

COMMUNICATION FUTURES  
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# PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS



ISSUE 01

HOW CAN WE USE BIOPHILIC  
DESIGN TO PROMOTE A CONNECTION  
BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE THROUGH  
THE REKINDLING OF OUR PRIMITIVE  
INSTINCTS?

NAOMI MCGUIRE  
INTERIOR & ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN





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# MEET YOUR INNER CHILD



It is difficult in the modern-day Western world simply to exist without purpose; we are tested on our academic abilities from a young age, our minds are jammed with paperwork and emails, and after an adulthood based around working eventually we quit the nine-to-five and take a well-deserved break because we have exhausted ourselves. It's the convention and play simply doesn't squeeze into our tightly packed schedules. Play doesn't have a purpose, a goal or a reason – and that's precisely why it is so important.

We are quick to think of building blocks, park playgrounds and children when the word 'play' is mentioned. The word itself holds more weight than we may consciously realise, so we substitute it for 'recreational' or 'leisure', at fear of sounding immature. But to play is a primitive instinct without which humans most likely wouldn't exist. As adults, we cope through constant, rigid labelling and cataloguing of the objects and patterns we see. It's the way we read spaces, and it draws us closer to the resolutions we crave. In other species, play is a ritualistic part of survival. But where jungles are housing estates and deserts are offices, the pressure to play doesn't exist in the same manner as it once did, and we tend to forget about it.

Bringing play into workspaces is an idea that has skyrocketed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether to endear employees and help them to take breaks, or as part of a publicity stunt, many of the world's biggest corporations have turned their backs on monotonous offices for a more unconventional style of workspace. The Swiss Google Headquarters in Zurich features a slide and a fireman's pole so you can choose how you want to travel between levels of the building. The Pixar Animation Studios in California offer playful little sheds for its animators to work in, allowing them to spin dreams into movies by putting themselves in a

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kid's shoes. As we grow up, we refine and thus become increasingly restrained when brainstorming ideas, according to designer Tim Brown. In his 2008 TED Talk, the former chair of global design company IDEO set up a task for his audience in which each member was asked to complete a 30 second drawing of their neighbour. He considered how architect Charles Follen McKim received the same results when asking the same of his students: embarrassment, vulnerability, and fear of exposure. *"This fear is what causes us to be conservative in our thinking."* Brown observed, amused and unsurprised at the reaction he received. The beauty of childhood is existing without this form of self-doubt and living without sensitivity to the opinions of others. The most assured children play with a strong sense of freedom, their minds clear of fear. This is why we make mistakes so often as children, from which we learn. But somewhere along the way, we begin to believe that making mistakes is not only wrong, but shameful. We keep our cards close



to our chests, growing afraid to raise our hands in class and stop speaking up for ourselves. Children have so much to lose with their bold opinions and unfailing honesty, yet we can be so quick to undervalue their behaviour.

Author Marjatta Kalliala describes this as “*the marginalised child*”, the choice to focus on a child’s dependence and intense spirit of character. When it’s played up, this wedges a gap between the perceived thinking styles of adults and children, when it’s actually healthy to acknowledge the overlap in terms of our creative thinking. It’s a device that allows us to easily take for granted the boldness we all once had as children and generalise childlike behaviour as incorrect. Judgement allows a chasm between intelligence and play to grow and compels the repression of thoughts, emotions, and impulses in adults. Whilst chewing with your mouth open and wailing like a baby may not help you to prosper, it is important for adults to gain a connection with their inner child’s courage and to an extent, nurture it. There are of course places dedicated solely to play for adults – skateparks, ice rinks and nightclubs to name a few. These foster our childlike energy and provide us with space to release our emotions, yet these spaces feel highly artificial, and are often plain ugly. Can playscapes not be attractive for adults

to take them seriously or are aesthetics simply forgotten? Whether it’s Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum’s spiralling ramp that offers a new means of travelling through a gallery, or Ricardo Bofill’s splashes of colour to concrete, there are buildings to prove that playful doesn’t need to mean kitsch. The spaces we inhabit daily have been built for home, work or consumerism. Money is of the utmost priority and play is an afterthought. One end of the spectrum shows dull, grey cubicle

TOP : La Muralla Roja  
Lee, P.C. (2018)  
BOTTOM : Català: Muralia Roja,  
Joanbanojo (2015)



play etches itself deeply into our memories for a good reason: it is the only known activity that humans engage in solely because it produces joy.

– INGRID FETELL LEE

offices stretching for miles under strip lights, and the other that of the Pixar Studios and Google Headquarters, Zurich. But even the slides and sheds look like add-ons and lack aesthetic quality. At times we forget that we are natives to the concept of play; colours, beauty and shape are magnetic to our being, so much so, that designer Ingrid Fetell Lee embarked on creating her blog The Aesthetics of Joy, detailing the small ways in which we can bring joy into our lives not just for occasions, but every day. In 2018, Fetell Lee released her first book, *Joyful*. She wrote “*Play etches itself deeply into our memories for a good reason: it is the only known activity that humans engage in solely because it produces joy.*” Whilst eating and sex can count as recreational, they each offer other uses – food sustains us, while sex can lead to procreation. Work can be a form of release, but usually for the objective of aspirations or money. Play is the only activity without an underlying goal relating to ‘real life’ – perhaps we do need to take

it a little seriously. Fetell Lee’s philosophy of play is as simple as using what we already have. It’s accessible joy for the masses.

Our biology determines that while we receive a psychologically negative reaction to the sight of sharp and straight-edged objects, curved shapes like circles and spheres are naturally pleasing to the eye and help us to relax – a reality confirmed when you consider the lack of angles in nature. The danger alerts in our brain pulsate and try to fathom the sharp corners – most likely a primitive human survival mechanism. In contrast, there is a particular allure to the translucent sphere of a dandelion, the shimmering full moon and the rings formed by water droplets on a pond. The mild visual impact of circles and their never-ending outlines allow us to indefinitely trace the shape when we see it in the way a child might.

#### LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS

Infancy is for watching, repeating, trying and testing, and there is a unique beauty in having dedicated headspace to do this before our decisions are tainted by judgement and apprehension. There is nowhere better to let the show unfold than in the great outdoors, where children can test their perception of space and navigate playtime through their movements. Whilst



most schools offer metal skeletal playground climbing frames that allow for the development of walking and acrobatics alike, they simply can't match the sensory stimulation of organic surroundings. The quirky and exaggerated buildings of artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser are characterised by organic, curvaceous structures, lush greenery, and a rebellion against corners. His famously childlike style of painting transfers to the three dimensional beautifully, surveying buildings not as machines much like Le Corbusier did, but instead as playgrounds. They are strikingly eccentric; bursts of colour, mismatching windows, columns like strings of beads and a checkerboard facade define the mammoth sculpture of Rogner-Bad Blumau Spa in Austria, once narrated as 'the largest inhabitable total work of art'. Guests of the hotel can walk out onto the green rooftop gardens and view the surrounding

landscape, or dip into the spa's thermal baths. Hundertwasser's wish to unify site and surrounding kept him content in his work and his attention to detail created a quality of setting akin to that of the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. It's easy to get lost in Hundertwasser's technicolour storybook in a way that the corporate nature of that of Google and Pixar can't match. From square one the architect cooperated with nature and play; it's the foundation of the design rather than the afterthought.

Product designer Cas Holman shares the same attitude. Her first product Geemo, a toy that blends organic form into play, made it into the MoMA's Design Store back in 2006. Geemo is unconventional and a dramatic departure from mainstream children's toys, to say the least. The highly abstract, flesh-like tendencies of Geemo were inspired by the structure



of bone marrow at a time when Holman was highly influenced by the patterns that appear in the natural world. There are no rights nor wrongs when playing with Geemo and the toy allows children to play freely, and to enjoy open-ended playtime and freedom from making mistakes. Further, the decision to make a plain white product is unorthodox in children's toy design. In an episode of Netflix's Abstract: The Art of Design, Holman explains that children aren't so naïve as to need to be bombarded with colour and caricatures and they immediately take to the beautiful simplicity of something so strangely organic. One piece of Geemo after the other builds and builds to create a single structure reminiscent of a microscopic view of bone marrow. It's plastic as you've never seen it before. Simple but sophisticated, it allows children to easily interact with something akin to nature's rhythms and formations, not for function, but for fun. There's

something very endearing about Geemo, yet it is almost comical – perhaps because we are seeing the fabrication of an object that we would never naturally see in such high resolution, or the concept of a child playing with bone marrow, except it now wiggles, hangs and droops playfully rather than making your stomach churn. It could so easily be vulgar, but instead it is delightful.

Whilst much of the way we judge objects and spaces can be placed on individuality, it is worth considering the extent to which the coding of the human mind is influenced by evolution, impacting mankind, or genetics, impacting individuals. An affinity with nature runs hot through our veins, but why?

#### THE LAWS OF ATTRACTION

In an interview with Nature Science journal, David Deutsch relayed his opinion that both objectivity and

LEFT : The facade of this building in Rogner Bad Blumau, was modelled on the Kunsthaus museum in Vienna – also designed by Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Hence its German name “Kunsthhaus” (“Art house”) Intentionalart (2008)

ABOVE : Cas Holman's Search for the Ideal Playground Netflix (2019)





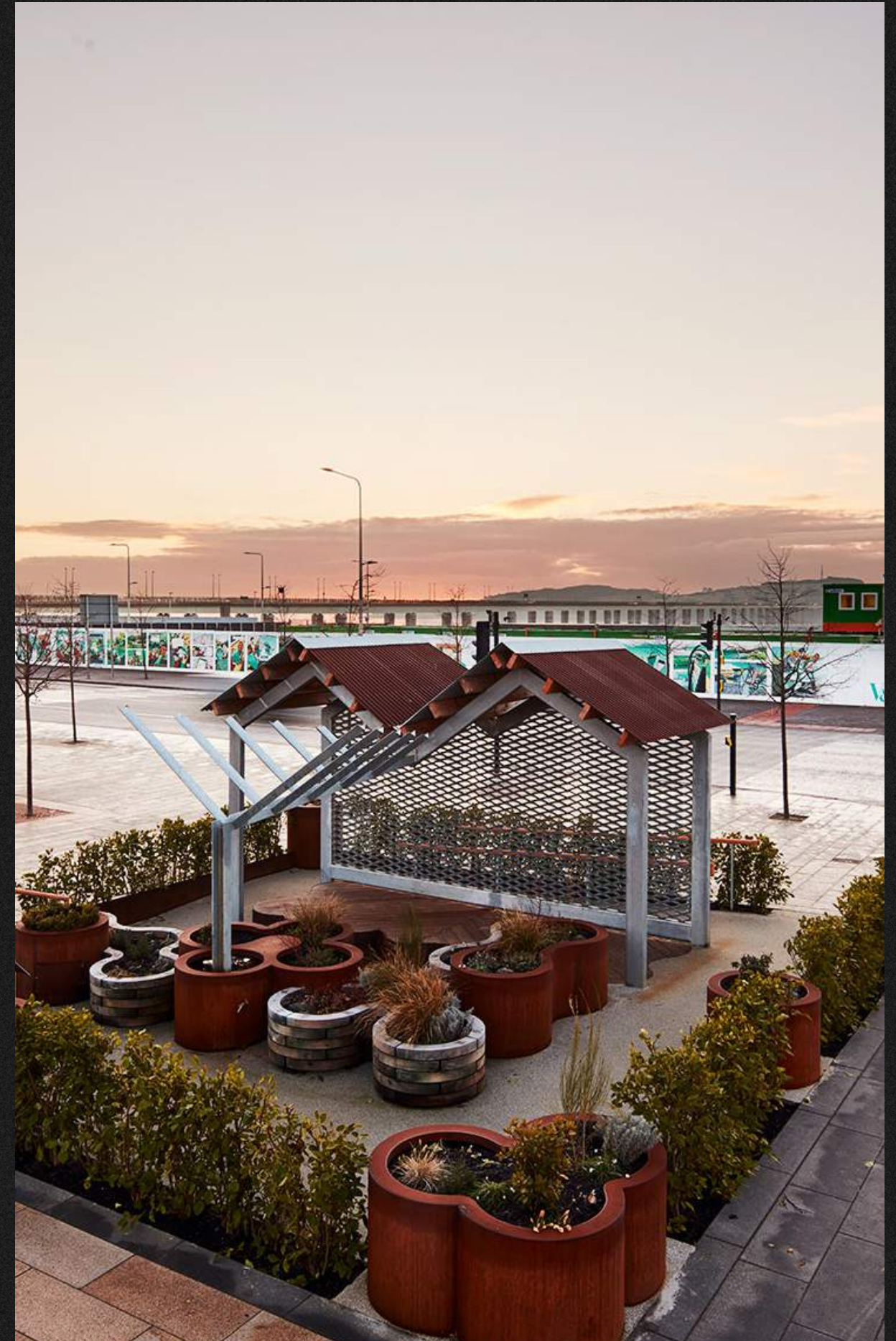
subjectivity play a role in our perception of beauty. Whilst personal preference can be malleable, that is to say dependent on the subject, there is evolutionary evidence to suggest that objects which are widely agreed to be aesthetically pleasing are branded as beautiful as a mark of the years of adaptation and shape-shifting planet Earth has endured. Beauty isn't mere decoration, it's purpose too; flowers, for example, are beautiful as a result of attention-seeking survival tactics. Their survival relies wholly on a fluorescent declaration of beauty, without which they wouldn't attract bees. Deutsch concludes that humans must be programmed to perceive natural, organic beauty is beautiful for the same reason that  $1+1=2$ . Subjective attraction is belief, objective attraction is truth.

In contrast, philosopher Holmes Rolston believes beauty is completely subjective, claiming that there is instead parallels between morality and beauty. Animals cannot distinguish what is beautiful from what's ugly in the same way that they cannot disentangle good from bad. Nature is unprincipled and pragmatic, and functions for the sake of upholding its own system rather than for beauty, although function tends rests on aesthetics. The swirling patterns of Verner Panton's Phantasy Landscape are exemplar of natural philosophy. Panton's signature psychedelic

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style forms the seating for which the sculpture was made, and he proves that playfulness need not be an afterthought. The designer once said *"One sits more comfortably on a colour that one likes."*

Whilst the concept of play isn't wholly ignored in spatial design, the designers of today must endeavour to meld play into our 'everyday' buildings to help us to achieve wellness. The natural aesthetic is psychologically healthier for mankind than that offered by many existing buildings in the 21st Century Western world, yet we settle to be surrounded by desaturated chunks of stone and concrete. By integrating ourselves into the natural world through spatial design, we effortlessly educate inhabitants to respect our planet, and improve our health in the process. ♦





BELOW : New York City Waterfalls. Waterfall in foreground is under Brooklyn Bridge. The bridge in the background is the Manhattan Bridge (2008)  
Americasroof

In the age of the #stayhome movement, we've allowed ourselves more time than ever before to ponder our domestic living principles and for some, the first time to begin to appreciate the wonders a walk in the park can do for one's health. Exercise and socialising used to be squashed into our diaries, but we now cling to the next available appointment of normality out of fear that before too long, the rug will be pulled from under our feet. The pandemic of 2020-21 has seen an unprecedented mass retreat of our population into their homes and has highlighted just how stubborn human nature can be when rules are made. 'Home' itself once symbolised comfort and stability,

but now can feel akin to a prison, because roaming free is no longer an option. It's not novel anymore, instead it's ground zero or square one, forcing us to reflect on the power of our spaces while we stare at a wall. COVID-19 may not discriminate, but lockdown certainly does, and it's the wealthy who by and large are able to insulate themselves from the worst of it. Rekindling freedom in our souls is an impossible goal when you can't afford the space to do it in. But tapping into our primitive instincts of survival in small ways is more easily achievable than one might think. Let's turn up the volume on the natural world and let it enhance our emotional proximity to it, and each other.

## SHIFTING THE FOCUS

Danish artist and architect Olafur Eliasson founded his Berlin studio in 1995, and it is a play-scape for experimentation and prototyping with his team of artists. *"I love my studio being exciting and magical and capable of doing things that otherwise would be hard to do, because we just play a lot. It's not rational, it's not pragmatic, I mean it's about making art."* The ethereal nature of Eliasson's work doesn't lull us into a dreamy slumber but rather magnifies reality and defines human scale - and there's something very comforting about it. As part of a series of spatial interventions, one of his

few artists would have the confidence to do. The natural world is his blank canvas, and we are the paint that makes it art. It is about people as much as 'it', whatever it may be. Eliasson once said himself, *"There's nobody in the room; there's also no art."* Whilst his media is organic and reflective of the textures of our planet, Eliasson's art is human-orientated and inspires connection between friends and strangers alike. It shows something bigger than us and a glimpse of a new perspective we perhaps could have taken more easily, once upon a time. His work doesn't emphasise fabrication as much as a simple arrangement of what was already there, right beneath our noses.

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- OLAFUR ELIASSON

New York City Waterfalls (2008), was situated under the Brooklyn Bridge. Onlookers could view it from afar and begin to understand the scale of the bridge by noticing the rate at which the water would fall from the underside of the bridge into the East River. Something as simple as the pace of running water allows us to tune into the scale of our surroundings and our proximity to one another within them, physically and metaphorically. Eliasson places perspective on what matters, working with a magnitude that

## TRANSACTIONAL HAPPINESS

While in modern day society we are forced to rely on the government and mass market economy for our survival essentials, in the past we could rely on our planet to provide for us. The value of our possessions never determined the fresh food, clean water, healthcare or means of shelter we could obtain - it seems mad doesn't it? Survival wasn't a lonely task; nomadic communities were bound together by the innate principle that we are social beings, something which has changed very little down the timeline of evolution. But take the same necessity for survival, community and resources, and add the daily grind, suburbia and its cash-strapped inhab-





itants and life becomes a whole new ball game. Survival is no longer your job – you buy how healthy you want to be, how happy you want to be. It is true that money can't buy you joy, but does living in a 10-storey complex with small windows and no heating allow for much joy? We take what we're given in a game of luck with little space to budge.

### COME TOGETHER

In 2017, freelance designer Linsey McIntosh worked with V&A Dundee, Kennedytwaddle and the local community to help create the V&A Dundee Community Garden in the centre of Dundee. The V&A Dundee, which didn't open until the following year, was imagined by its architect Kengo Kuma as “a living room for the city”, inspiring the Slessor Gardens co-design project to work loosely around the theme of the potting shed, a concept that imitates the indulgence of escapism, even if it's at the bottom of your garden. The Scottish Design Award-winning project took inspiration from the materials of Dundee's City Road allotments to give the space a homespun feel, whilst the motive of co-design followed through, allowing a community to come together and feel involved in something which remains today on the doorstep to the city centre. The design itself mimics many elements of organic pattern, from the angular pipes that imitate leaves catching water thus allowing the droplets to filter down their metal stems to

the roots of the city garden, to the curved formations of the plant pots that can be seen from an aerial view. The project lives on through its biophilic element and members of the team continue to visit and nurture the garden so its plants can thrive. McIntosh described the community-driven powerhouse that defined the project's success: “It was something that we achieved together as a team and we all had a kind of positive experience with that. I guess that the team can take pride in it and say ‘I was part of that’ and ‘I did that’ and ‘I designed that’ and that's so important for people to be able to do that.”

we have become involuntary prisoners of architecture, without even gardens to play in. It is unfortunate to be trapped in stacked boxes and viewless homes yet it is somehow still acceptable by UK government standards.

Projects like the V&A Dundee Community Garden show the importance of community-built spaces and the power of taking pride in one's dwelling. We have become involuntary pris-

oners of architecture, without even gardens to play in. It is unfortunate to be trapped in stacked boxes and viewless homes yet it is somehow still acceptable by UK government standards. Our lives are constructed in a spatially different way to how they once were, many years ago, so it unsurprisingly can impact one's perspective on life. It has become a choice to live peacefully, but worse than that, it has become a privilege too.

### SELF-CARE

The Guardian columnist Dean Burnett criticised writer and activist Mark Boyle in 2017 for expressing his ideological reverie of abandoning modern life, claiming that it's a “privileged fantasy”. To have the money to take a holiday away from the city you live in and switch off

your phone, to buy organic food, to test age-old diets in the search for spiritual experiences or to reject the gym for yoga retreats, are all options but only possible with time and money. Self-care is a movement on the rise but is commonly mistaken for marketable experiences and products that can't really self-help. In an era dominated by social media, we are increasingly obsessed with the surface impression of our lifestyles, more than our emotional wellbeing which lies beneath. People may be sooner judged by their highlights reel than in person whilst others strive to do good for how it looks, not how it feels. The primitive instincts within us can't be bought or sold and they take time and thought to tap into, nevertheless they exist within all of us. That's not to say the rustic out-of-doors lifestyle



BELOW : V&A Dundee Community Garden Co-Design Workshop at University Of Dundee Botanic Garden Kennedy, G. (n.d.)



is for everyone – there are plenty who would sooner get cosy by the fire than head for the woods, but these instincts don't actually have to be as literal as stepping outside in the first place.

### CIRCADIAN RITUALS

The powers of experiences like wild camping can be brought into our homes and bring us the comforts of nature without needing to move into a tent. Traditional Japanese domestic architecture, for example, often features a Kotatsu, a low table designed to be sat at on the floor, and sometimes a fire pit, even indoors. Humans are heat seeking missiles and are programmed to be hypnotised by flickering fires, watching the flames burst and wither for hours on end. Meik Wiking, author of *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well* agrees. He writes “No recipe for hygge is complete without candles. When Danes are asked what they most associate with hygge, an overwhelming 85 per cent will mention candles.” The Danish design movement dedicated to pure warmth and cosiness can only be described with a single unique word that has soared in popularity in recent years. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 we have been forced to spend more time at home whether we like it or not. Cabin fever has struck and is just as deadly as the virus.

The increasing need for comfort in our homes is for the purpose of sanity

and our means of shelter concerns our survival as much as it once did for our stone age ancestors. Indeed, the threats may be a little different, but just as hazardous all the same. The importance of fire was given homage through the myth Prometheus, who stole fire from the Greek Gods to give it to humans. It is a deadly weapon and a celebrated element of survival that marks the beginning of the timeline of technology. We naturally associate fire with life – past humans used it for a source of warmth and light and to cook food upon. Life, to a large extent, had to rotate around its power, so it is unsurprising that within us lives the instinct to let it nurture us. Back to 2020, and online companies like Amazon and Wayfair have thrived during the pandemic, benefitting from people as they desperately rearrange their furniture or seek gratification with other consumer goods. A survey taken the same year showed that more than two thirds of young people (aged between 13 and 24) suffered new mental health struggles during lockdown. And who do you think was Amazon's most loyal market during the pandemic?

### INSTINCTUAL HEALING

Frank Gehry's design of the Maggie's Centre in Dundee showcases a contemporary take on an old rural Scottish dwelling, the But'n'Ben. The inspiration for each Maggie's cancer care centre rests upon the emphasis on heal-

the millennial obsession with self-care has allowed the concept to be stripped of its true definition.

”

ing spaces and connecting the indoors with the outdoors. Gehry, like other Maggie's architects, was hand-picked for the project to create a “home from home”, somewhere warm and non-clinical for visitors to seek sanctuary in and appreciate the surrounding landscape. The influence of historic Scottish architecture unlocks our intrinsic desire to get inside and get cosy, more than we might feel when entering a standard domestic household. As the Maggie's Architectural Brief puts it “Coming in means accepting that you have cancer. People won't come in if they feel intimidated. We have to make it as easy as possible.” The centre is more than a

building – it's a support system. It is welcome to everyone and anyone dealing with a cancer diagnosis including the friends and family with links to the situation. The interior comfort speaks volumes to those who use the space, providing an indispensable experience, even if it is a small step on a big journey.

While lighting some candles may be considered accessible décor enhancement for the masses, in terms of comfort it is a drop in the ocean. The millennial obsession with self-care has allowed the concept to be stripped of its true definition – instead our screens are bursting with face mask advertisements and we've been led to believe that we can buy our way to joy. Anyone may choose to tap into the wild instincts they conceal within themselves but with projects like the V&A Dundee Community Garden and the Maggie's Centres, we allow for accessible connection with these instincts and true inclusion within the communities they create. ♦

BELOW : Maggie's centre, Ninewells, Dundee, UK, Frank Gehry designed building Ydam (2006)





## A SYSTEM FOR

# HUMANITY



Whilst revered as an innovative style of modern design, biomimicry exposes many issues of practicality that shine a bright light on Western ignorance. The word biomimicry describes naturally inspired solutions to our design problems that are provided by mimicking elements of nature. In the UK, our efforts to connect with nature through architecture have often been futile, for they have lacked the spiritual understanding required to connect deeply with our landscape. Designers cannot pick-and-choose from natural systems, for it isolates natural intelligence in an urban environment where it will wither and die, in the same way you might try to force a piece of a puzzle into the wrong jigsaw. Sustainable development teachings in the UK are based on Westernisation, allowing us to believe that we have a grasp of nature, the ultimate wisdom, when in fact this wisdom can only be gained through years of loyalty to natural surroundings. It is time to give credit where credit is due and look to other societies in the places where we have failed ourselves.

### DEATH TO EFFICIENCY

Reintegrating oneself into nature is a technique known as bio-participation, allowing ourselves to become a part of natural chains and systems whereby we understand our reliance on nature whilst it bares no reliance on us in return. Loyalty to traditions and

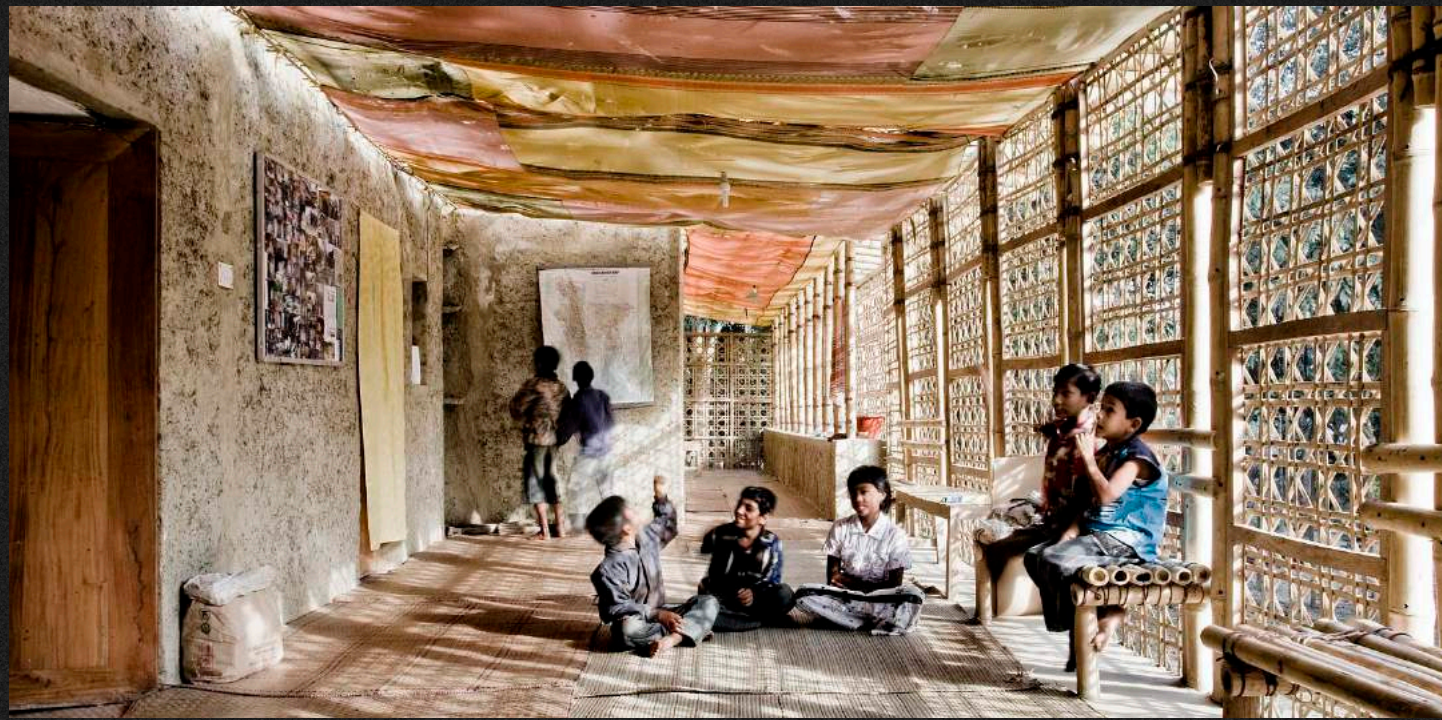
a strong spiritual connection to the landscape is what binds Indigenous Communities and compels them to treat nature with respect. It isn't a case of us versus the world - to tackle both smaller-scale and large issues like the climate crisis it is important to analyse our faults and look to Indigenous Communities for inspiration. Ecologist Dr Keith Skene's theory about culture is that it *"represents the landscape-human bond"*. As a principal Investigator at the College of Life Sciences at the University of Dundee, he believes that whilst present day teachings of empowerment lie in an emphasis on individual empowerment, our identity is in fact bigger than that. Our fuller, societal identity has diminished as we increasingly cut ourselves off from nature. He believes that *"[the] return of a really functioning society within a functioning landscape [is] the ultimate transcendent way of being, the way of really enjoying the fullness of what it is to be human"*. Our urban jungles provide us with the heartless practicality and efficiency we've grown to crave as time speeds on. But we lack connection with our spaces and thus the contextual awareness that could lead us to peace. Instead, we live in large and popu-

culture represents  
the landscape-  
human bond. ”

— KEITH SKENE

OPPOSITE : The high-rise architectures at Shibam, Wadi Hadhramaut (or Hadhramaut, Hadramawt) Yemen  
Jialiang Gao (1999)





lous cities where we have allowed our identities to be stripped back and validated by work. Whether you are a cog or a wheel in the steamrolling machine, there is no peace in a place that thrives on efficiency run amok for efficiency thrives on the toxic refusal to understand that we cannot have everything. Whether it be your home life, social life, or the ability to be present, something's got to give.

It's easy to assume that because of its enduring system and wild strength, that nature too, like us, is efficient. But it is in fact the opposite – Skene observes food pyramids, for example. There is an abundance of grass at the bottom, a few herbivores halfway up the pyramid, and up top, a carnivore. The carnivore does not manage to consume all the herbivores in the same way that the herbivores cannot devour all of the grass. What we are trying to do is just that; with

enough resources to divide between us we've grown greedy enough to invent ways to obtain every last crumb when we only need enough to survive. Mankind does not contribute to the ecosystem, thus without integrating into nature, we break food chains in our hands like eggshells.

Sub-optimality only takes small changes and should

ABOVE : Meti School, Haripur, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, designed and completed by German architect Anna Heringer Hossain, N. (2008)

BELOW : METI School, Bangladesh Hoerbst, K. (n.d.)

in theory make our lives easier. Retrieving local products allows a transparent system in which we can easily see its origins from who made it, how and where. We are more likely to practise humane consumption than when we are buying from afar whilst emotionally benefitting from the more personal experience. Architect Anna Heringer's participation in creating the METI School in Bangladesh is a prime example. The building is more than a school. Construction took place between 2005-6, when the choice to reject materials exports from abroad saved money that could be spent entirely on labour from the local community. The children at the school contributed to the building process allowing them to help create a space that was uniquely their own. They were educated about design in the process, money was given back to the community and as for materials, the

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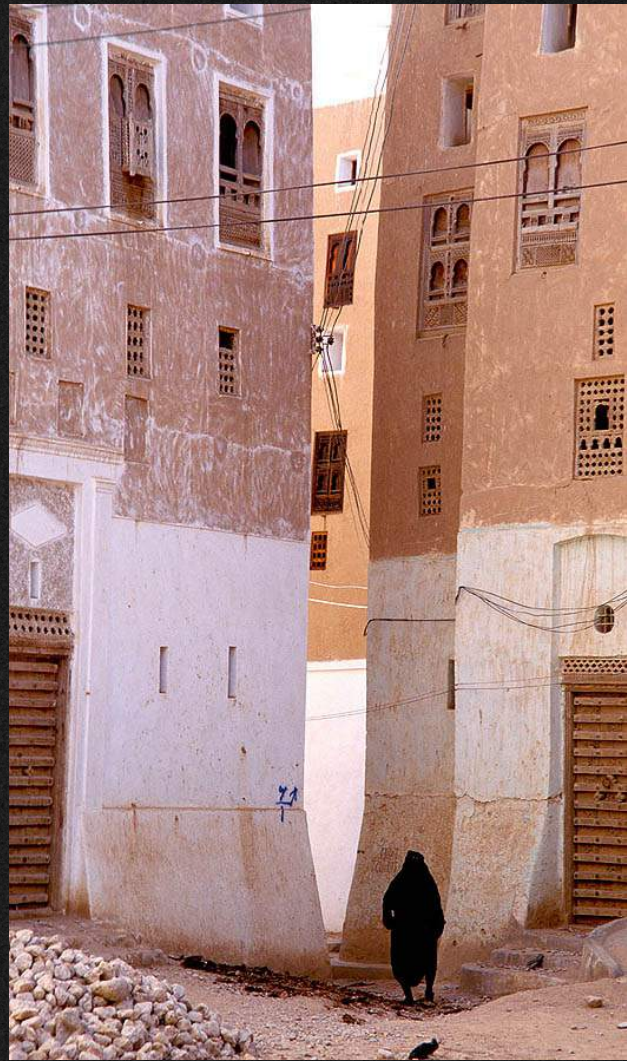
school was built almost entirely from mud found right there, in Bangladesh. It stands strong to date – any small breakages are simply fixed by adding water to the cracked mud and remoulding the broken fragment back in its place. As a natural resource, mud has been overlooked by Western universities as a valuable material in architecture. The 500-year-old city of Shibam in Yemen has been described as "*the Manhattan of the desert*" and is entirely made from clay. Back to the 21st century, and China has consumed more cement in a couple of years than the USA did during the entire 1900s. Not only is mud sustainable, but it is also a natural humidifier that can be sculpted ergonomically to create a stronger connection between inhabitant and building.

#### **SHORT-LIVED MATERIALS, LONG-LIVED DESIGN**

There is a common misconception that sustainability equates to durability, when in fact our designs need to be a lot less durable than they







currently are. Perhaps you've experienced your phone breaking, showing a lack of durable technology, so then you've thrown it out where it eventually ends up on landfill, showing its durability in the form of materials. What we require is the exact opposite. Nature recycles swiftly and is starting to clog up with our metals and plastics. Skene recounts the point that whilst wind turbines appear eco-friendly, they are made from metal, fiberglass and plastics, which involve a damaging process of attainment as well as being unrecyclable. He suggests we use wood to build them instead. *"Now these are less efficient, they*

*don't make as much energy, but they're recyclable and they don't damage anything, and actually the carbon in them is a carbon storage".* Out with the old and in with the new tends to be the prevailing attitude in Western technology that pinpoints the flaws of slower functioning models of sustainability. But as Skene points out, we should be using less electricity anyway.

De Ceutel in Amsterdam is an award-winning floating estate and former shipping yard dedicated to sustainable experimentation. The area is bursting with creativity in its workspaces, cafe and housing and plays host to an annual festival. Designed by Space&Matter, the architects created a lively cultured port from derelict land and boats through which a public boardwalk meanders. The aim of the project is to be "a symbol of the social transition to a contemporary circular lifestyle" which is executed through the use of composting toilets, upcycled materials to build houses, solar energy and heat exchange. The project is a fantastic example of what can be done in an urban environment in northern Europe and how we can leave behind ourselves cleaner soil.

#### **IN THE NAME OF DEVELOPMENT**

Western education categorises countries as 'developed' or 'developing' which spreads the assumption that 'developed' countries are worthy of being a role

model for 'developing' countries. It patronises people living in poverty and barely skirts over the qualities that many poor countries behold. It is a black and white representation on a political to-do list that deflects from the many problems the UK should be held accountable for. The terms are perhaps difficult to get around; they are not pointless and poverty should never be belittled or sugar-coated. It is a serious issue that must be eradicated, however the idea that everyone needs to be 'like us' to improve a situation is deeply wrong. Indeed, we need some way to distinguish issues in one country from issues in another to take them seriously, but the two-tier categorisation dumbs down the complexity of the issue. The problem that lies with the word 'developed' is that it

doesn't provide room for future improvement. It allows us to patronise countries because we've set ourselves apart by rejecting some of the most important traits we once possessed that demonstrate the vibrancy of what it is to be human - the same traits that remain more securely and with more respect in many "developing" countries. And to think that what we are as a country is the best we can be would be a delusion. It is not enough to resolve your own problems by causing problems for others - naturally, this applies on a global scale.

The climate crisis is a clear-cut reminder of this; the vast majority of countries causing the heaviest impacts that spark environmental catastrophes are in the same portion of the world

OPPOSITE : Buildings inside the high-rise town of Shibam, Wadi Hadhrumout (or Hadramout) Yemen, with traditional windows and doors  
Gao, J. (1999)  
BELOW : Project area 'De Ceutel' in Amsterdam-Noord Superboas (2019)





that has not yet faced the brunt of the climate crisis. The UK makes up 0.87% of the earth's population yet it is responsible for 1% of the world's carbon emissions. But the most severe heatwaves, droughts, floods, landslides, and air pollution happen across the ocean in countries far less responsible for these issues. Where Indigenous Peoples have respected their landscape for lifetime upon lifetime, their voices are barely heard back in the UK as we continue to destroy it. The direct actions that lead to catastrophe tend to be that of corporate efficiency, unsurprisingly. In the Amazon Rainforest, the Indigenous Community of Karipuna People live for the landscape that possesses not only their home, but their story as a community too. The community is comprised of only 58 people living in their village Panorama by the Jaci Paraná River where many Karipuna traditions are based. But it is *"in the name of 'development'"* that their home, supposedly protected by the Brazilian Constitution, is being destroyed. Economic progress takes the form of illegal deforestation seeking meat or soya, something that leader of the Karipuna Community, Adriano Karipuna, describes as *"organised crime"*. The power of localism is the ability to allow transparent consumerism, from field to factory to feeding. It isn't just a system for imports and exports, it

is a system for humanity.

### A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Adital Ela's TED Talk demonstrates the power of local, short-lived design. She recalled travelling to India where she stumbled upon a chai vendor and was immediately drawn to the small clay cups from which the tea was drank. Sculpted from the earth, the cups were filled with chai, sipped, then thrown to the ground where they touched the earth's skin and disintegrated into nothingness, as though they never existed. It didn't matter their appearance (although there is a charm to them) for the cup's life would end exactly where it began, back in the earth. The beauty is in the design of the ritual, the repetitive make-and-destroy. It didn't need to be durable and everlasting, only perishable. Whilst architecture and design



BELOW : Clay chai cups in Kolkata, India  
Mostafa, K. (n.d.)

OPPOSITE : An aerial view of logs illegally cut from the  
Amazon rainforest seen in sawmills near Humaitá, Brazil  
Marcelino, U. (n.d.)



often focus on natural structures, Skene believes it's more important to take influence from the ways in which nature functions, thus the ways in which nature recycles. Structures in earth's flora and fauna will evolve, develop and change over time, whilst the food chains they service will endure, despite even mass extinctions. Zaha Hadid Architects burst into fame for their iconic curvaceous, sculptural buildings which have an unmistakable connection within nature in their identity, helping her gain her nickname, *"queen of the curve"*. The Mayfair Residential Tower in Melbourne was inspired by the Australian oceans' tumbling waves in a classic example of biomimicry. But the tower itself is a lofty glass box oozing with luxury, from the slick lobby to the rooftop pool. Perhaps indulgence doesn't need to mean unsustainable - the company has invested in a number of sustainable material choices over the years after all. But do we need to create unnecessary

artificial lookout points when we have mountains for that? It is a thirst and a thrill that we can live without. The urban heat island effect is caused in built up, vegetation-lacking spaces, where heat cannot escape, cannot be absorbed. Couldn't one of the world's richest firms afford a roof terrace or vertical garden?

Reductionist attitudes to a spiritual connection with nature have run rampant for years in the UK. But it may be just the ticket to many of the problems we face in the near future. We spend so much of our time indoors and yet can so easily overlook the available opportunities to harness this to our advantage, both in enhancing our connectivity with nature and in creating new models of sustainability. The time is now, to contemplate our choices and our geographical privilege a little more deeply. Designers determine the ways of the man-made world - which way will we let things swing? ♦



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# PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS





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