



**THE VERTICAL GARDEN** at the Athenaeum is just one of more than 140 that Patrick Blanc has constructed worldwide

# GROWING UP

The brand new vertical garden at London’s Athenaeum hotel is not just an aesthetic boon for its concrete surroundings, it does its bit for the environment, too

**FOR MOST HOTEL OWNERS, GREEN** means little more than installing a few solar panels and stocking a kitchen with local produce. But when the proprietors of the Athenaeum hotel in London’s Mayfair began a GBP7 million renovation last autumn, they had a more literal green vision: to convert the building’s eight-storey exterior into a verdant vertical garden. “Although we’re located opposite Green Park, this is a rather grey area of Piccadilly,” says ▶

PHOTO COURTESY THE ATHENAEUM HOTEL

Alison Wheatley, the hotel’s marketing manager. “We wanted to stand out by bringing the park into our building.”

Clearly, this wasn’t a job for a common garden gardener. So the hotel hired living wall pioneer Patrick Blanc, who has planted eco-friendly exteriors everywhere from New York to Seoul. The French botanist and artist has spent 40 years travelling the world, studying plants that grow in soil-free environments such as cliffs and mountainsides. Using that knowledge, he developed a special system that allows these species to thrive on the walls of urban buildings. Blanc begins by attaching metal scaffolding to the exterior, which prevents the vegetation from damaging the building. That frame is coated with PVC and a thick layer of felt made from recycled clothes. Plants are then slotted into holes cut in the felt, and fed by nutrient-enriched water that drips from embedded irrigation pipes.

The construction process may sound simple, but the real skill lies in plant selection. Each of the 260 species – collected by Blanc on journeys to South East Asia, South America and Africa – on the Athenaeum’s exterior has been housed in a spot that best replicates its natural environment. Once planted, the garden requires little maintenance, says project manager Matt Elms, who oversaw the renovation. A gardening team working from a crane cuts back excess growth four times a year. But, says Elms, they don’t need to clean the fabric or plants, as the vegetation naturally breaks down and absorbs pollutants.

Blanc’s wall – completed in May – has transformed the once-drab Athenaeum into a lush, London icon. Passers-by regularly stop and stare up, entranced by the seemingly endless shades of green and brilliant slashes of blue and yellow flowers. But the project hasn’t just beautified the building – it has also upped its eco-credentials. The wall acts as a much-needed haven for birds, bees and butterflies in the otherwise barren cityscape. And, according to project manager Elms, it provides solar shading by absorbing the heat of the sun, reducing the need for in-room air conditioning. The urban jungle is starting to look cleaner and greener.

*Theunis Bates*

## A GROWING TREND



**BARDESSONO, YOUNTVILLE, CALIFORNIA**  
 Californian landscape designer Flora Grubb created four vibrant plant panels for the lobby of this recently opened Napa Valley spa hotel. These living works of art are populated with anemone-like South American tillandsias, which capture all the nutrients and water they need through their leaves.



**PERSHING HALL, PARIS**  
 The 30m-high vertical garden installed by Patrick Blanc in the hotel’s courtyard is a towering, tropical success. Completed in 2001, the wall is home to over 250 types of flora, including many Indian plants such as the yellow flowering Himalayan hedychium gardnerianum (ginger lily).



**RICA TALK HOTEL, STOCKHOLM**  
 Step into the hotel’s restaurant and you might think you’ve been transported to the depths of the Amazon. Swedish landscape architect Michael Hellgren swaddled walls and even covered doors with almost 3,000 plants drawn from 100 species. Thankfully, he didn’t go all out for authenticity: there are no poisonous snakes or mosquitoes.



**QANTAS FIRST LOUNGE, SYDNEY**  
 Working together with famed designer Marc Newson, Blanc lined a 30m strip of the airport lounge with 8,400 plants. The exotic wall has brought nature into the heart of the airport, helping to clean the air and create a calming, pre-flight atmosphere.

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PHOTOS FROM TOP COURTESY BARDESSONO, PERSHING HALL, RICA TALK HOTEL, QANTAS