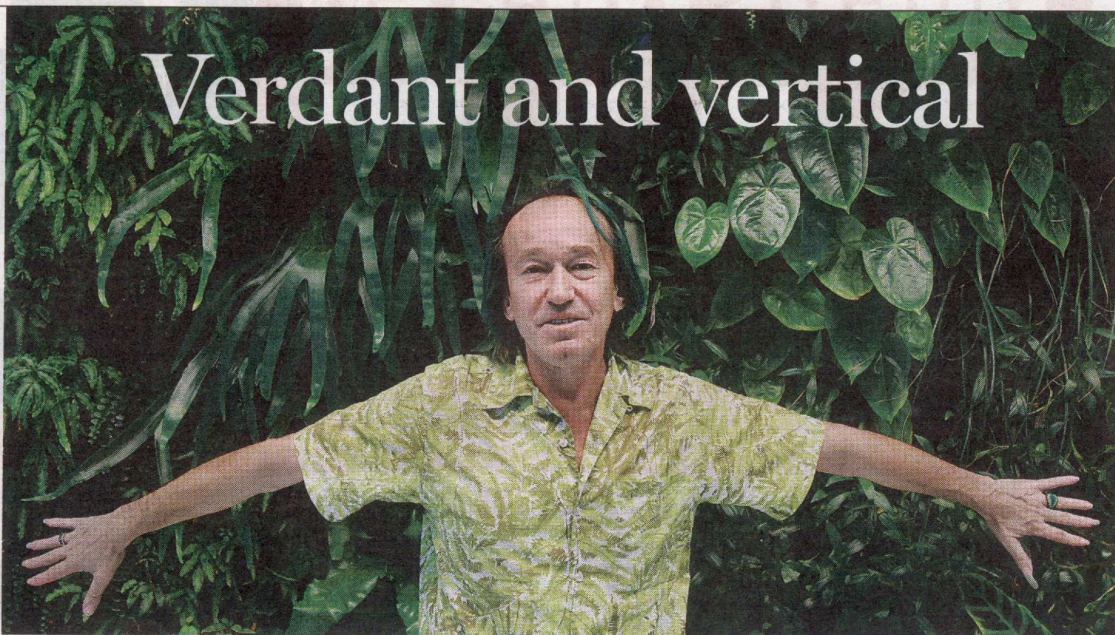


## DESIGN



## Verdant and vertical



CATHERINE KEENAN meets botanist Patrick Blanc, the Frenchman behind the hanging gardens of Broadway.

**T**he display pavilion for the \$2 billion Central Park development on Broadway is a sleek white box, so bright and minimalist that a staff member wears sunglasses inside and it's hard to work out where the door is. It speaks of money and restrained elegance. And there in the middle of it, as unlikely as a baroque chandelier, is Patrick Blanc.

Blanc is the botanist-cum-artist creating the world's tallest vertical garden down the side of Jean Nouvel's landmark residential tower. He's just arrived from France and wears a green botanical-print shirt and orange botanical-print pants. He

has long green hair and wears green glasses and a green ring. Even his phone is green. His fingernails are so long the thumbnail is starting to curl in on itself. His plane landed at 6am and at 10.30am he's jumping around, permanently grinning, like an antic woodland sprite. He's asking for a beer when I arrive. Or white wine. "Or champagne!"

We talk in front of a small, display-sized version of one of his indoor vertical gardens, which will also feature in Nouvel's 1 Central Park building. It's a lush wall of lustrous green leaves and flowers, all sprouting from his patented growing system. His outdoor wall, the big one

stretching 130 metres into the sky, won't look exactly like this one, he explains. Growing conditions outside are not the same. "This one is for the indoor walls, so you see it's only tropical plants," he explains in his thick French accent. "It's very different from outdoor. Because you see, for instance, plants like this or this" – he points to what I think is a philodendron – "outdoor it's too windy."

Blanc, 57, will use up to 40,000 plants on his living walls, from 200 mostly native Australian species. He is the acknowledged master of the "mur vegetal" and has created them around the world: at the Athenaeum Hotel in London, the

Taipei Concert Hall, for a Stella McCartney fashion show and the Quai Branly museum in Paris. Each one is different, in mossy-looking stripes of contrasting greens, like sprouting abstract paintings.

The Quai Branly museum was one of a number of collaborations Blanc and the Pritzker-prize winning Nouvel have done over the past 20 years, starting with the Cartier Foundation in Paris. "It was more like a piece of art at the time, just because it hadn't been done before," says Bertram Beissel, the architect from Nouvel's atelier who is staying in Australia to oversee the Central Park project.

Beissel is French, too, but speaks in a



milder accent and is altogether more serious looking, sporting a crisp white shirt and the sort of interesting glasses that are de rigueur for architects, especially French ones. Beissel obviously loves Blanc's work but that's not the only reason he likes working with him. "It's more fun to have him in these serious meetings," he says. "He's definitely a rebel."

Still, it's Blanc's thorough knowledge of plants that makes his walls possible. He trained as a botanist, works at France's National Centre of Scientific Research and is obviously mad about plants of all kinds. He's just come back from a research trip to Costa Rica, where he spent three weeks studying the growth habits of rainforest species. He overflows with enthusiasm as he waves around the product list of a local nursery he's been dealing with and tells me about brushing up on his knowledge of Australian natives. He's fairly familiar with them, having already done a living wall at the Trio Apartments in Camperdown, another Frasers Property development.

Blanc's growing system is surprisingly simple. It starts with a metallic frame affixed to the wall, over which is stretched a thin sheet of PVC. Stapled to that is a layer of felt and the roots of each plant are lodged into pockets in the felt. An irrigation system delivers all the water and nutrients the plants need. Voila!

Doesn't the wet felt deteriorate over time? "Non," he declares. "I have in my home the oldest parts, from 1982." The system sounds like a strata-fee nightmare but Blanc says his walls are relatively easy and inexpensive to maintain. Two or three times a year, a company from Sydney will scale the walls of 1 Central Park (due for completion in 2013) to replace dead plants and trim as necessary. Indoor walls take a little more care, mostly because people see them up close and notice every dead flower or leaf. "But outdoor, if you have some yellow leaves, it's nature, eh?"

Choosing which plants to put where depends on factors such as the amount of

sun each part of the wall gets and the fact that the wind gets stronger higher up, ruling out anything with big leaves or flowers. There are also artistic considerations. "For instance, the first walls I shall do, close to the street, you can see from quite close, so you can have quite small-scale design. But for the top ones, what you see from the other part of the town, it will be not the same scale of the design."

Does he think of a living wall as a garden, or art? "It's not a garden. It's, ugh, I try to have a piece of nature in the town. You see, for me it's different from a garden because a garden you walk inside. This is much more like a painting, a living painting, or something like that."

Blanc began making his walls by accident. He was 12 and keen on keeping fish when he read in a German magazine that it's good to have a biological filter for the water in an aquarium, as plants suck the excess nitrates out. He decided to try it. "I did take a cutting of philodendron from my mother, in the living room and I did put the root in the water and I did see that it was very well growing like this. So I put more and more plants above the aquarium and, finally, I was more interested about what happened above the aquarium." Eventually, he wanted to pump water from the aquarium up to flow through the roots above, so he got rid of the fish altogether. His vertical garden was born.

He still has those original walls in his home. "I did change home a few times, so I did take patches of the felt with the plants and I did put on another wall in my new home." As well as the walls, his house in Paris now has birds flying around inside. "Yes, yes, yes! Some lizards, some frogs, also. And I have a huge aquarium, the same as when I was 12 years old."

It's six metres by seven metres and 50 centimetres high and he's made a desk out of part of the transparent glass top.

"So when I work I see the fish under my feet," he says. "It's very funny. I'm very happy to have this."

Living walls ... artist's impressions (far left and main) of the 1 Central Park development; Patrick Blanc.

