Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior

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The discipline of design history, which emerged in the UK in the 1970s, combines the study of visual and material culture with social history and, unlike art history, focuses on banal objects. Since the 1990s that has been supplemented by the study of interiors which, usually, contain assemblages of artefacts situated within designed spaces. By expanding that focus to the engagement of designed objects and interior spaces with nature, this essay pushes design historical scholarship yet one step further.

The subject of plants and flowers being brought indoors has, to date, been absent from interiors scholarship. However, in the contemporary context, it has increasingly come to the fore both as a fashionable pursuit for millennials in their homes (which grew exponentially during the Covid lockdowns) and as a large-scale phenomenon in many commercial buildings (fig. 1). Popular accounts of these phenomena have focused on the role played by bringing plants and flowers inside in maintaining mental health and in healing the rift between human beings and the natural world that has been caused by the former’s over-exploitation of the latter. That lack of respect for nature, the authors of the accounts have explained, is the cause of many of our environmental problems, especially climate change.

Fig. 1 The indoor roof garden at Crossrail Place, Canary Wharf, London, designed by Foster and Partners, 2015.
Driven by the expanding availability of exotic plants – Kentia palms from Norfolk Island in the South Pacific, and the cheaper indigenous ferns among them – and the sense of loss that was incurred by people leaving their lives in the countryside – “nature inside” became a hugely popular aspect of the interior décor of the Victorian home. It softened architectural frames, lightened heavy furniture, provided elegance and refinement, acted as screens, and added colour, texture, and scent. (fig. 5) It also helped to introduce children to the laws of science and post-Enlightenment rational thought, as well as playing a part in the self-improvement of adults.

Perhaps the most important symbolic meaning of domesticated plants and flowers at that time, however, derived from the
widespread Christian belief that nature was made by God himself and was therefore inherently ‘good’. Very importantly also, domesticated nature was seen as therapeutic, both in the sense that many people needed to negotiate new relationships with both the pre-industrial past and the modern industrial present and future, and because living nature could act as a companion to those who needed it. The apprehension and fear of raw nature’s power was, in the domestic context, replaced by a belief that nature had a calming effect on the soul. The advice book author, Shirley Hibberd, believed that nature inside was a source “of rest, and solace, and refreshment”.

In addition, anticipating ideas that were to become widespread in the early 21st century, the author of a 1898 book explained that indoor plants, ‘preserve the purity of the air by removing the poisonous gas evolved by animals and the combustion of hydrocarbons and maintain the equilibrium of nature’.

Given the gendered (as feminine) nature of the Victorian middle-class home nature inside took on that gendered meaning and
inside had largely lost its religious symbolism and its educational role. These were replaced by a new, primarily aesthetic, function which was to underpin architects’ and designers’ spatial strategies, especially in creating the porosity between inside and outside that was so central to the modernists’ vision for their buildings. The softness of plants also provided a strong visual contrast to the otherwise cold appearance of steel and concrete.

A vestigial domesticity remained in place in some of those interiors, however. Nowhere was that more apparent than in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Villa Tugendhat, built in Brno in 1929–30. Not only do archive pictures show many plants and flowers in the spaces of that dwelling, a large conservatory filled with plants also flanked the entire eastern side of the building (fig. 9). To date, despite its size and its visual prominence in many of the images taken of the open plan first floor of the building, the conservatory has received practically no mention in existing accounts of the villa, most of which stress its technological inventiveness instead.

The sense of calm, recognised by Hibberd and others, that nature inside brought with it, and the safe atmosphere of feminine domesticity that it represented, proved the ideal means of attracting people (especially women) into the public arena and encouraging them to spend money.

The Victorians’ love of indoor gardening is widely documented, especially in the vast numbers of domestic advice books that were published at that time. A greater challenge to the design historian is presented by the overt rejection of Victorianism, and of the inward looking interior, that emerged in the early 20th century with the advent of modernist architecture and design. If nature inside was a key component of domesticity, did it survive the shift in design that, at least in theory, no longer embraced that concept? Despite their absence in the accounts of modernist dwellings, many examples of modernist buildings did contain plants and flowers. Examples included designs by Hans Sharoun, Walter Gropius, Group 7 (fig. 8), Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto and many others. However, very often palms and ferns had been replaced by cacti and other sculptural plants. Also, that new version of nature inside had largely lost its religious symbolism and its educational role. These were replaced by a new, primarily aesthetic, function which was to underpin architects’ and designers’ spatial strategies, especially in creating the porosity between inside and outside that was so central to the modernists’ vision for their buildings. The softness of plants also provided a strong visual contrast to the otherwise cold appearance of steel and concrete.

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As one entered the villa, at the top of the staircase leading to the floor below, a complex set of planes, surfaces, forms, materials, and spaces converged with each other. To add to that complexity, one of the internal, chromed steel-covered columns passed through the midst of that convergence. The meeting point of the horizontal floor, which stopped sharply at a right angle as the stairwell fell away beneath it, and the vertical column, was made even more complex by its proximity to the end point of the glazed drum and the presence of a rail, made of two horizontal rows of steel bars, which acted as a protection from the otherwise open stairwell. An early photograph depicted a potted maple strategically placed on the floor at the point at which all those elements met, softening the hard geometry and materials it neighboured (fig. 10). Also, arguably, it provided a visual resolution, or perhaps a distraction, to the spatial complexity of the combination of verticals, horizontals, curves, straight lines, masses and voids, and the multiple materials that came together at that point.

Did the photographer of the maple feel it was a photogenic requirement? Or did a member of the Tugendhat family feel that it provided a picturesque punctuation mark that was needed in that specific location? On one level, given that interiors are always the result of the work of multiple agents, those questions are irrelevant. What is important, rather, is to recognise its primarily formal function in that architectural and interior setting. Not only did the maple reinforce the spatial strategies at play, it also added texture, colour and decoration to the interior. It also brought a level of conventional domesticity into that otherwise technologically progressive space.

In post-war USA – especially as demonstrated by the mid-century modern houses that were built on the West coast in the years after 1945 – architectural and design modernism and the natural world became increasingly closely aligned. The warm temperate climate of that location permitted the inside/outside obsession of modernist...
architects to become a reality rather than a dream. Plants and flowers were used to realise it. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Case-Study houses, especially Case-study house 8, designed by Charles and Ray Eames. (fig. 11) Plants were added around the perimeter of the house to blur the boundary between inside and outside, while, inside, they performed a similar role by taking the eye from the inside outwards. The photographer, Julius Shulman, emphasised this strategy in the images he created of the interior of the house in which plants both framed them and took the eye into the distance. Other case-study houses either planted nature directly into internal beds dug directly into the earth (fig. 12) or placed them strategically to emphasise distinct areas in otherwise open spaces.

While nature played a key role in many west coast modernist domestic spaces, it also defined a new kind of public interior that accompanied the expansion of corporate capitalism in America at that time.
This took the form of dramatic planting schemes in hospitality interiors, shopping malls, and office and hotel atria, among other large-scale spaces. Its presence in these commercial spaces echoed the way they were used in 19th-century exhibition halls and palm courts, that is, consumers were made to feel relaxed and willing to part with their money. Examples include the Four Seasons Restaurant in NY; the NorthPark shopping Center in Dallas (fig. 13); and the indoor garden at the Ford Foundation Building in NY (fig. 14). The scale of these constructions required the combined skills of architects, landscape architects and horticulturists. However, a new multi-skilled professional specialist also joined the team, known as an interior landscaper, a plantscaper or an interior-scapery. One of the pioneers in this field, Everett Conklin, worked on both the Four Seasons and the Ford Foundation building garden.

The Hyatt Regency Hotel in Atlanta opened in 1967. Although the hotel was heavily criticised at the time for being inward-looking, the way in which nature inside was incorporated as part of the overall design marks it out as extremely innovative. Its architect, John Portman, cleverly created an interior atrium space that was simultaneously a living room and a city. While the former was reinforced by pots of yellow chrysanthemums, seating positioned for conversations, and low lighting, the latter was defined by the inclusion of fully grown Australian umbrella trees; quarry tiles on the floor; and the addition of lifts which looked as if they were outside rather than inside.

When the hotel opened 110 philodendrons cascaded down from each floor. That number grew significantly over time. The idea of using them was envisaged from the moment of the conception of the building and modular concrete structures used for the balconies outside the guest rooms were specially designed to accommodate them. As well as adding colour the philodendrons also provided texture and a strong sense of movement that contrasted with the static concrete structure of the atrium’s frame.

In the early 21st century, the rate of the expansion in interiorscaping accelerated once again. It became a global rather than just a US/European phenomenon at that time and, thanks to a vast body of scientific research that was undertaken by environmental psychologists and others, the benefits to human beings of plants and flowers in inside space were widely articulated. It was increasingly used in commercial spaces to enhance productivity and consumption. Also, at that time, interiorscaping became a huge international industry and its popular symbolism became linked to the widespread interest in environmentalism.

Nature inside’s therapeutic capacity to calm people by restoring their links with the rural past, and of improving interior...
environments physically, both of which had been first recognised in the 19th century were acknowledged once again in the early 21st century. Arguably, the religious function that it had performed in that earlier century was replaced by many people – architects and designers among them – signing up to the concept of “biophilia”. The psychologist, Erich Fromm, had first used the term in his 1964 book, The Heart of Man, where he defined biophilia as a “psychological orientation of being attracted to all that is alive and vital”. Everett Conklin had published an influential article in 1972, in which he outlined the idea that man was genetically programmed to be near green, growing plants.

In 1984 Edward O. Wilson published a book, Biophilia, in which, like Conklin before him, the author articulated an evolutionary approach, defining biophilia as “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes”. He realised that, “we only think we have control” of nature, thereby recognising the importance of the agency of the natural world and the need for human beings to re-establish a balanced relationship with it. Along with Stephen Kellert, Wilson was one of the editors of The Biophilia Hypothesis, a book of essays, published in 1993. The hypothesis was now formulated as “a human dependence on nature that extends far beyond the simple issues of material and physical sustenance to encompass, as well, the human craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and

Fig. 14 Fountain in indoor garden of Ford Foundation Building, 320 East 43rd Street, New York, designed by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, with Dan Kiley as the landscape architect and Ernest Conklin as the interior landscaper, 1968.
and their associated microorganisms”, he wrote, “it should be obvious that when he attempts to isolate himself in tightly sealed buildings away from this ecological system, problems will arise.”

Bringing nature inside is undoubtedly here to stay for the foreseeable future and architects and interiors designers will be working with plantscapers and horticulturists to facilitate many of the future’s green interiors for some time to come. A design historical exploration of some of the different ways in which it has worked in the past hopefully assists an understanding of the ways in which, to date, human beings have

however, by others who invoke the physical benefits of nature inside, a fact that was already understood by the Victorians. The subject came to a head in the wake of the 1989 publication of a report for NASA by Bill Wolverton who, back in 1973 had found that Sky Lab 3 had been contaminated with more than three hundred volatile organic chemicals. Wolverton discovered that certain species of plants – peace lilies, areca palms, lady palms, fig trees and the golden pothos among them – were effective air purifiers. “Since man’s existence on Earth depends upon a life support system involving an intricate relationship with plants

even spiritual meaning and satisfaction”. Biophilia, it was suggested, was rooted in learning that had taken place in the past and still existed in people who had lived in urban environments for several generations. The satisfaction of their craving for nature, it was implied, led to a state of psychological well-being, a reduction in stress levels, and the promotion of physical health.

In the early 2000s, the concept of biophilia is embraced very widely. Not only is it invoked by architects, designers and plantscapers, it is also used by the developers of offices and large commercial spaces (figs. 15, 16 and 17). It is paralleled, and their associated microorganisms”, he wrote, “it should be obvious that when he attempts to isolate himself in tightly sealed buildings away from this ecological system, problems will arise.”

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continually exploited nature to their own ends, whether to improve the quality of their lives, or, more cynically, for economic profit. Knowledge of that exploitation will hopefully help future perpetrators of the act of bringing plants and flowers into interior spaces to do as sensitively and with as much respect for nature as possible.

Notes:
1. Design history emerged in the UK in the 1970s. The need for it arose from design students wanting to be taught the history of their discipline, and it was pioneered by scholars in the fields of art history, architectural history and social history who sought to stretch the edges of their disciplines.
5. Domesticity, and the accompanying idea of the "domestic interior", first emerged in 17th-century Netherlands but reached new heights in 19th-century Britain where it represented a refuge from the world of work.
6. Examples of modernist houses that contained plants included Hans Sharoun’s Villa Schminke of 1933; Walter Gropius’s Zuckerhandl house of 1929; Group 7’s Electric House of 1930; and Marcel Breuer's Erwin Piscator apartment of 1928.
9. Ibid., p. 10.
13. Ibid., p. 18.

Fig. 17 Green wall created by Biotecture in the Anthropologie fashion store, Regent Street, London, 2009.