

By Beate Taudte-Repp

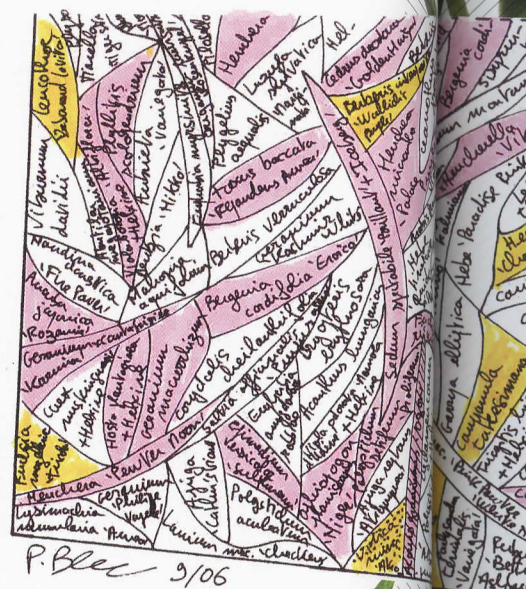
Vertical Gardens

When greenery goes up the wall: Patrick Blanc brings nature back into urban space with his plant walls.

He finds space in the narrowest lanes, on any square encircled by moving traffic, to say nothing of hotels, shops, airports, banks and office blocks. All Patrick Blanc needs so as to bring a piece of nature back into urban living space are walls. The flanks of high-rise buildings, the facades of museums and ministries, concrete monsters such as parking lots or bridges – all vertical planes on which to site vertical gardens. “Murs végétaux” – plant walls – is what the Parisian botanist calls his opulently green upright ensembles. Blanc is the star of “green architecture”, a global player with more than 120 plant walls distributed between Bangkok and New York. The 57-year-old biologist had his elaborate vertical garden system, which thrives without soil, patented as early as 1988, in a fit of youthful prudence, so to speak. Currently, his idea is all the go in the art of gardening and in hybrid architecture. Which is not surprising, given that space and land in urban settings are rare and expensive, and the tendency is on the rise.

The demand caused by the boom in an ecologically-inspired style of building which directly integrates plants into the facades or disperses them on the interior so as to improve the climate and eradicate harmful substances is long since being satisfied by kindred spirits of Blanc's. Varied and copied by landscape architects, garden designers and lifestyle planners, vertical plant constructs are now part of the green non plus ultra on the walls of grey cities. Be they called Vegetalis, GreenWall, Pflanzwand or Wonderwall, they ensure a vertical natural oasis in the most varied of places. While other façade-climbers require soil and tubs, baskets and grids hidden under leaves, Blanc always plants his little creepers without a substrate, in felt made from recycled fibres. His vegetable textures, composed of rhythmically meandering grasses, ferns, mosses and bushes in every possible shade of green as well as cascades of flowering shrubs, transform even 30-metre high walls into three-dimensional nature

Without soil: Patrick Blanc's greenery is rooted in felt

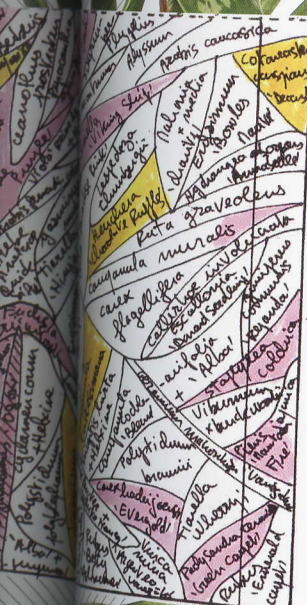


Artistic sketch of a plant for the Caixa Forum in Madrid



Ecological inspiration: Patrick Blanc works with internationally famous architects

Jean Nouvel's Musée Quai Branly in Paris: Blanc covered the 800-square-metre facade with greenery (left)



paintings. In Paris alone, where he works at the national research centre CNRS, Blanc has created three dozen vertical gardens.

The fact that they are relatively rare in Germany may have to do with a tougher climate here. Yet the plant rectangle created in 2008 above the entrance to Galeries Lafayette on Berlin's Friedrichstrasse has braved two cold winters undamaged. According to Blanc, the city of Herten in the Ruhr District is also interested in his work. Should he receive the commission for the "future location" of the former Ewald colliery, it will be the first time for him to harmonize his greet art with the red of the venerable brick facades of this listed mining building. However, Frankfurt am Main could soon become the German capital of Blanc's "murs végétaux": In 2008 he designed a garden wall for the Press Centre of the Frankfurt Fair, stocked mainly with tropical plants of the kind which the botanist, who is passionate and knowledgeable about the tropics, usually uses for interiors. By all accounts a possible involvement of Blanc in the future skyscraper for the European Central Bank in Frankfurt is in its planning stage. The architects office Coop Himmelb(l)au envisage "hanging gardens" for the glass atrium, called the "vertical city", between the two towers. So Europe's lively garden designer could place one of his green vertical milestones here too.

However, a project for Frankfurt's Palmengarten, which is steeped in tradition, represents a unique challenge for the artful greenery man. The idea here is for a tapestry rich in plant species to cover the planned noise protection embankment on the park's north-western border which runs parallel to a heavy traffic artery. In 2011 Blanc intends to transform the first 100 metres into a vertical garden. With the help of this showpiece the director of the Palmengarten, Matthias Jenny, hopes to be able to win over sponsors to finance the expensive project. Ultimately, the "Parisian Botanica" could also set up a new horizontal record with this 1.3 kilometre long "mur végétal" in Frankfurt.////