

Natural Accents: Reinterpreting Nature's Objects Indoors

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Introduction

The dialogue between interior and exterior spaces reveals a fragmented perception of our environment. For many Americans the “best nature” lives on digital screensavers, posters or in photos. Our culture has commodified the idea of nature into a pristine landscape. Conventional human architecture and interior design separates those who face economic hardships and those who are privileged. Those fortunate are able to view the “best nature” through big windows in their homes or in person on expensive trips while those less fortunate experience everyday life with objects we deem dirty such as cockroaches, mold and dirt. If we lack appreciation of the ecosystem’s evidence around us currently, how can we be stewards for the planet we inhabit? *Natural Accents* escalates the meaning of natural elements such as dust and bugs that we perceive as unkempt in interior environments, in the form of home accents such as wallpaper, rugs and lighting. These objects invite further intrigue into the fragmented relationship many of us have with nature indoors and outdoors.

Dialogue between interiors and exteriors

Human structures delineate interiors and exteriors. This distinction translates into our understanding of items that belong inside and outside. The new “best” environment could be one that integrates interiors and exteriors to reveal the impact of human structures on environmental perception. One gallery example of our disconnection to the environment through product is gallery installation *A Museum of Modern Nature* by Wellcome Collection, a museum/library in London, UK. In this installation visitors brought objects that depicted their relationship with nature. Objects ranged from baby teeth to inhalers and cards, and were displayed alongside wall text that explicated the owner and object relationship. Horticulturist, Alistair Griffith’s object was a Playmobil plastic gardening set. Griffith articulated “I feel our

society needs to reconnect to nature so that we are more mindful that we are nature and are large influencers of nature.”¹ This statement affirms the notion that cultural disconnection from nature extends and emanates through the objects we purchase. The Playmobil gardener reveals the commodified way in which we experience nature. In reality dust, bugs and dirt inside are natural objects that help us build immunity towards the things we cannot see, yet through the interior versus exterior dialogue is viewed as unproductive within our human ecology.

Socioeconomic status and environmental perception

Human architecture and interior design determine the way in which various socioeconomic groups experience the environment. Low income families are economically pressured to dwell with more members of the ecosystem such as bugs and dirt and therefore low rent structures are perceived as being filthy. This in addition to our social presumption that the poor lack skills to provide for themselves and are consequently lesser shows how our environmental dirt and grime is perceived in America. Joakim Eskildsen depicts impoverished living conditions in photo series *American Realities*.² Living conditions like these are not always mentally or physically healthy. One of Eskildsen’s photos depicts Adell White Dog’s burnt mobile home on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation in South Dakota where many families struggle financially. White Dog comments “we lived where the windows were all boarded up on a trailer” and “ I am trying to make things work to keep my family together.”³ White Dog’s family lived closer to the natural elements as a result of socioeconomic status. As intrinsically fundamental nature is to our health and well being there is a line at which the environment and

¹ Wellcome Collection, A Museum of Modern Nature, London, Wellcome Collection Museum and Library, Spring 2017.

² Eskildsen, Joakim and Natasha del Toro. *American Realities*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2014.

³ <https://soundcloud.com/americanrealities/082611-adell>

the interaction with our built structures does become dangerous for us. Relationships with nature are often duplicitous in that nature can both hurt and heal human health.



White Dog used to live in a boarded up trailer on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation with her two grandchildren (shown in strollers) and her two pregnant daughters until there was an electrical fire. Above is what remains of her home. White Dog in an interview about her story responded “that’s what I owned, that’s the only thing I could call home.” Photo: *American Realities*

At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum reside those wealthy enough to enjoy the “best” nature. The wealthy have access to large homes with enormous windows and embark to exotic places seeing snapshots that others can only view in nature documentaries. One example

of high income, nature-centric architecture is *Fallingwater* located in Mill Run Pennsylvania designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. This home formerly inhabited by the Kaufmann family is built atop of a waterfall in a remote and picturesque forest. The tourist website states “the epitome of organic architecture, *Fallingwater’s* design symbolizes the harmony between people and nature.”⁴ This home, designed by a prestigious architect offers the high income perspective of nature; the environment acts as aesthetic inspiration integrated through design not solely from financial necessity akin to White Dog’s experience. Sustainability in our modern time acts as an economic stratifier indicative of someone having a high economic status. This might be how our culture has arrived at the notion that only the rich can afford what nature has to offer or there is a “best” of what nature has to offer only unlocked by affluent populations.



This image taken by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation presents the home perched atop a waterfall on Bear Run.

Photo: Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation

Mental and Physical Environmental Gains

Interior and exterior in terms of human relationships extends beyond the socioeconomic spectrum. The lack of exterior spaces in everyday human life may be depriving humans of

⁴ <https://www.fallingwater.org/history/about-fallingwater/designing-fallingwater/>

stimulation needed to process ideas and for our mental and physical wellbeing. Interaction with exterior environments have been proven to positively affect humans physically and mentally. Nature as a space for mental clarity has been established as remedy for depression, anxiety and stress by numerous influencers including philosopher Aristotle's, president Teddy Roosevelt and writer Henry David Thoreau. "The Nature Fix," a non-fiction work by environmental activist Florence Williams presents personal narrative intermingled with scientific study on the human biological and psychological dependence on nature. America is highlighted as a culture that lacks human connection to nature and in response shows increased rates of depression, anxiety and obesity. Williams recalls a discussion with Japanese physical anthropologist Yoshifumi Miyazaki who states "through our evolution, we've spent 99.9 percent of our time in nature"; therefore, "during everyday life a feeling of comfort can be achieved if our rhythms are synchronized with those of the environment."⁵ If our bodies are tuned to be outdoors but our modern culture lacks the ability to experience the benefits of mental clarity and peace of mind we should utilize natural objects already present. Products derived from nature already present indoors act as a type of environmental reeducation through exposure. One might think the simplest option would be to go outside more, but amidst busy schedules, errands to run and work to accomplish, the exterior environment fades into the background of our day limited to our experience of weather to and from the car. Interior ecosystems have won in our culture, therefore reintroduction to nature in unexpected ways may boost the value we place on environmental objects and our health.

The ability to process natural objects we live with in a new way may benefit the way we think about our environment and judgements toward others based on physical attributes. As little as under 100 years ago humans were taught to construct their own shelter. Technological

⁵ Williams, Florence. *The Nature Fix*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017. (21)

advancement has caused us to lose the ability and skill to build our own homes, a skill that may be critical to how we understand and process the world around us. Animals in nature glean critical information from building their own home. Scientific writer, Joshua Sokal explains the scientific theory of embodied cognition in his article “Thoughts of A Spiderweb.” Embodied cognition is “where cognitive tasks sprawl outside of the brain and into the body.”⁶ One example Sokal uses is orb spiders who use their webs to process objects around them, calculating prey mass, air flow and temperature. For humans the interior has become our form of embodied cognition. Numerous environmental design solutions work to increase viewers’ appreciation of nature from materials derived from nature or are inspired by the “beautiful” elements of nature like sunsets and flowers but do not reintroduce nature as a way to process information. At the core of *Natural Accents* is an ambition that utilizes human embodied cognition through products to revitalize human ability to create and reformulate their ideas about their environment.

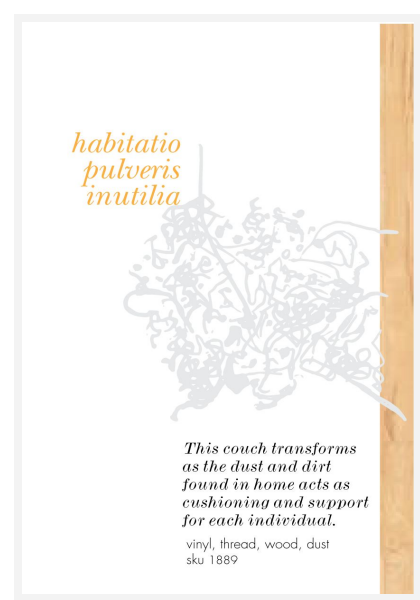
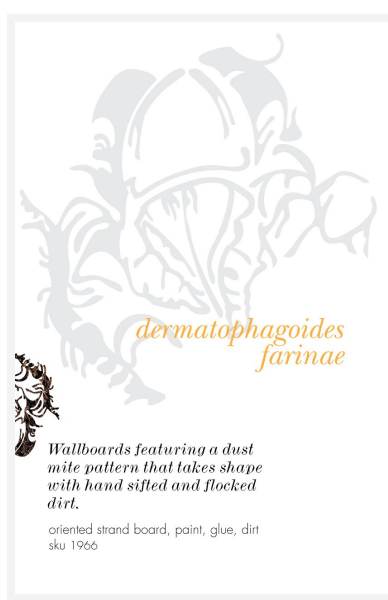
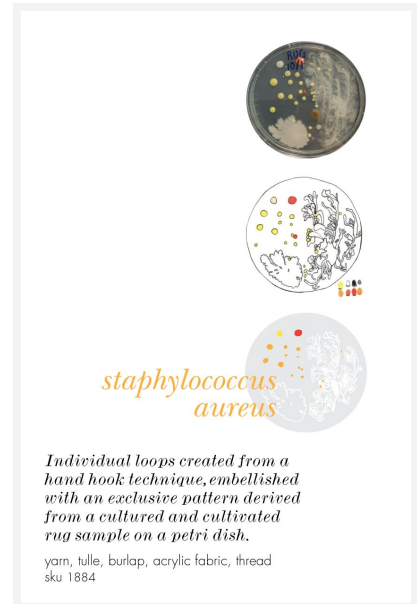
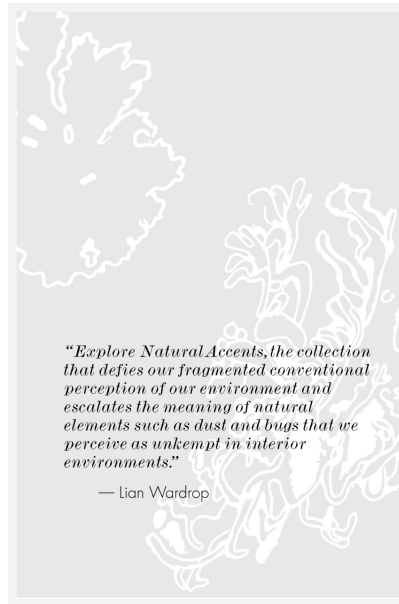
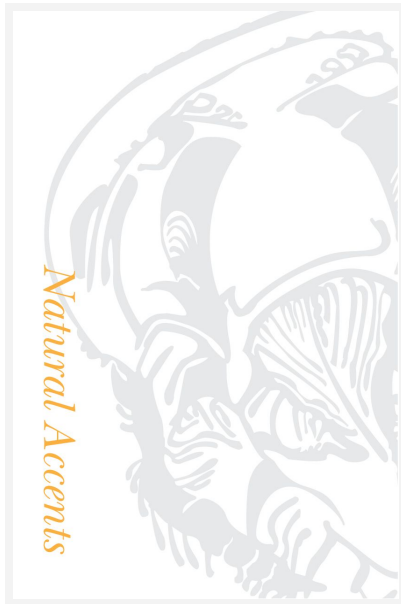
Methodology

At the outset of the project the intellectual goal was to create a middle ground where we can coexist alongside nature and start to understand how the interior spaces we live in affect human nature, culture and society. To pare down, I asked myself broad questions such as: *How do the objects that we buy impact human nature, our culture and society?* and *Can objects motivate cultural change?* Specificity from topics of gender, biology and the environment swayed my products to take on a gendered idea that women are represented both as mother nature and life givers but are often reduced to a housekeeping role. I got stuck interpreting

⁶ Sokal, Joshua. “The Thoughts of a Spiderweb.” *Quanta Magazine*. Last modified May, 23 2017. <https://www.quantamagazine.org/the-thoughts-of-a-spiderweb-20170523/>.

interior spaces in terms of gender and this no longer connected to my original environmental idea. Retraction from that gendered idea of interior space into a socioeconomic space made more sense for what I wanted to accomplish. In doing this, I was able to specify and pare down my intent: Interior furnishings inspired by natural objects deemed unkempt and dirty.

From a purely physical final deliverables standpoint, interior design objects have always been the goal. The way these objects are intended to interact with the space and humans around them has morphed through the process. Reading “The Thoughts of a Spiderweb” by Joshua Sokal I learned that the way animals build structures impacts the way they think about their broader environment. This was a metaphor for how I wanted the objects I was building to impact their viewers. The objects could have been more interactive with their owners where the owners could build upon or rearrange the structure that exists. I also thought about how the objects could interact with the organisms and natural objects that I wanted to highlight. This idea made sense when analyzing the problem in terms of the perspective laid out by Sokal but humans are creatures of habit. The knobs, rugs, chairs, tables, desks, planters, organizers, paintings and mirrors that I was seeing in home catalogue magazines like “West Elm” or “Blue Dot” or “Reformation Hardware” were predetermined by the designer. The designer in this sense had all of the power because they were determinantes of the outcome of the final deliverable. I decided that my objects would tow the line between disgust and fascination with the dirt and grime and dust I was to amplify.



Excerpts from the palm sized gallery pamphlet further explaining each work for viewers to take.

The final works from the project are: *Staphylococcus Aureus*, *Musca Domestica*, *Habitatio Pulveris Inutilia* and *Dermatophagoides Farinae*. All objects were named after the scientific name of the organism that inspired the piece. *Staphylococcus Aureus*, a rug pattern inspired by the petri dish samples that were taken from a rug in the studio is a hand hooked rug

using mesh and yarn on burlap. The material burlap is natural but contrasts with the brilliant and seemingly unnatural colors that the petri dish originally had. This rug is one that is not overly harsh in order to invite further intrigue into the fragmented relationship many of us have with nature indoors and outdoors. From the outset viewers will see that the rug is circular and that hints at its circular petri dish origin. A person with a biological background may be able to gather that it is a work inspired by a petri dish sample but the average person may not be able to without the gallery explanation.



Left: An in progress shot of a mini scale rug and the petri dish sample. Right: The finished rug without trim and not tacked down to a carpet pad.

In comparison with that work, *Dermatophagoides Farinae* are a pair of wallboards that feature a dust mite pattern that takes shape with flocked dirt. This work takes literal dirt as a building material to reveal a microorganism that is not thought of everyday until now. The walls are more literal in that they use the material that is being discussed itself to build and in that dirt has a use inside now. That being said it is hard to visually connect a petri dish to dirt. It has been a learning experience figuring out how to build with some of the objects that I have chosen. That has negatively impacted the way that the objects work together. I believe that the color and

textures of the objects do not successfully work as a whole but conceptually they do. The color, texture and material of the two pieces compared to the smooth clear PVC dust stuffed couch and 3D printed flies on the lampshade are vastly different and could have been more cohesive to fit as a whole.



A detail shot of the wallboards.

Creative Work



The final installation at the Stamps Gallery.

The works themselves were enjoyable and separately connected with the theme of the collection. However, the collection could have been strengthened overall with more works on this theme. The space that I inhabited was somewhere in between a gallery setting and a showroom setting. Ideally, for these pieces to work how they were intended to, viewers would have the chance to purchase multiples and bring them into their own homes.

Conclusion

Interior and exterior space could have more relevance than ever in society. These architectural spaces embody countless ideas that extend beyond class and the environment, yet the environment is an incredibly human entity that we have each constructed for ourselves differently. Our own environments are a physical representation of how we think about what the things we purchase can do for us. Environmentalism currently is construed and miscommunicated through the consumer products that we purchase in order to be more eco friendly. In reality we may not even need those products like. *Natural Accents* is a playful jab to prod consumers and homeowners into thinking about how perceptions of their own environment can lead to broader ideas of socioeconomic status and environmentalism.

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