

For our March webinar, SCHS was pleased to host David Brenner of Habitat Horticulture, a vertical landscaping firm that is a leader in designing world-class living wall systems. Combining high art and science, these non-traditional landscapes are seen by Brenner as an integral part of a public shift in consciousness towards the restorative effect of plants on health and well-being. He frequently speaks on the benefits of living walls in urban architecture and has worked on a wide range of projects, a number of which were showcased during his presentation and used to illustrate the design process used for creating these “living walls.”

Photo courtesy of speaker.



By way of introduction, Brenner spoke briefly about his background which includes a degree in Environmental Horticulture Sciences from California Polytechnic University at San Luis Obispo and studies at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in London. Learning how to best grow plants vertically led to his founding of Habitat Horticulture eleven years ago, where as lead designer Brenner is known for bringing a deep expertise and artistic intent to enhance the sensory and environmental impact of each project. The firm has several offices in Northern California and one in Los Angeles, and through their development of proprietary and durable techniques in vertical landscaping they have become a force in vertical garden design.

While explaining the processes of designing, building and maintaining these installations, Brenner repeatedly emphasized the psychological and physical benefits of plant life in work and living spaces, both psychological and physical. He shared examples of interior and exterior projects to illustrate some of these benefits which range from stress reduction and restorative effects to acoustical dampening and thermal insulation. While many of his commissions are large-scale, Brenner is known to be a dedicated collaborator on residential, commercial and public spaces of any size as he promotes the philosophy that plants are integral to our well-being, especially in urban settings.

He shared the design process of assessing a space for its functionality and purpose, to considering suitable plant palettes and how the installation would be maintained. Addressing these factors establishes parameters for increased success in any landscape design regardless of the location. From there, aesthetic decisions regarding color, texture, shape, size and how the design will blend with its surroundings can be considered much the same as in traditional landscapes. Brenner's expertise with growing mediums and plant species interaction have led to his work with clients ranging from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Hammer Museum in L.A., to Facebook Cafe, Del Amo Fashion Center, Cal Poly Vista Grande, and residences in both northern and southern California.



“Living Wall” at SFMOMA Photo by: Garry Belinsky

Brenner used SFMOMA's living wall installation as a case study to illustrate a number of design considerations that can impact the final layout, plant palette, etc. The wall is on the third floor terrace, facing southwest, but during most of the day many sections are in the shade of nearby architectural features. Based on available light, he determined the wall would have to be divided into four light regions. He then based his selections on plant companions and communities found in nature that were suitable for each region. Textures, colors, and even the reflective light qualities of foliage were factors in the selection process. Brenner then drew a chalk outline once the wall was covered in GroTex (the proprietary growing fabric used by his firm) to designate where the different plants would be installed, while keeping in mind that the wall is visible from many angles, heights and vantage points. In addition to the GroTex base, a site-specific irrigation system is critical to any vertical landscape, and at SFMOMA this included a waterproofing membrane, an irrigation catch basin with a special drain pipe, and more. Additionally, fail-safes with remote monitoring had to be built to protect the landscape from any unexpected system

failures. And finally, scheduled maintenance had to occur routinely to groom the plants, replace specimens as needed, and to keep the integrity of the original design. These and other factors, plus budget and client expectations, make designing each project unique, and Brenner noted that different systems available commercially should be assessed/selected to fit the conditions of each individual project.

In conclusion, he shared a selection of systems which might be appropriate for a novice to experiment with, including Habitat Horticulture's wall-mounted Gromeo pods which are self-watering and available with or without plants. Regardless of the scale of an installation, Brenner's belief that living walls afford the chance to promote awareness of plants' benefits and to have a direct impact on our quality of life was evident from the many beautiful examples he shared in this unique presentation. The Q&A that followed also made it clear what an intriguing topic vertical landscaping is, and that the webinar inspired a number of attendees to consider trying their hand at creating a living wall of their own.

To see more examples of Brenner's designs (including several in Los Angeles), and learn more about the topic, you can visit: www.habitathorticulture.com.

✎ Sabine Steinmetz

SCHS MONTHLY GARDEN SHARE

Let's all hope for April showers as we do the following:

- Continue planting herbs and warm season veggies
- Monitor pests, and abate using least intrusive IPM methods first
- Begin routine dead-heading of roses & other repeat bloomers
- Get fruit trees on a feeding schedule during active growth
- Finish mulching before soil temperatures begin heating up
- Adjust irrigation based on needs

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