benefits of living walls in urban architecture

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design process used for creating these

“living walls.”

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

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.

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

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

Sabine Steinmetz

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