

## Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in Modern Interiors

The early twenty-first century is witnessing a huge interest in indoor plants. A visit to London's Regent Street, for example, will reveal several examples of indoor planting in commercial settings. They range from the full-grown trees and vertical green garden in the Apple store, to the small potted plants in the & Other Stories clothes store on the other side of the road, to the enormous green wall in the Anthropologie clothes store located further down the street in the direction of Piccadilly. This is just the tip of an iceberg, however. A visit to countless offices, health centres, hotel lobbies and exhibition halls around the world will reveal many more displays of indoor greenery. This is to say nothing of the contemporary fashion for bringing it inside our homes, aided by the use of interior planters, Wardian cases, terraria, and other means of integrating it into our interior schemes, which are featured widely in glossy home magazines.

While the vogue for indoor planting, or 'interiorscaping' as it is sometimes called, can be dismissed as an interior decorating fad, albeit one that probably has its roots in our growing concerns about the place of nature and the environment in our lives, it arguably also represents a particular moment in a longer-term narrative about the relationship of human beings with nature. This essay sets out to provide a relatively brief overview of that narrative as it unfolded in the modern era through the example of plants and flowers inside.

That narrative is not gender-free, however, and therefore cannot be ideologically neutral. In her 1980 book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant explained that 'to write history from a feminist perspective is to turn it upside down – to see social structure from the bottom up and to flip-flop mainstream values'.<sup>1</sup> Given that this essay focuses on plants and flowers in inside spaces, a subject that has been almost completely excluded from mainstream histories of interior design, it inevitably adopts such a perspective. Historians of the interior have mostly emphasised architectural structures and the material components of interior schemes. Rarely, if ever, does the aspidistra in the corner, or the vase of flowers on the table, get a mention. Subject as they are to growth and death, or often thought to have been put in place at the last minute to add a picturesque element for photographs, plants and flowers are missing from most mainstream accounts of interiors. Think, for, example, of the many accounts of the interior in Charles and Ray Eames's Case-study house #8, one of the most admired and documented late modern interiors. The numerous examples of plants and flowers present in that space – the carefully positioned rubber plants, the Swiss cheese plants and the small posies of flowers arranged by Ray Eames - are rarely discussed. Seen as representations

of nature, rather than of the manipulated spatial and material world, or culture, they are not considered to be an intrinsic part of that very self-consciously constructed interior. The fact that, in the form in which they are presented here, these plants and flowers have been tamed and transformed into culture - no longer part of the untamed wilderness - does not get acknowledged.

Given that the socially constructed concepts, women and nature, have long been linked together (one only has to think of the familiar term, 'mother nature', to understand that alliance), any account of the presence of the natural world in inside spaces must address the question of gender, if only implicitly. Both women and nature have also, arguably, been treated to levels of subordination at various times.<sup>2</sup> In Carolyn Merchant's view, a women and nature were both seen as 'culturally passive and subordinate' under the domination of the mechanistic paradigm that emerged through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and has continued until recently.<sup>3</sup> From the late eighteenth century to the present, the association between women and nature inside has been seen as problematic: In the nineteenth century the fact that domestic window gardening was deemed a feminine accomplishment meant that it belonged to the amateur field of home decoration, rather than to the professional world of interior design. In the early twentieth century, modernist architects and designers (purportedly) rejected both nineteenth-century domesticity and, by implication, the plants and flowers that constituted such a strong element within it, in favour of the machine as a key metaphor. While, in the post-second world war years, although late modernist architects and interior designers set out to re-unite nature with technology, it was, arguably, through a masculinisation of the former rather than a feminisation of the latter. Finally, from 1970 onwards, the post-modern ecological movement has been determined to rationalise and scientise the beneficial effects of plants and flowers in inside spaces as a means of downplaying their non-rational benefits.

The relationship between human beings and nature has been in place since the arrival of the human race. The story of nature inside in the modern world reflects the tension that has existed for several centuries, between, on the one hand, faith in the power of rationality, science and technology, and, on the other, a continued belief in the power of nature. Carolyn Merchant described that tension as one between a 'mechanistic' and an 'organic' view of the universe. The relationship reached a crisis at the moment when we decided to distance ourselves from the natural world by becoming urban dwellers, a consequence, in turn, of the development of economic capitalism and industrialisation. The deliberate turning of our backs on the natural world, and of our

former seamless continuity with it, which began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Britain, brought with it an inevitable reaction that was represented culturally by the Romantic Movement and, at a more popular level, by, among other things, the desire to bring plants and flowers inside. The story of the ways in which, from the eighteenth century to the present, that desire has been enacted, and the meanings that have been generated by it, has inevitably operated on many levels. At the simplest one it is part of the story of interior decoration/design. On a deeper level it relates to human beings' changing relationship with the natural world.

Nature inside first emerged in the modern industrialised world through the acquisition, as part of overseas trade, of plants that had their origins in colonised countries. Once transferred to the west they became commodified appendages of, at first, the gardens and interiors of the social elite. In that context nature inside represented the 'other' that was formed through imperial power and domination. Removed from their countries of origin the transported plants became exotic markers of social status.

Before long, however, the forces of social mobility and emulation facilitated the entry of plants and flowers into the interior schemes of the middle classes. Although there was knowledge at the time about their physical properties – the absorption of carbon monoxide and the emission of oxygen, for example – their benefits were mostly seen as intangible and non-rational. While, on one level, they sought to sustain values that were linked to pre-industrial community life, they also aligned themselves with the modern world. Their benefits were thought at the time to be numerous: Plants and flowers played a role in the education of children and in the self-improvement of adults, for example. Nature was believed to be made by God himself and was therefore deemed to be inherently 'good'. They also played an aesthetic role as nature was believed to be beautiful. Nature was also accessible as, in its wild state, it was available to everyone. It was also ennobling as the presence of plants and flowers inside, especially non-indigenous and exotic ones, had hitherto been the preserve of the wealthy and the aristocratic before it had trickled down to the new middle classes. Importantly nature was also therapeutic – a support for the sick, the poor, the bereaved and the lonely - and, in its non-indigenous form, a stimulant for exotic fantasy and escape from the domestic chores of everyday life.

At the same time, plants and flowers communicated messages about taste, fashion and respectable middle-class domesticity that were transferable to the public sphere and used to conceal commercialism. By the end of the nineteenth century they filled the conservatories in

public botanical gardens, the palm houses in public parks, exhibition buildings, education and leisure complexes, seaside winter-gardens, and the palm courts that appeared in the semi-public inside spaces of hotels, liners and department stores. They took the parlour and middle-class respectability with them into the public sphere, enabling new audiences to access them. They provided aesthetically pleasing environments, imparting knowledge about the natural world and moving the social interactions and display that had hitherto taken place in that domestic space to the public sphere. In those new, commercial settings, however, the traditional, religious, private and familial values that plants and flowers had reinforced in the domestic sphere were replaced by ones linked to fashion, conspicuous leisure, pleasure, consumption and democratised luxury, in short to the range of activities that defined the experience of public sphere urban modernity in the period 1850 to 1914.

The utopian vision of the winter garden was rooted in that of the glasshouse. Since the seventeenth century glasshouses containing tropical plants had been looked upon as Gardens of Eden, or as little Paradises, on earth. Arguably that utopian vision attached itself to the nineteenth-century public winter garden, even though it rapidly became transformed into a social space that was no longer uniquely dedicated to the cultivation and display of plants. Key to that vision was the fact that man was being reconciled with nature in a way that was felt to be in tune with urbanisation and industrialisation.

The second chapter in the story of the relationship between human beings and the natural world as represented by plants and flowers inside moves away from their integration into popular culture and associations with modernity as represented by feminine domesticity and mass leisure, and addresses the disruption created by the emergence and subsequent dominance of the hegemonic, high cultural, architect-led approach to the interior that emerged in the west in the inter-war years. Driven by the metaphor of the machine and of the possibilities offered by new technologies, nature took second place.

The creators of the inside spaces of inter-war modernist dwellings were primarily pre-occupied with the implementation of a number of formal strategies, among them the replacement of clearly defined rooms by open planned spaces; the creation of spatial ambiguity and flow; an outward orientation facilitated by the use of large plate-glass windows which brought the outside nature inside; and the introduction of as much light and transparency as possible into their buildings. To that extent many of them were involved with bringing outside nature inside. The ultimate aim was the creation of inside spaces that blended seamlessly with those outside their buildings. The use of transitional

spaces – balconies, terraces and verandas - helped to reinforce the levels of ambiguity required to undermine the impression of defined boundaries. Indeed, the very idea of an inner enclosed space was replaced by one that was characterised by permeability and ambiguity.

Although their presence was rarely noted as historians of the movement largely focused on the mechanistic metaphor, plants and flowers were included in the interiors of many modernist buildings. Palms and ferns were often exchanged for cacti and more obviously sculptural plants and planters were frequently built in to architectural structures to control the way in which plants were used. The German, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's use of a contained conservatory to control the jungle in his Villa Tugendhat was one such example, while the Finn, Alvar Aalto, built planters in below the windows of his own home in Helsinki. Several modernist buildings situated plants between the two pieces of glass that formed their double-glazed windows. Even more than in the Victorian parlour, where plants could often be found in pots so that they could be moved around, the modernist way was to integrate them as much as possible into the structure of the building.

In the years after 1945 the same strategies remained in place but the movement of architectural and design modernism across the Atlantic to the USA facilitated two important new developments. Firstly, due to the fine weather on the USA's west coast, the Californian modern architects made possible what had only really been a dream in Europe, namely the erosion of the boundary between architecture's inside and outside, between, that is, nature and culture. Thus, was born a new model of modern domesticity that openly embraced nature both inside and outside the home. Above all, it was characterised by the ability of inhabitants to live both inside and outside the house, and, in the process, significantly blur the boundaries between them. In effect the interior absorbed the exterior transforming it, in the process, from nature to culture. The patio and the garden became outside rooms, the former furnished almost as if they were inside. Often it was half inside, sheltered by overhanging beams and lit as if it were an interior room. In that new domestic scenario, the ways in which plants and flowers were used was hugely strategic, one of the key means, in fact, through which the new architectural idiom was realised and expressed. The idea of landscape was no longer restricted to the garden area but ventured inside the house as well, becoming part of the modern interior language of domesticity. The new approach was to prove hugely influential internationally in the years after the Second World War.

Secondly, as a result of the USA's post-war economic boom, which dramatically transformed the worlds of corporate business and commerce, many large-scale interiors were created which embraced

nature as a means of welcoming people inside them. This did not mean that they replaced the mechanistic with the organic. Rather, the latter was used as a way of softening the former and making it more acceptable. Through the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the natural world penetrated the interiors of significant numbers of restaurants, corporate office complexes, retail stores, hotels and shopping malls. In the process, the experiences that took place in them were transformed into something new, utopian and (seemingly at least) less exclusively urban.

While the public (or a privileged section of it) was theoretically allowed access to these spaces, they were privately owned and, inevitably, therefore, drew those who entered them into the ideology of late capitalism that underpinned them. That ideology was experienced by consumers and participants as the fulfilment of a dream of entering a world of affluence and luxury in which they felt that they were in 'benign' inside spaces, constructed as 'homes from home', where they were free agents able to express their individual identities. That sense of benign-ness was largely defined by multiple references to safe domesticity, including the presence of exotic nature which was elevated to the status of art, the highest cultural form of all.

The final part of the story begins in the 1970s and coincides with what has been dubbed 'the environmental turn'. A new approach to the natural world emerged which saw nature as essential to human beings' existence. One of the early advocates of that view was the influential American plantscaper, Ernest Conklin, who, in 1972, published 'Man and Plants – a primal association' in *American Nurseryman Magazine*, in which he outlined the idea that man was genetically programmed to be near green, growing plants. It was, he believed, a requirement of our biological heritage. Two years later Conklin developed those same ideas in another article in the *Nurseryman* and in 1978 he wrote an article, published in *Journal of Arboriculture*, entitled 'Interior Landscaping' in which he expressed his heartfelt belief that, we need bring plants and flowers inside in order to establish an 'interior ecology' in our homes, offices and public buildings in order to avoid 'the erosion of human life'.<sup>6</sup>

Conklin's was a completely intuitive approach to the subject of being at one with nature, based on his childhood experiences of living on a farm. 'I knew the bay of the fox...I knew the inspiration of nature's foliage and flowers. It all seems lost in our man-made cities', he explained.<sup>7</sup> His words were part of a broader cultural movement, emerging in the 1970s, which focused on an evolutionary explanation of man's need to remain close to nature. The term 'biophilia' was first used by psychologist, Erich Fromm, in his 1964 book *The Heart of Man* in which he defined it as a 'psychological orientation of being attracted

to all that is alive and vital'.<sup>8</sup> The idea was picked up again in 1984, with the publication of Edward O. Wilson's, book, *Biophilia*, in which the author introduced the idea of the 'biophilia hypothesis'. Wilson attempted to apply sociobiological ideas to the environmental ethic, positing the idea that 'humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life'.<sup>9</sup> The hypothesis was discussed in the context of biological evolution, and upheld by Wilson's belief that humans have always needed nature (plants and flowers included) for survival and have learnt, therefore, partly genetically, to develop a close relationship with it that has lasted to the present day.

Along with Stephen Kellert, Wilson was one of the editors of *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, a book of essays on the subject published in 1993. It covered a wide spectrum of subjects, addressed from a range of perspectives – psychological, biological, cultural, symbolic and aesthetic – and set out to provide evidence to either support or refute the hypothesis in order to move beyond the instinctive relationship with nature, or the romantic idealisation of it that one could accuse Conklin and others of having embraced. The hypothesis was now reformulated 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 even spiritual meaning and satisfaction'.<sup>10</sup> Biophilia (and its polar opposite, 'biophobia') was, it was claimed, rooted in learning that took place in the past and it was assumed that it still existed in people who had inhabited urban environments for several generations. The implication was that the satisfaction of that craving (which could arguably be achieved by including plants inside) leads to a state of psychological well-being, a reduction in stress levels and physical health.

Undertaking extensive scientific experimentation to prove that plants have beneficial effects on human beings was especially important when it was a matter of persuading office managers and the owners of retail spaces to invest in plants as a means of making their employees more productive or encouraging their customers to make more purchases. What began as a belief, which had strong resonances of the Victorians' earlier understanding of nature inside, quickly became a science rooted in empiricism and based on evidence. Once again, the mechanistic had come to dominate the organic.

Positioned as an example of human beings' relationship with nature, therefore, the seemingly simple narrative about plants and flowers inside in the modern era aligns itself with several far-reaching issues of the period, from the colonial story, to that of gender inequality, to that of cultural hegemony. Arguably, it approaches them all from a new perspective and sheds new light on them. Discussion focuses on the

representation of the exotic other, the tension between professionalism and amateurism, the meanings of domesticity, and, above all, on the relationship between nature and culture. Ultimately nature inside falls somewhere in between the two, which causes a final question to be raised. When nature came inside and is transformed into culture, does it retain its essence? That is, can we be affected by it in the same way as we are by nature in the wild? Does it lose some of its potency to heal us and can it resolve the tension that was created when we turned our backs on nature outside? Clearly the designers of the Apple store interior on Regent Street, and the managers who invested in their work, believe that it can.

<sup>1</sup> Merchant, C. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), xx

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 1-41

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, xv

<sup>4</sup> Conklin, E. L. 'Man and Plants: A Primal Association' *American Nurseryman Magazine* (136 (9), 1972, 46-49), 46

<sup>5</sup> Conklin, E. L. 'Interior Plantings bring nature indoors' *American Nurseryman Magazine* (139 (2), 1974, 12-13), 12

<sup>6</sup> Conklin, E.L. 'Interior Landscaping' *Journal of Arboriculture* (vol. 4, No. 4, 1978, 73-78), 73

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 74

<sup>8</sup> Fromm, E. *The Heart of Man: The genius for good and evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988 [1964]), 22

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, E. O. *Biophilia* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984), 27

<sup>10</sup> Kellert, S. R. and Wilson E. O. (eds.) *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington: Island Press, 1993), 20