore, but when they [Capitaland] saw my work they thought the imitations are a little bit different than the original work.”

This project, which he will visit on the way back from Australia, will be the fastest he's participated in. Only four months from go to whoa.

“We signed at the end of November and the project was planted in two months,” he says.

There is a great deal of concern for sustainable outcomes in Singapore, says Blanc. “They want in the future to be more and more environmental and are very much involved in sustainability.”

“This is more and more and more necessary. Of course Singapore does not have a problem with water, but they have more than doubled the population in very, very few years.”

Despite this the country has managed to retain some of its virgin forests, says Blanc.

“What is very surprising is that in spite of its small [land mass], parts of it are virgin forest with water catchments and primary forest.

“There are very few natives ... you have to find them in nurseries, but in the forests I found at least 10 native species.”

But then, if anyone can find them, it's Patrick Blanc.