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You look up rather than down to see this garden



At Hotel Icon last week, I had the great pleasure of meeting Dr Patrick Blanc, creator of the sweeping vertical garden that graces the gigantic expanse of wall in Green, the lobby-level café. Blanc is not quite what you'd expect of a world-famous botanist who's discovered a whole new species of begonia and had it named after him (*Begonia blancii*). For a start, his shoulder-length hair is bright green. And his nails are manicured. And long. Again, not quite what you'd expect of someone who spends a great deal of their life clambering through

steamy jungles, and up and down cliff faces.

He's also utterly, charmingly eccentric — when offered a glass of water at lunch, he brushed it away, saying with a laugh: "I am not a plant, I do not drink water. I only drink wine."

Blanc, who developed the vertical greenery concept, is an award-winning botanist based at the French National Centre for Scientific Research. For close on three decades now, he has studied the many ways plants adapt to extreme conditions, such as low light and little soil. The knowledge he has gleaned has been translated into green walls in eco-aware arts centres, shopping malls, hotels and company offices worldwide. Since 1994, he has created over 200 public vertical gardens as well as many private installations, including his most famous, the Quai Branly Museum in Paris.

At Icon, Blanc's wall is three storeys high and measures 230 sq-m, and is the largest of its kind in Asia. He's enthusiastic and excited about his work, but knows his consumer audience well enough to avoid going into eye-glazing detail about the science of how it works. He designs the wall, allocates plants to create patterns that are more than simply about aesthetics — do they need more light? Place them closer to the window. Prefer dryer conditions? Put them higher up. Thrive in damp soil? Then position them at the base of the wall, where water collects.

The installation requires trained expertise; Blanc and his support team will oversee construction and maintenance of the wall to ensure it's always done right. The vertical garden — this one at Icon, others anywhere else — is by nature an ongoing work in progress. It needs nurturing, care, and control. When he returns to Hong Kong later this year, it will have grown so much; some of the plants by up to one metre. "It will be ready for a haircut," he says, smiling.