That’s a wrap!

Hi!

For the last blog entry of the course, I want to write a little reflection and summarise the key things I have learnt throughout this course.

Even though I thought of myself as someone who deeply cared about the environment before, taking this course completely reshaped my understanding of the interconnectedness between built environments and ecological systems. The learning experience revealed a depth and complexity that initially felt overwhelming, as I was far from imagining the extent of the environmental emergency we are in, but soon became an inspiring and motivating force. It not only introduced me to foundational principles of sustainability and its evolution over time, but it also deepened my appreciation for the role designers play in fostering sustainable futures.

For me, one the biggest learning outcomes was moving my understanding of (environmental) design beyond a materialistic point of view to a more philosophical one. This course thought me to consider the broader responsibilities, ethics and cultural implications that come along design when trying to create harmony between human activities and the planet, and not just the aesthetic and functional characteristics of it. Exploring how that relationship between the environment and design has evolved over time and how designers have adapted to it, has also deepened my

understanding of it.

Another skill that I feel I really improved throughout this course is the ability to find and, more importantly, critically engage with academic sources in the field of design. I got to develop a vocabulary which allowed me to express what would be clear in my head but that I always struggled to back up with words.

Something else I have discovered over this course is my love for debates, which is something I had never done academically before. I really saw the benefits of challenging perspectives and discussing with my peers in other design sectors. Sometimes it would reinforce the ideas I already had, and sometimes completely changed where I was standing. It pushed me to think critically, challenge my assumptions, and refine my perspective.

Ultimately, and on a more personal level, this course has reinforced my motivation to create spaces that prioritise minimising environmental impacts and respect the ecosystems we live in. I am grateful to have learnt new perspective, methods and applications which will help me contribute to a more sustainable world.

Design as a solution (W10)

Hi! It’s me again!

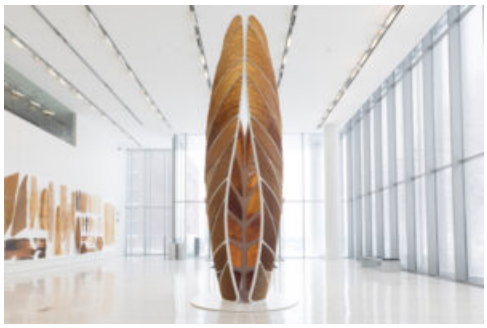
As an interior design student, my passion for design runs deep. I love what design brings to the world materialistically and ideologically as well as the conversations it sparks. However, I must admit, there was a time when my enthusiasm for the industry became quite tainted. It began to feel like a symbol of consumerism, pollution, and environmental degradation. The more I learned about the industry’s impact on climate change and wildlife destruction, the more conflicted I felt, and I think more and more designers are also feeling this way.

However, throughout this course, my perspective shifted as I engaged with the deeper possibilities of design through research, lectures, debates, and workshops. I realised that design is not necessarily the problem; it can also be the solution. The power of design lies in its ability to adapt, innovate, and inspire change. And even though sustainable design does require effort and motivation, I believe that the creative genius designers have hold immense potential to address the urgent environmental challenges we face today.

An example of hat that has stuck with me for a couple of years now is Neri Oxman’s *Aguahoja Pavilion (Fig. 1)*. This installation was created

from organic matter found in insects and plants, its structure was robotically printed and shaped by water. It is very interesting to notice that it is not designed to last forever, but to serve its purpose and leave no trace behind. “Organisms will serve their purpose then vanish to create something else – unlike the 300 million tons of plastic produced globally each year. only about 10% of that will vanish.” (Zach Andrews I., 2019) The *Aguahoja Pavilion* challenges traditional notions of permanence and consumerism, advocating for a design philosophy rooted in cycles of regeneration rather than waste.

Figure 1: Aguahoja by Neri Oxman



Interestingly enough, I saw that this project had already been previously added to the *Environmental Design Good News Archive 2018* which does show its status as a great example of environmental design.

Projects such as *Aguahoja* remind me why I fell in love with design in the first place and are very inspiring as I continue my journey as an interior design student. They truly reignite my belief in design as a transformative force—one that can shape not only beautiful spaces but also sustainable futures.

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Zach Andrews I. (2019). *MIT Media lab's Mediated Matter Group Creates 'aguahoja' Pavilion*. [online] Designboom | Architecture & Design Magazine. Available at: https://www.designboom.com/technology/mit-media-lab-mediated-matter-group-aguahoja-pavilion-03-28-2019/.

Figure 1: The Mediated Matter group (2016). *Aguahoja*. *MIT Media Lab*. Available at: https://www.media.mit.edu/projects/aguahoja/overview/.

The Integral Urban House (W9)

Hello!

The Integral Urban House is an experiment conceptualised in the 1970s by Sim Van der Ryn, Bill

and Helga Olkowski, and other architects, which exemplifies the first efforts to integrate sustainability into urban living. Featured in Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowan's *Ecological Design*, this house in Berkeley, California, aims to create a self-reliant domestic environment that promotes ecological principles at an urban scale. As an interior design student, studying such projects offers valuable information into the intersection of design and sustainability.

Figure 1:The Integral Urban House by Farallones Institute

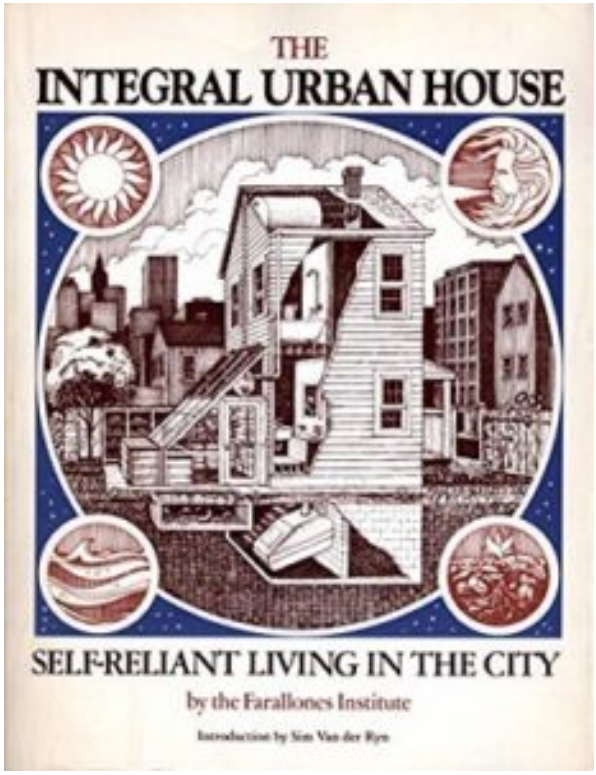

Figure 2: Photograph of the Integral Urban House

The house's design aligns with the five broad principles of ecological design outlined in *Ecological Design*:

1. **Grounds Design in the Specifics of Place**
   Situated in Berkeley, the Integral Urban House reflected its unique urban environment,

demonstrating the importance of designing with sensitivity to local conditions.

2. **Evaluates Ecological Impacts**
   The house employed measurable criteria—energy usage, water management, and waste management—to assess its environmental footprint. Comparing its systems to conventional housing revealed both the house's reduced ecological impacts and how traditional methods fail to.
3. **Minimizes Impact by Partnering with Nature**
   By integrating natural resources, the house exemplified a harmonious relationship with the environment. Solar energy systems, biological composting, and urban gardening all showcased how nature can be a partner.
4. **Engages Communities Beyond Experts**
   A key element of the project was community involvement. The house served as a laboratory, welcoming public visits and knowledge sharing to inspire broader ecological awareness and action.
5. **Transforms Awareness through Participation**
   The house's functionality required active involvement from its inhabitants, making users directly responsible for ecological processes. For example, the compost privy necessitated active maintenance, fostering a deeper understanding of waste systems compared to the detachment enabled by conventional flush toilets.

Although the Integral Urban House was decommissioned

after a decade, primarily due to the labour-intensive maintenance it required, its principles remain relevant today.

You could even say that the house anticipated modern sustainability concepts like the circular economy (*Cradle to Cradle*, 2002), where waste becomes a resource in closed-loop systems. Its commitment to self-reliance and ecological harmony underscores a timeless approach to sustainability that cities can imitate as they tackle climate change and resource scarcity.

This project serves as a reminder of design's transformative potential in creating sustainable urban futures. By applying ecological principles, designers can shape not only spaces but also the behaviours and values of the communities inhabiting them.

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Farallones Institute, Olkowski, H., Van Der Ryn, S. and Olkowski, B. (1979). *The Integral Urban House: self-reliant Living in the City*. Sierra Club Books. (+Figure 1)

Sim Van Der Ryn, S. and Cowan, S. (1996). *Ecological Design*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Figure 2: UC Berkeley Environmental Design Archives (1974). *Backyard of the IUH with hutches, beehives, and Farm Plots*. *Critical Sustainabilities*. Available

at: https://critical-sustainabilities.ucsc.edu/integral-urban-house/.

Life in plastic, it’s fantastic! (W8)

Hello and welcome back to my blog!

In this post, I will be talking about PLASTIC and my thoughts on its impact and future in the design world as a combination of meaning and materiality.

Plastic is a material that has revolutionised society and remains one of the most dividing materials in the design world. It’s versatile, affordable and functional and has completely changed everything from mass production to aesthetic creativity. Just looking around me as I am writing this blog, I can see so much plastic; headphones, keyboard, window blinds, juice bottle, ruler… It has completely changed our relationship to mass production, consumption and durability. Furthermore, plastic has had a particularly big impact in design by enabling unprecedented creativity (through material versatility), affordability, and functionality. Iconic designs like the Eames Moulded Plastic Chair (Fig. 1) and Philippe Starck’s Louis

Ghost Chair (Fig. 2) demonstrate how plastic has defined modern design aesthetics.

Figure 1: Eames Moulded Plastic Chair
Figure 2: Louis Ghost Chair by Philippe Starck

While plastic has brought convenience and innovation, its environmental persistence, health risks, and contribution to unsustainable practices highlight significant challenges. But the question is, how are we going to deal with it?

During the debate we had on Thursday, a very interesting point was raised which is that we can’t make the huge quantities of plastic in the world magically disappear… And even though we urgently need to stop producing plastic at the rate that we do, ‘cancelling’ it because of the negative impacts associated with it will not get us anywhere either. We should learn to ‘fall in love with it again’ and innovate to up-cycle (not just re-cycle) all of the plastic that is already here. Just like the rise of plastic brought a new wave of innovation, we must now see the environmental impacts of plastics as an incentive towards new innovation and sustainable practices. Eco-conscious materials like recycled plastics and bioplastics must be integrated into designs to mitigate waste and pollution. I actually think that the urgent climate challenges we face, which can be illustrated with plastic, bring a really exciting opportunity for designers to think outside the box and I definitely want to be apart of that movement through my designs.

On a small scale, we did that exercise earlier during the day at the workshop where we up-cycled old plastic bottles into new designs. Here are the design ideas I had (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Plastic bottle Up-Cycling design ideas

Bibliography:

Figure 1: Herman Miller (n.d.). *Eames Molded Plastic Chair*. *Herman Miller*.

Figure 2: Kartell (n.d.). *Louis Ghost Chair by Phillippe Starck*. *Kartell*. Available at: https://www.kartell.com/gb/en/ktgb/shop/product/louis-ghost/66-530.

Figure 3: Noel, E. (2024). *Plastic Bottle Up-Cycling Design Ideas*. *own work*.

Thing-power! (W7)

Hello and welcome back to my blog!

This week starts a new theme: ‘Materials and (New) Materialism: Bodies, resources and pollution’.

Jane Bennett’s ‘Vibrant Matter’ is a refreshing piece of work that shifts the perspective we have been looking at environmental design through from a traditional concept of matter to a philosophical and political point of view. To me, this new approach makes perfect sense as we are getting to a point where, with all the information we now have, the seemingly only solution is indeed to change our perception of materialism as a society.

One of the main ideas introduced in the preface and the first chapter is the one of ‘thing-power’ (rather than active human subjects and passive objects). ‘Thing-power’ suggests that non-human entities, such as objects, materials, and forces, possess a form of agency and an active role in shaping experiences, emotions, and behaviours.

This idea is something I have particularly noticed to be true for material selection in interior design. Materials like wood, metal, or glass and also elements like light and acoustics are not just passive elements; they have distinct qualities (texture, colour, temperature) that influence the

atmosphere and user experience. For instance, the warmth of natural wood might evoke comfort, while the sleekness of metal can convey modernity. This is something that was explored in the lecture given a couple weeks ago by Fiona McLachlan on colour theory.

Acknowledging ‘thing-power’ encourages us to be more careful and mindful in material selection, valuing the lifecycle and ecological footprint of items. Sustainable interior design can align with this philosophy by respecting the inherent “life” of materials and reducing waste.

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