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How To Love a Houseplant
Yarn, Wood, Denise the Philodendron

When we let nature into our homes, we make environments more hospitable. This is the thesis of my final project. I studied biophilic domestic design and explored how it could trigger a shift towards taking responsibility for the health of our natural environment. My research involved looking at specific mechanical and artistic aspects which make a building biophilic. I did my best to manifest this research in my art by incorporating space for natural light, using naturally occurring materials like wood, and most of all in the creative design, through biomimicry of complicated and organic patterns (think, microbes, cell structures, flower petals, spider webs, ect…). My greatest hope for this piece is that you feel invited by it.

Somehow putting economic value to every tree, animal, and piece of land has made us feel like we can and have a right to control nature. As natural disasters encroach on human life man and earth become opposing forces in the public mind. Any amount of research into this relationship will reveal that humans are not anti-nature and "nature" is not anti-human. Humans are a very small, and important, part of nature– same as any bird or fish.

I chose textile, or "soft" sculpture as the main medium of this project because I feel as if no other medium can make us feel so swaddled. Baby blankets, quilts and hammocks, for example, all have such a powerful capacity for love and memory. The reminder that humans are not biologically wired to abuse natural resources has been a great source of hope for me. I want people to understand that nature, plants, insects and animals all have this same superpower and as they swaddle us in energy and sunlight, it is our responsibility to honor them as fellow earthlings. It seems like a big jump, but the first step is building that relationship. So get a houseplant, learn about it, do the best you can to take care of it, maybe give it a name, and let it swaddle you, it's the beginning of a better world.

How To Love a Houseplant:

The Role of Domestic Architecture and Interior Design in The Environment

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OS50

Writers Note: This paper discusses the intellectual split between humans and our environment present in western culture and how incorporating natural elements in domestic design can rebuild the bridge between humans and nature. I've always been very passionate about climate activism and domestic design so this paper has been an opportunity for me to explain that intersection and stress the importance of participating in your community beyond human-to-human interactions.

I: Why I Love Houseplants

I love my house plants. I really really really do. There are roughly 38 and they all have names. Just off the top of my head, I can remember Janet, Spiro, Antony, Linda, Tuna, Batman, Jamie, Lydia, Fiona, Icarus, Joe, Sophie, Sphen, Tristan, Edward, Cass, Helen, and Lisa. I collect them, I propagate them in tiny glass jars in my bathroom, and I spend my weekends taking care of them. I water. I re-pot it. I research. I even talk to them. When one passes I don't always cry, but I do feel remorse. I pour their dirt and remains back into the plant composting box in the garage, and I do so somberly. I go to my local Whole Foods for one bar of soap and am instantly met with the ethical dilemma of whether or not I should be smart with my time and money at the cost of knowingly ignoring the silent screams of agony coming from the clearance plant rack. If all this sounds ridiculous it's because it absolutely is but you see, I owe my plants a great debt. I'm a middle class teenager who had access to the internet during the pandemic so, of course, I have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression and ADHD. My plants don't care. They need water, sunlight and food. And if they don't get those things, they die (true fact). When they start to

wither and wilt and their roots squirm uncomfortably in their pots, I have to help them. There's simply no time for rotting alive in my crumb filled bed. Shutting curtains isn't a choice because my plants need sunlight. I can't transfer them to larger pots in my room because of the dirt, so, suddenly, I find myself outside of my house, dressed properly, showered, and fed. I love my plants because they love me.

When I've had a bad day, I can still count on that bit of happiness when Sphen, my mopey ZZ plant, shows me the beginnings of a new stock. Sphen is such an inactive grower that at times I wonder if he's actually dead and just hasn't turned brown yet, but then boom: new stock. Sphen is trying to tell me that he's still here and he's trying his hardest to be the best him. When I take my computer off of my lap and pull myself out of bed to go to that corner of my room and give a bit of water to that new stock. Sphen knows that I'm trying my hardest too.

I want everyone to love plants. I want everyone to love arranging and rearranging their plants. I want people to have that kind of interaction and genuine pure care for the things that surround them. I want to design houses that make people feel as if they are something that matters, something needed, and something small enough to make mistakes. The incorporation of biophilic design in the interiors and exteriors of our homes more than any other building, can restore a symbiosis with organic life that has become long abandoned. But what is organic life?

II: What Does “Environmental” Even Mean?

If I type up “organic definition” into Google and it tells me that organic means “relating to or derived from organic matter” am I not wrong to infer that an industrial material like rubber is

organic because latex comes from a tree? Alas, the language barrier between the worlds of design and ecology– the bane of my artist/climate activist existence. The increasingly common use of words like “sustainable”, “natural”, and “organic” has resulted in vague shifting definitions that linger from the original scientific intentions for these words and make them representative of an aesthetic image. The scientific definition of the word “natural” is a descriptor for all things not caused by humankind. However, in the context of interior design, “natural” means dark green paint, big windows, and wooden furniture with the grain exposed. All this is to say that terminology is entirely contextual so the discussion balances two very different contexts and definitions may be misconstrued but assume that these words are being used according to scientific context.

The term “environment” is all too often used in conversation today as a synonym of the words, “ecology” or “nature”. An environment is simply made up of “all external forces and factors to which an organism or aggregate of organisms is actually or potentially responsive” so, not just plants and animals (Jeong, 1997). The reason this is so harmful is that by labeling an environment as separate from ourselves or “non-human”, it becomes its own entity, and the antithesis of everything man-made. Humans and nature are seen as separate and even opposing forces, destined to be enemies. From this exclusionary mislabeling of words like “environment” and “nature”, humans are not only separated from their connections with other life forms, but told that we are indisputably and biologically antagonistic to nature. When people leave conversations about global warming and conservation by saying “well, humans hate the earth and there is nothing we can do about it,” it’s a great failure to take responsibility for our own actions, blaming our laziness regarding the climate crisis on a wired hatefulness towards nature

which does not exist and has never existed. Nothing has done more harm to our environment than the loss of faith in ourselves to participate in it. To believe, as environmentalists, that the existence of humans as a species will means the death of an entire planet, is to believe that, first of all, humans hold the power to wipe out all life on any planet, and second of all, that the need to burn fossil fuels and pollute oceans is somehow wired into our biology. I don't know about you, but I do not wake up with a personal vendetta against biodiverse marine life. In fact, just as you, I find ecosystems to be quite beautiful. Still, as the saying goes, I'm only human. I fully admit to being inefficient with my energy usage, being wasteful with and ungrateful for the things I have been gifted, and participating in a cultural trend which values my comfort over the health and wellbeing of those least able to defend themselves. This “trend” in question goes by the name anthropocentrism.

III: Anthropocentrism and the Greenhouse Effect

Anthropocentrism is a hierarchy of all living things on earth in which humans are placed above every other living thing. Although this is a relatively new word, this concept is nothing short of fundamental in understanding the ideology of Western theology and culture. The earliest assertions of anthropocentrism can be found in the passages of Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”, thus beginning the popular Christian belief that God created humans

with the intentions of them being to all other species as god is to humans (Kuper, 2015). Greek philosopher, Aristotle, often praised as a beacon of logical thinking, expresses anthropocentric views in his text, *On the Soul and Politics* by stating clearly, that "if nature makes nothing in vain, the interference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man" again, framing all animals as god given tools of man which men have every right to exploit (Kuper, 2015).

Aside from western theology and philosophy, western economics too, are held up by anthropocentrism. Adam Smith's notorious text, *Wealth of Nations*, uses the metaphor of an invisible hand to characterize the benefits which Smith argues will come to an free-market capitalist economic model with no government interference. The general idea of the invisible hand is that if individuals are left to buy and sell whatever they want in the name of their individual self-interest, competition between producers will result in affordability and an increase in the quality of goods. Though theoretically, this system seems reasonably functional, it fails to take the health of the environment into account and relies heavily on the unscientific assumption that resources are endlessly abundant because the social environment at the time pushed this as an undisputed reality. In Smith's economics model "trees become lumber, wilderness becomes privatized and converted to farms, animals and insects become pests, and the land becomes something to conquer." The environment is no longer for the health and wellbeing of all living things, but rather for the profit and use of man (Kuper, 2015).

Today, anthropocentrism has manifested as resource depletion, overfishing, and carbon emissions resulting from the burning of fossil fuels. When we burn fossil fuels to get energy for our industrial world, we are burning carbon which has been trapped in the terrestrial surface and buried in sediment over millions of years (Sommer, 2016). When this carbon is burnt, it

combines with oxygen in the air and carbon dioxide and water vapor are released into the atmosphere. Although it is far from the only greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide is the most abundant, accounting for 80% of all greenhouse gasses, primarily coming from the burning of fossil fuels (Foster, 2024). Greenhouse gasses like carbon dioxide and water vapor absorb radiation from the sun which has bounced off of the earth's surface and trap heat in the atmosphere. Global warming, and extreme temperatures most often affect the most vulnerable and least responsible individuals across the entire animal community (homosapiens included). The reason polar bears have become such mascots of climate activism is because they are so directly affected by abnormally warm temperatures, relying on stable sea ice as their only means of staying afloat while they hunt seals. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “if a turtle's eggs incubate below 27.7° Celsius (81.86° Fahrenheit), the turtle hatchlings will be male. If the eggs incubate above 31° Celsius (88.8° Fahrenheit), however, the hatchlings will be female” (Sullivan, 2017). Therefore, even small shifts in temperature can significantly decrease the likelihood that sea turtles of opposite sexes will mate and produce offspring.

Humans too, are not exempt from the consequences of anthropocentric economics. Climate refugees are people who have been forced out of their homes after intense climate change has made their environments uninhabitable. Climate emigrants are more often than not, farmers and fishermen from rural areas, and when pushed into more urban environments, they have to very quickly adjust. Climate immigrants have to navigate legal challenges, potential language barriers, and cultural shifts. As anthropocentrism persists, so does displacement, “The International Red Cross estimates that there are more environmental refugees than political

refugees fleeing from wars and other conflicts" (Boudreau et al., 2024). The true cost of fossil fuels makes our laziness to seek out alternative energy sources indisputably unethical.

IV: Minimalist Aesthetics in Interior Design

As humanity faces the consequences of acting according to anthropocentric values it becomes abundantly clear that free-market capitalism is not a system which diverse ecosystems can thrive under. Following the pattern of individual interest over environmental contribution, our homes have become anthropocentric. The class systems built around wealth and feudalism tell us that bigger, well heated houses with more things in them give someone higher status. As a result, expansion and luxury take priority in architecture. Air conditioning and heating systems take a sizable amount of energy to run properly and the bigger the house, the more climate there is to control, not to mention the amount of unnecessary land clearing that must occur to build these houses (Zografos, 2019).

That said, I still believe that our environment is important to us because I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't. Over the last five or so years there has been a rising trend of aesthetics, the philosophy of beauty, art and creation. I'm using "trend" very loosely here because to curate your entire wardrobe, house, and public presence to fit within a tight set of rules about shape, color, and material, you have to be very wealthy, so clearly that hobby is not accessible for the majority of people. One of the most popular of these aesthetics amongst the ultra wealthy is minimalism, or, stripping your possessions down only to what adds the most value. The

minimalist aesthetic uses a neutral color palette, simple geometric shapes, and absolutely no patterns or nonfunctional detail. The irony of this aesthetic being most popular with billionaires is that it is never applied to the land they own. No matter how few colors, patterns, or details you include in the interior of a house, that house still sits on multiple acres of private property, 95% of which these people aren't going to even see (much less, need), in their day-to-day life. The other irony of minimalism as an expensive aesthetic is that historically, it's very contradictory to traditional images of wealth. The cost of colorful pigments, extravagant detailed paintings, and materials like gold and marble have made them status symbols for many years, so why the sudden shift?

The answer is relatability and public image. As public opinion of the ultra-rich shifts with an increase in education about unethical practices, and headlines like “Taylor Swift Threatening Lawsuit for Private Jet Emission Tracking” are read, billionaires begin to get the message that the richer you look, the less people will like you (May, 2024). So minimalism is a defense. Youtube videos of millionaire celebrities giving the cameraman a tour of a minimalist mansion are made to flash a message in the viewer's head, “look how little I have, I'm just like you!” It's strategic, and cold, and deeply sad to me. The false minimalism of high class design means that these people are still participating in consumerism, still buying more than they need, but of objects with (I'm gonna say it this is my paper) no artistic value. If you’re gonna do consumerism at least have some taste, add some color. Minimalist aesthetics are meant to simplify and make the homeowner feel less overwhelmed by the clashing saturation of the outside world, but when applied to a house that's ten times bigger than it needs to be, the irony festers in the cold corners of these empty concrete mansions.

We need a balance. We need homes with few, meaningful objects, and which take every given opportunity to give back to the organic environment and, in the process give us more appreciation for the intricacies of non-human structures. Our houses need to be more biophilic. The term “Biophilia”, popularized in 1984 by biologist Edward O. Wilson, is “an adaptive love of life-forms and life-like processes … in humans” which Wilson claimed was a primitive result of natural selection (Joye, De Block 2011). Humans who love their environment are likely to survive the challenges that environment may pose, at least long enough to produce offspring. Biophilic design aims to trigger that love for nature which is hardwired into us, it reminds us of where we came from, and what we owe to those natural elements. If natural resources are a gift, then biophilic design is a mother nagging you to write a thank you note. So what happens when we apply biophilia and biophilic design to our homes? Is it at all possible to create homes that aren’t anthropocentric?

V: The Power of Biophilic Design in Houses

Biophilic architecture and interior design has a specific ability to make a homeowner lose that desire to control organic nature and embrace being a part of it. The first and most obvious strategy that architects and interior designers use to induce biophilia in the homeowner, is real, living greenery. Green roofs, vines, and, yes, houseplants demand that they be recognized, maintained, and cared for, but the sense of purpose they give to the homeowner makes the relationship a symbiotic one (Joye, 2011).

The second strategy is biomimicry, or mimicking organic life in design. Although this approach is certainly more abstract, it should not be underestimated. Elaborate fractal patterns inspired by nature highlight its unpredictable beauty and leave a great deal of room for color, cultural input, personal, artistic taste. Smooth flowing surfaces and aversion of edges and corners give houses a very unique and organic feel and can camouflage them within their environments (Joye, 2011). This style also highlights the uncommon flexibility of sustainable clay building materials like adobe, which insulates houses in warmer climates, and is so easily accessible that it can be made locally and by hand. It is most common to witness biomimicry when looking at the use and placement of glass in a building. Obviously windows aren't just something you stumble upon when you hike, but they mimic the absence of walls between you and the outside world without sacrificing comfort or insulation. The use of windows in domestic architectural design gives the people in the home a good sense of aesthetic congruence between the outdoors and the indoor environment (Ziff, 2004).

A popular example of this is Phillip Johnson's notable "Glass House" in New Canaan, Connecticut. The house's exterior, of course, is made almost entirely out of glass pains with a metal frame to hold them up and although there are no actual residence, it provokes anyone who's been in it to ask about the benefactors of transparency (Melchionne, 1998). We close ourselves off to so much in the name of privacy, do we not lose our own connections to our natural surroundings and our communities? When our houses become a spectacle, we want them to look their best uncluttered, uncomplicated, and natural. Tidying and organization thus becomes somewhat of an art. Any homeowner spending hours adding and subtracting furniture and decorative ornaments room for an audience of houseguests is

no different from any painter who spends hours adding and subtracting pain on a canvas for an audience of critics. Large windows which frame a malleable image of the outdoors fuse the exterior environment with the interior and therefore part of our art work (Melchionne, 1998) . We become obligated to tidy it and thus extend love and curation beyond what inhabits our human environments, our homes, and what towards what inhabits our exterior environment, animals, plants, and our community. The incorporation of glass and windows is also a matter of natural lighting, which, when solely relied on for illumination, becomes an essential part of the space. Natural lighting too, goes hand and hand with real plants within the house and thus, these two approaches to biophilic architecture feed into each other.

A great example of successful biophilic architecture and interior design is Michael Reynolds's Earthships. Intended to be used by off-gridders, these "earthships" make their occupants entirely self-sustainable. The Earthship website explains that, for a house to be considered an earthship it must be built out of natural and recycled materials, harvest food and clean water, use passive heating and cooling, be powered solely through solar and wind energy, and have a contained system for sewage treatment. Regarding design, the houses are heavily naturally lit, and made from adobe. Exposed wood and round, colorful, glass windows bring in the organic patterns of woodgrain and water droplets. This model is truly innovative in its capability to welcome organic life into human spaces and adapt as if the home itself were a plant or animal.

VI: Conclusion

By considering organic nature in the make and design of something so personally and culturally significant as our homes, we gain more appreciation for other organic life, and consider less anthropocentric views of environments and heighten our sense of responsibility in the wellbeing of our environment. Moving forward, my hopes for biophilic design are that it is not gate kept from urban spaces. While researching for this project, I found it frustrating to see so few examples of affordable biophilic design applied to apartment buildings. Environmental justice is something that affects all of us and therefore all of us should have the right to fight for the regulation of our climate. That being said, the materials of biophilic design are often sustainable because they are abundant and universally local, so there's certainly something to be said about the power of educating homeowners about biophilic design. I also hope that biophilic design continues to make its way in office buildings, schools, and anywhere possible because the more natural elements we let into our spaces, the more natural our spaces become, and the more responsibility we take in the health of our environment. Our homes are far from the only things we need to change if we want our species to survive extreme climate change, and the capitalist model is a major hindrance to that, but if can make our homes welcoming and cohesive with the natural environment as individuals, we can replicate that action on a much grander scale as a species, making our human environments more welcoming and fulfill our duty as earthly beings. It starts with building that relationship with nature, in your home. It starts with houseplants.

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