

# VERDANT BY DESIGN

Architect Huy Bui's Plant-in City synthesizes architecture and technology with vegetation to create micro-ecosystems that can revolutionize the way we live, work and play.

BY SHONQUIS MORENO

**He used to be a banker.** Now Huy Bui makes his living mixing nature with nurture and art with design. Bui left the financial world in 2003 to study architecture at Parsons and, later, co-found Plant-in City, a practice that integrates architecture, technology and plants, inspired by Archigram's influential 1964 concept *Plug-in City*. Bui builds interconnected micro-ecosystems of plantings and terrariums that stack and suspend, forming sculptural structures that turn residential, public and work areas into green spaces.

Bui's spring was fertile. In mid April, at New York design gallery Patrick Parrish, he presented 64 brass-framed wooden objects that stack into rolling landscapes or stand alone, part of an ongoing project called *Geological Frame*, studying how humans shape and perceive the landscape of the Earth. "We are approaching a very precarious time," Bui says. "Some call it the Great Acceleration, which started when population growth, technology and urbanization began to grow exponentially at the expense of the environment. My response to this environmental crisis is my design work."

Bui, 41, was born in Paris to Vietnamese parents, who moved to Virginia a year later. His mother held a post at The World Bank, his father is a banker, and Bui worked in real estate for four years.

Plant-in City was born in 2012 with architect Jon Schramm and Carlos J. Gómez De Llarena, a graduate of the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University. "We wanted a mobile idea to suit the chaotic and unstable nature of the city," he remembers, so they started with a lightbox frame containing a potted plant and began to add technology, initially to automate the irrigation process. Soon de Llarena was tapping an open-source electronic prototyping platform called Arduino to create the sounds of a "digital forest" to accompany a large-scale installation.

In June, Bui's installations for the Storefront for Art and Architecture's benefit gala in the Eero Saarinen TWA terminal introduced a fast, scalable, flexible solution called *Beyond 0*, a scaffolding system assembled within hours from off-the-shelf steel gas plumbing pipe and slip-fit connections with existing Plant-in City terrariums, houseplants, an Arduino-based environmental control, irrigation and doors repurposed as surfaces. It will later become an easy-to-assemble prefab jungle gym, garden, studio, storage, lab, microhouse, bar and/or lounge system that he wants to make available, open-source, to the public.

Today, the components are being tested at the Lowline Lab in Manhattan, a subterranean project that links city, nature and technology. Bui is also turning *Geological Frame* into furniture to show in Parrish's Design Miami booth in December.



Bui with his installation at JFK's Eero Saarinen TWA terminal.