

SISTER PACT



Landscape architect Enzo Enea's friendship with his Cistercian landladies has helped establish his "Tree Museum" – and inspired an installation at this year's Art Basel.
By Victoria Woodcock

Photography by Beat Schweizer

Above: Enzo Enea with Sister Andrea and Abbess Monika at Kloster Mariazell. Right: Enea's Tree Museum, with an in-house water feature alongside sculptures and juniper, pine, maple and magnolia trees

This is what we've done for many hundreds of years," says Abbess Monika Thumm, the head of Kloster Mariazell – a convent on the postcard-pretty north shore of Lake Zurich. She is explaining how her Catholic order of Cistercian nuns place a bean in a box to cast their vote when making decisions. "White is yes and black is no," adds fellow nun Sister Andrea Fux, opening the drawer that reveals the outcome. "Every monastery has a box like this." Each result is duly archived.

Fifteen years ago, the voting method was called upon when the community was approached about leasing a neighbouring piece of land to Italian landscape architect Enzo Enea. The bean count tipped to "yes," recalls Abbess Monika, a sprightly 70-year-old, who joined the convent in 1984. "We were very enthusiastic about his proposal. It's a beautiful use of the land." The nuns welcomed their "green neighbour".



Enea and his landladies have since struck up a charmingly harmonious relationship – one of friendship and collaboration. When the convent church was renovated in 2010-2011, for instance, Enea redesigned the gardens, which are both pretty and easy to maintain, producing a steady flow of cut flowers, herbs to make teas and tinctures, and fruit for jams – jars of which are sold by Enea. Of the convent's head gardener, Sister Ruth, Enea exclaims: "She's great. She's my friend."

But signing the initial 99-year-lease required a leap of faith for Enea. "It was pretty much a swamp," he recalls of the land that he set about draining by planting trees – specifically *Taxodium distichum*, or bald cypress, a species native to the American south. "I invested and I built, and I hoped and I prayed that it would work."

In this, "Enea is a little bit like a monk," suggests Sister Andrea, explaining that when the order of the Cistercians was founded in France in 1098, "the monks were very close to nature. They reclaimed and cultivated wastelands, and had methods to drain swampland." Today, the 7.5-hectare plot is approached along a driveway lined by the statuesque bald cypresses, opening onto a lush landscape. The space supports 3,300 trees and houses Enea's workshops and design offices, clustered around a sleek, glass-clad showroom. The business employs some 240 people and the team has created private gardens from Basel to Bogotá – for clients that include Tina Turner and Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, wife of the King of Bahrain – as well as hotel projects such as the Mandarin Oriental in Beverly Hills and the Peninsula properties in Istanbul and London.

Enea, who trained as an industrial designer before turning to gardens, is known for combining a flair for planting mature trees with technical knowhow, particularly when tackling challenging garden spaces such as rooftops. Other facets of the Enea universe, however, are more personal. Firstly, there's his collection of old pots. "Some are Roman, 2,000 years old, others are Greek and Turkish. That's a Medici original," he points out, signalling two large outdoor storage racks. "They were all collected by my father in the '60s and '70s," he continues, explaining how his father's business manufacturing, importing and trading outdoor plant pots in sandstone and terracotta was the starting point for his own landscaping career.

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Perhaps most importantly, though, there are his hoard of "trees that people would have cut down and thrown away", he says pointing to a red-leafed Japanese Maple, rescued from a nearby building project. "Replanting old trees is our speciality. It's very difficult to do. You have to dig down by hand, so you can see exactly which root is doing what, and then cut them in a certain way." His method is based on the bonsai technique, scaled-up to mature trees and using a mycelium fungus to encourage new networks to grow between the roots. The impetus is ecological: "If you cut down a 200-year-old tree you have to replant 2,000 new ones to produce the same amount of oxygen."

Fifty of Enea's finest rescue specimens, each at least 100 years old, are brought together in his Tree Museum – a distinct space delineated with Palladian gateposts (salvaged by his father) and hedges of yew. The latter is symbolic for Enea: "The Celts and the Romans wrapped the bodies of their kings in yew when they died, and it's also used in chemotherapy – it's a transition plant between life and death." It's a mirror to the state of humanity today, he says. "Here, I am showing what could keep us alive. The most important thing is oxygen. I want to make people think about the nature that we've lost and how we need to get back in balance."

This balance is partially quantifiable. “We are also a laboratory here,” adds Enea, whose tree-populated estate has its own microclimate, recently measured by drone studies in partnership with the Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences in the nearby town of Rapperswil to be four or five degrees cooler than the surrounding area. But the Tree Museum is also profoundly poetic. “The first tree you see is the wild apple – in one more day there will be blossom, boom – and then the second is a wild cherry.” Some of the trees are “framed” with sandstone slabs (leftovers from his father’s pot-making business) and an orangery wall from a French chateau (courtesy of Sotheby’s) will bloom with roses this month.

There are artworks dotted around too: from a trio of high-gloss mushroom sculptures by Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury to brightly coloured beehives by German conceptual artist Olaf Nicolai, which stand alongside functioning beehives. “I am looking for art that helps me to find a dialogue with nature,” Enea explains. The Ugo Rondinone stone-slab stack of a sculpture, meanwhile, is a nod to his neighbours – one of a series titled *nuns + monks*. “He showed us a picture of the nun sculptures on his phone and asked us what we thought; whether he should buy one,” says Sister Andrea. “We said, ‘Why not!’”

In many ways, walking across the road to the Kloster Mariazell is like stepping back in time. The building dates back to the 13th century and the sound of ringing bells fills the air – they are fastened around the necks of a herd of goats. Inside the church, Sister Andrea starts to sing, demonstrating the room’s enviable acoustics. It gives me goosebumps. “Can you imagine nuns living here 800 years ago, surrounded only by forest and wolves?” Enea adds as an encore. “How they have created this way of life in connection with nature, staying true to their beliefs until death. I see myself as an extension of some of their beliefs.”

But the Sisters are far from isolated from the world. They post as @klostermariazell on Instagram, have just published the book *Meinst du mich, Gott?* (Do you mean me, God?) and run an online boutique. They are



A sandstone structure in the Tree Museum. Left: the view of the convent garden from the church.



also hosting refugees from Ukraine, as well as running what they call the Time Out programme – a sort of working retreat for people who “need to take some time to look at their lives and what direction they are going in”, explains Abbess Monika. “They can stay here for €100 a month; they pray with us and work three days a week,” continues Sister Andrea, adding that daily tasks include baking bread, making candles and gardening. “Working in nature, getting their hands dirty in the soil, it grounds them,” adds Abbess Monika. “The feedback we get is that it really helps – that they’ve found their way.”

One of Enea’s team helps with the gardening part of the programme at the convent. And over at Enea HQ, former Time Out participant Dominik is now employed in his practice. Enea is currently conspiring with his landladies to expand this holistic offering. “We don’t know exactly what direction we’re going to go in yet,” he says, referring to the burgeoning concept of creating a Future Skills Academy.

“Enea is someone that has a vision,” says Abbess Monika. “I admire his ability to go beyond the superficial and delve a little bit deeper into the meaning of things. This is something that connects the two of us.” Another connection is their trees; the Kloster Mariazell has recently handed over an area of first-growth forest to the local forestry to create a nature reserve. “It’s a biodiversity project for scientific monitoring,” says Abbess Monika. “New mosses, very rare lichens are growing and insects are returning. They’ve discovered beetles that have never been seen before in Switzerland.”

Later this month, Enea will bring his vision to Art Basel (from 15 to 18 June), creating an installation of trees in the fair’s central courtyard. “We have built Treetopia – a forest of the future, and a vision of what could be,” he says. “It shows how green spaces can be integrated into the most urban design and argues that we need to save trees in order to save ourselves.” Among the art-world hubbub, it will be a space for quiet contemplation. Sister Andrea approves: “Just taking time, when everything happens so quickly, frees the mind. It’s so important.” ■ HTSI

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Top, from left: Sister Andrea, abbess Monika and Enea. Above: preparing a tree for transportation at Enea’s headquarters