

**“I have seven stylists who put me in sweats and leggings. Just like that effortless look, you know? But it’s really a lot of effort.”**

*- The aesthetics of the natural - a consideration of the effort that we spend to 'make it look natural'*

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## Introduction

*“I have seven stylists who put me in sweats and leggings. (Just like that effortless look, you know? But it’s really a lot of effort.”)*

The following considerations will explore where our desire to ‘make it look *natural*’ comes from, and why it takes so much effort, time and resources to do so. It seems that all over the world there are people striving to make things look and feel *naturally* occurring, as if it fell into place, or formed organically without undergoing the choreography of human design or labour. In this context ‘it’ can include anything from forests, acts of kindness, flawless eyebrow contours, freckles, cities, basically anything human made or initiated. Things that have not seen human intervention are almost impossible to find these days, with a growing population packed into dense urban environments, ‘untouched’ is scarce. Scarce to the extent where for example, every single inch of a country such as The Netherlands has been pissed on, if we were dogs. There is not a square meter of The Netherlands that is not controlled in some way and owned by a human body or human made entity.

Something *natural* can only visually stand out as such in a predominantly human made environment - context is very important when appearing to your surroundings. In many cases we can only notice something if we simultaneously experience its juxtapositions, or if we’re directly looking for it, otherwise it can quite easily blend into its surroundings. For example, we don’t see a bush when it’s camouflaged within other bushes, but we’re much more likely to see a solitary bush between grey concrete slabs. If we look back at one of the previously mentioned definitions of *nature* that states; the basic or inherent features, character, or qualities of something. Then to make something look *natural* in a human made environment would entail matching its attributes, which nowadays in the city is, more often than not, grey and materially non organic.



The term '*natural* look' challenges me, it seems like a self denying concept. A 'look' suggests programming in order to be looked at, if a true *natural* look is ever to be possible, we would have to use the processes used by *nature*. The human intention and influence that wills a 'look' already abandons *nature*, *natures* intention is to survive, not to appear (unless to the sun, perhaps appearing is also surviving). The life cycle of most living things on this planet consists of eating, excreting, reproducing and resting, not catwalks, careers, social media and influence. If we followed the laws and patterns of other *natural* entities, we would be guided by necessity and survival, we might still walk around naked if it were warm enough, the loincloth sure changed this.<sup>1</sup> As sentient beings we've evolved to appreciate much more than basic survival, and our world is full of things that we made, put together, or synthesized. Such as the 8.3 billion metric tons of plastics produced globally, since plastic's introduction in 1950.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the greatest invention of all is the very need for all these things.

To help me understand the concept of 'making it look *natural*' I will mainly look into the following five areas; architecture, fashion, military defence, television and entertainment and the cosmetics industry. I will dive into trends and fluctuations in aesthetics that shed light on this desire for a *natural* look. I will investigate the motivations and sometimes necessities of both blending into your surroundings, or on the contrary trying to stand out amongst them.

A torn up 'Yeezy' sweatshirt with holes in it (sold for \$2,243), attempts to mimic *nature's* pattern of degradation, except it is formed in this state, it didn't actually degrade.<sup>3</sup> It's an impossible re-creation of what a sweatshirt would look like after being worn under a bridge for 6 months straight, or after the wearer being dragged through a rose-bush by their feet. The tall wild grasses that spring out of a luxury

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**1** 170,000 years ago during the first ice age conditions, the first record of human clothing according to a study of clothing lice led by Mark Stoneking

**2** Roland Geyer et al. ,Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made.Sci. Adv.3,e1700782(2017).DOI:10.1126/sciadv.1700782

**3** 'Ripped Homeless Sweaters' designed by international rap star Kanye West: <https://medium.com/writing-the-ship/kanyes-ripped-homeless-sweaters-1a908e9f10fa>

apartment building rooftop mimic a New Zealand bush forest, or a post apocalyptic city scape where the absence of humans has allowed *nature* to take back the throne. We fill a perfectly *natural* human face with poly-L-lactic acid and then fill it with some more, for a *natural* looking result. Sometimes these efforts are not wasted, and can result in an effective imitation of *nature*, but the question is if it's costing us more than just time, effort and resources?



# Terms and Conditions

- *'Nature / Natural'*

Notions of *'nature'* and *'natural'* are crucial to this paper. I will be using *nature* as a figure of speech, a root to refer to, a goal to aim for, a contradiction to call out with, a set of values to find oneself within. For the sake of writing and reading this text alike it could be good to establish some common ground, to formulate what the soil we stand on is made up of - both *nature* and *natural* are often used rather loosely so here I will look into the different established definitions and etymologies of the two terms.

*Nature* seems to be an expression that's bandied around without much consideration nowadays. It's easily happened that people connect the word to flora and fauna, scenes of plants growing freely under and around a dense forest canopy, where rocky waterfalls have emerged from earth being pushed into place by the *natural* flow of a



mountain spring. In fact, the Oxford dictionary defines the word;

- "The phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations."

I find this definition limiting and slightly skewed, it separates the human from the 'collective physical world', in turn denying that we came from (debatable in the face of certain religions) and still belong to the interconnected network of "plants, animals and landscape". If we, users of the English language, detach humans from the collective *nature*, we also suggest that our part in it doesn't have an influence. This is an irresponsible and dangerous stance, I will argue that this detachment is a heavy contributor to our ability to kill off forests, oceans and other networks of life dead beyond repair.

On the other hand, if we assume humans are indeed part of *nature* then who is to say that dumping several tonnes of plastic (that we synthesized) into a landfill is not a *natural* act. If our influence does, as most of us would argue, have implications but simultaneously is a part of *nature*, we must think of the direction in which we wish to take the notion of *nature*. We are living in the height of the Anthropocene, and as the most influential force on this planet, we have a say above all other species in how we define *nature*.<sup>1</sup>

Another definition Oxford gives is;

- 'The basic or inherent features, character, or qualities of something.'

This definition almost sounds like it talks about the identity of an entity or subject, like the expected core qualities and expressions of something, or *what is 'natural' to it*. Something recognizable as *natural* to its context can often go unnoticed if not marked in some way, so we could instead attach the word 'normal' in this definition. A lion

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<sup>1</sup> Steffen, Paul J. CrutzenWill. "How long have we been in the Anthropocene era?." *Climatic Change* 61.3 (2003): 251.

spotted in the Savannah is normal, unlike a lion in a city central office block (or even a city zoo for that matter), however it could become normalized if we start introducing and domesticating lions in financial city districts, would it then be *natural* also? I reluctantly say; yes it could, wildcats have successfully been reduced to garment wearing home accessories (that in my opinion are honestly like soooo adorable) since around 12,000 years ago, at this point house-cats are normalized worldwide.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, the idea of lions roaming around an office complex doesnt seem so absurd. A better application to this and many other instances might be words such as normal, seamless,

**2 Serpell, J.A., 2000. Domestication and history of the cat. *The domestic cat: The biology of its behaviour*, 2, pp.180-192.**



subconscious, normalized, casual or unnoticed. I will be applying these different points of reference to my observations throughout. I encourage a second thought when reading terms like this, to reflect on whether it's *natural*, for example, for a huge slab of mountain bedrock to exist in a city park.

Another (ab)use to the idea of *natural* or *unnatural* is in relation to actions and instances that we deem 'bad' or 'good'. One example of this is the Catholic church believing until only recently (thanks to queer icon Pope Francis) that having romantic or sexual urges toward another human of the same sex is bad, because it is *unnatural*.<sup>3</sup> Records of homosexuality across cultures and empires span far further back than the founding of Catholicism, and homosexuality was, and still is, celebrated among many.<sup>4</sup> It seems to have stood the test of time without doing explicit harm to the species around it, therefore surely it sits comfortably within the definitions of *natural*. An often weaponized counter argument to this is that most living things want to keep living, the instinct of survival suggests that if we are to act upon sexual and romantic urges, we'd better make some babies while we're at it (something that two people with the same reproductive system aren't capable of), which is valid, if your species is vulnerable to going extinct. 'As a perfectly *natural* homosexual man, I hereby pledge to, in one way or another (most likely another), impregnate my fair share of females - in the event of near extinction, due to under population that is.'<sup>5</sup>

We've come a long way from hunting and gathering within our time on earth. In the way of survival many different things are just as important as reproduction at this stage of humanity, such as agriculture, medicine, education. If anything, we're now seeing that the amount of humans on the planet (8.1 billion), and how we like to farm, build houses, and entertain ourselves is actually detrimental to our survival.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Loughlin, G., 2018. *Catholic homophobia. Theology*, 121(3), pp.188-196.

4 Mondimore, F.M., 1996. *A natural history of homosexuality*. JHU Press.

5 Quote delicately composed on behalf of the writer by the Princess of Sweden, Tobias Karlsson.

6 Uniyal, S., Paliwal, R., Kaphaliya, B. and Sharma, R.K., 2020. *Human overpopulation: Impact on environment. In Megacities and rapid urbanization: Breakthroughs in research and practice* (pp. 20-30). IGI Global.

So there, suck on that Vatican City. Queer theorists such as John D’Emilio and Michel Foucault<sup>7</sup> suggest that the heteronormative reality that has prevailed in most of western society for hundreds of years now is essential to maintaining a capitalist structure. I will talk about capitalism later (fun!) in relation to the *unnatural* relationship we now have with the worlds around us.

It’s not just the freedoms and wellbeing of homosexuals that the *‘unnatural’* label harms.

*7 In D’Emilio’s essay ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’ & Foucault’s lecture series ‘Security, Territory, Population’*





- 'Look'

Looking is the act of directing your focal vision or attention to a specific direction, thing, or person. As long as our eyes are open and able, we are somewhat looking. We may not be focusing or giving attention to the subject in the line of sight but we are still registering something with our eyes. Lots of the things that we don't actively look at are likely to be registered in our subconscious, this is relevant to talking about 'making it look *natural*'.

In more recent language the word is used as a noun, one Oxford dictionary definition reads "the appearance of someone or something, especially as expressing a particular quality." This suggests that somethings 'look' is its key visual attributes, or the assumed visual reading of it. I will be using the term in this definition often in this paper, as I talk about how things and ideas are presented to the world around them, and how the world around them might read them.

- 'Make it look *natural*'

An alternative phrasing of the crux of this paper. It works very well as a sort of catch phrase for human intervention with intent to recreate the appearance of '*naturally* occurring,' which will be referred to throughout the text.

# The Built Environment

*Through the lens of a wannabe architect*

Let me set the scene: urban environments are predominantly hard concrete landscapes with the odd bush popping out, or a circle of grass peeking out the middle of a roundabout. All of the wires and tubes that fuel our lifestyles are buried into the ground and walls, hidden out of sight as to not make the 'constructedness' of our world too present. The original soil beneath the sidewalk paving varies in textures and qualities, but these attributes are usually valued purely on their capacity to facilitate the humanistic concrete volumes that are planned on top. 'Green spaces' have been segregated and allowed a square meterage with a border that they mustn't breach. The cities are densely populated and we've established efficient ways of comfortably (for most) fitting the masses into the area limits, through sturdy nevertheless non organic residential or commercial structures of concrete, mortar, and steel. Sturdy as they are, they usually cannot be dismantled and reused again because of the efficient and durable qualities of the materials. This has been the established standard of building for hundreds of years now and we're starting to experience negative repercussions. The soil is losing quality, flora and fauna are going extinct and our planet is getting warmer, this affects all life on earth. It has been widely accepted and recognized that global warming and environmental decay are collective, shared issues. At this point there are efforts being taken in most large social structures to combat these problems, but essentially we are still continuing production with the same methods that got us here.



Seamont Court Apartment Block - Aberdeen, Scotland

Within architecture and urban design in 2024 it's hard to get away with neglecting these environmental issues. The architectural practice is inherently connected to governmental bodies with national interests. There are sustainable building regulation boards such as BREEAM and LEED (which have been criticized by some environmental professionals as serving only as a justification checklist), that aim to make sure buildings are designed in a 'green' manner.<sup>1</sup> Architecture has very visible public platform of course, not only do the general public utilize and occupy the fruits of the practice, but throughout different stages of the project lots of the information is made public domain. With our growing awareness of environmental damage it is difficult for designers to maintain a completely unapologetic regressive stance and continue business as usual. However it is also difficult to measure whether the efforts and their effects actually make the new buildings and streets more sustainable. What is easier is to convince the untrained eye that a building has a zero carbon footprint by covering it with plants and using certain buzzwords, this dubious practice is known as 'greenwashing' (which falls under the notion of making it look *natural*, as I am using here in this paper). In the midst of this profusion of "green" strategies, the very definition of sustainability has been corrupted, moving away from the original concept based on three main spheres: society, environment and economy. Sustainability in it's current applied definition looks to achieve social well-being without negatively influencing the environment, but must meanwhile feed the economy.<sup>2</sup> It seems as if the order of these intentions have been convoluted in many cases so that economy remains the priority.

Greenwashing is a less desirable take away from humans modern relationship with *nature*, but this relationship has thankfully lasted much longer than capitalism and company image. We have of course always lived among *nature*, through more nomadic, tribal and transient existences, but within the realm of globalized knowledge

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1 <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/24550/1/A%20Study%20of%20the%20Effectiveness%20of%20BREEAM%20as%20an%20Assessment%20Tool%20for%20Sustainability.pdf>

2 <https://www.archdaily.com/978874/50-shades-of-green-the-contradictions-of-greenwashing-in-architecture>

and philosophy, it almost seems (at least through a western lens) like it all started with Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859). He was many things, a polymath, geographer, *naturalist*, explorer, and an advocate of Romantic philosophy and science. He inspired many household names, such as Charles Darwin and Philipp Franz von Siebold, with his, at the time, radically progressive interpretations and findings of the world and life on it. Some say he introduced the very idea of *nature* and environmental awareness to the wider world, through making discoveries around food chains, evolution of species, climate change and more.<sup>3</sup> Many at the time thought that he was insane and his ideas were not to be listened to. This is somewhat understandable in a primarily religious society where what is understood as *natural* is that god created all and we have no reason to question or think otherwise. Humboldt inspired prolific philosophers in his own time and still continues to influence thinkers and practitioners around the world today. In Andrea Wulf's book 'The invention of *nature*' the writer follows Humboldt's life from his early childhood and travels through Europe as a young man to his journey through Latin America and his return to Europe. This book is referred to often by minds in revolution, evolution, ecology, conservation, art and literature for it's timelessness. Humboldt's findings created the way we understand *nature* and evolution today, therefore he is definitely worth talking about in relation to the practice of landscape architecture, what we could call the modern day design of *nature*.

Landscape architecture is technically the practice of designing the outdoor environment, with an emphasis on green spaces such as gardens and parks, it's where urban planning and architecture is confronted with ecology. Just like any design practice, landscape architecture evolves through different eras and cultural movements. Throughout history we have seen different trends and standards influencing how humans manipulate and design *nature*, and in turn

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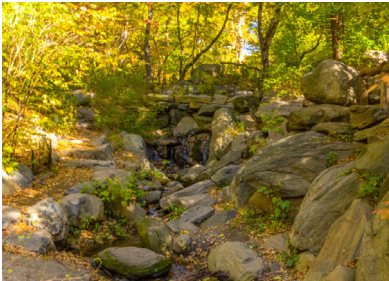
<sup>3</sup> Wulf, A., 2015. *The invention of nature: the adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the lost hero of science: Costa & Royal Society Prize Winner. Hachette UK.*



Gardens of Versailles in the typical 'French garden' landscape style - Versailles, France. Designed early-mid 1600's



Stourhead estate in the typical 'English garden' landscape style - Wiltshire, UK. Designed mid 1700's



A quiet corner of Central Park, in the 'landscape style' - New York, USA. Designed in 1858



One Excellence development, a hyper modern example of 'Landscape Urbanism' - Shenzhen, China. Designed in 2013

how many of us experience it. The most recent developments over the past two hundred years include; the French formal garden style, the English garden style, modern landscape style, and landscape urbanism.

These evolutions of the practice are largely connected to changes in societal structures. For example, the first two eras mentioned are only known as 'garden' styles because the social class systems within Europe, that still prevail to this day, were even more pronounced over

those two hundred years, and made sure that only the rich could afford to experience *nature* in a designed way. Only those with manors large enough to warrant a few acres of private outdoor land would require a landscape designer to come and make *nature* accessible and catered to the human experience.

The French formal garden starting in the early 16th century, also known as the *jardin à la française*, is a style of landscape design based on symmetry and the principle of imposing order on *nature*. The English garden style begun early 18th century and was a response to that French style of landscaping which framed rich estate gardens with hard straight lines, instead it presented an idealized view of *nature*. The English garden usually included a lake, sweeps of gently rolling lawns set against groves of trees, and recreations of classical temples, Gothic ruins, bridges, and other picturesque architecture, designed to recreate an idyllic pastoral landscape.<sup>4</sup> A major player in this movement of landscape design was Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who created artificial lakes and used dams and canals to transform streams or springs into the illusion that a river flowed through the garden.

Where it challenged the French style with less linear design, it still very much believed that the human were in control, to segregate the different biotopes and environments, and bring human function to the spaces, framing the landscape with the human eye as its prerogative. The idea of creating the illusion of *nature* seems to have been born here in this movement. However the clean lines and freshly mown grass suggests the opposite; that humans come by regularly to maintain their order upon the garden.

Perhaps we can think of this in relation to the 'suspension of disbelief', usually applied to different medias such as film, theatre and reality television. It describes the avoidance - often willing - of critical thinking and logic in understanding something that is unreal or impossible

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-landscape-garden>, para. 2, accessed 15-02-2024

in reality, in order to believe it for the sake of enjoying its narrative.<sup>5</sup> These idyllic scenes of *nature* can only be enjoyed as such if spectators suspend their disbelief, avoiding the reality of this garden being tended to meticulously (in the 18th century by the hard working underpaid servants of the landbarons that owned the property).

Throughout these periods we see a changing understanding and respect for *nature*, from the French garden imposing human order with no regard to making it look *natural*, to the English garden romantically presenting a human-centered narrative. Next we look into the 'Landscape Style', a response to the long-lived formal garden periods. While the classic English garden trimmed and maintained its vegetation to the humans desired contours, the landscape style aims more to recreate the qualities of *nature* that's been left to form itself. This was not just a change in how people design their gardens, but a whole new lens on *nature*, which also brought to urgency a term for the profession. Frederick Law Olmsted used the term 'landscape architecture' for the very first time when designing Central Park in New York, describing the whole professional task of designing a composition of planting, landform, water, paving and other structures. This transition from maintained garden to wild park speaks again to the theatrical recreation of *nature*, to its designer it is still a careful curation, to the unknowing passer by, it is the true unadulterated experience of *nature*.

'Parkways' were scenic roads developed in the US during the late 19th century, the term was also coined by Olmsted, alongside his associate Calvert Vaux. These roads separated cars, pedestrians, bicyclists, and horse carriages, and began to focus attention on the sequence and experience of roads within gardens and landscapes. Their aim was to allow people to experience *nature* within built environments, via designed routes through the Northern American landscape. A parkway is by general definition, a strip of public land intended for recreational travel rather than the movement of major segments of traffic. The primary purpose of the road is to provide a

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**5 Böcking, S., 2008. *Suspension of disbelief. The international encyclopedia of communication.***



visual experience, revealing a significant scenic or cultural quality in the landscape.<sup>6</sup> This idea was introduced in response to a car heavy society and can be seen as another stage of the process of humans self separation from *nature*. When we design paths in order to observe *nature* as a spectator it becomes a subject, not to be directly interacted with or connected to with but to be commodified and fetishised from the comfort of a moving vehicle.<sup>7</sup>

In 2024 we sit somewhere between the landscape style mentality and the most recent widely recognized term 'Landscape urbanism'. In 1996 British landscape architect Tom Turner wrote;

"The city of the future will be an infinite series of landscapes: psychological and physical, urban and rural, flowing apart and together. They will be mapped and planned for special purposes, with the results recorded in geographical information systems (GIS), which have the power to construct and retrieve innumerable plans, images and other records. Christopher Alexander was right: a city is not a tree. It is a landscape."<sup>8,9</sup>

Tall wild grasses are commonly featured in the planting plans of today's urban public space design, surrounding paths and clearings, rather than the neatly trimmed and mown grasses seen before in the formal garden period, when we presented *nature* as something that humans were to control and maintain. Wild grasses often give the illusion that *nature* has been left to grow around the human built environment, or almost like the paths in an inner courtyard of an apartment complex have been laid down straight onto the wild environment, still allowing the vegetation to spring up out of the top layer that we walk on, giving the site a rough, wild feeling. 'Rewilding' is a progressive approach to conservation, it's about letting *nature* take care of itself by enabling

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6 <https://amocarroll.com/projects/the-parkway-a-curved-legacy#:text=In%20the%20late%201800s%20the,roads%20within%20gardens%20and%20landscapes>.

7 Ahuja, T., *The Alienation and Commodification of Nature: Fighting the Fallacious Fetishism of*.

8 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landscape-urbanism#:text=Landscape%20urbanism%20is%20a%20theory,arrival%20of%20objects%20and%20buildings>.

9 Christopher Wolfgang John Alexander (4 October 1936 – 17 March 2022) was a British-American architect and design theorist

*natural* processes to shape land and sea, repair damaged ecosystems and restore degraded landscapes. Through rewilding, *natural* rhythms should create wilder, more biodiverse habitats.



Left: A render of the Valley apartments development - Amsterdam Zuidas, Netherlands



Right: Fan-fiction imagination render of a post apocalyptic New York City

A slightly absurd visual crossover between these wild urban environments is that of a post apocalyptic aesthetic. Zombie movies, games and media also nearly always show *nature* returning and overgrowing the streets and skyscrapers of our cities. It seems to be a common opinion within cinematography that, in the absence of humans, our carefully planted sidewalks will take back control and cover the building facades and ground with climbing and falling vegetation (if only zombies were herbivores, but I guess then we wouldn't have a very dramatic narrative). In the movies this happens by itself, very rapidly, but in reality creating a platform for *nature* to be able to take care of itself again requires a lot of work. We have, for a long time, elected to utilize spaces in a human-centric and functional way, either for further urban development or agriculture, to house and feed the growing population.

If we redirect our gaze upwards from the grass to the buildings, we see more and more wild gardens busting out of the balconies of high-rises and luxury apartment blocks. They turn huge linear brick and concrete structures into more organic forms, with bobble hedges and hanging plants spilling out of them. It can look like these elements of vegetation have emerged from a weed in a crack, however, they're carefully selected and planted species that often require a multi layered system to thrive in. Victoria University's rooftop in Melbourne has a recently built roof-garden, but before anything could be left to grow (just like the L'Oreal Paris '*natural*' look' I will talk about later), there were many steps that had to take place;

1. A structural engineer was called in to assess the roofs weight-loading capacity.
2. Then five tonnes of concrete pavers were removed and in their place a layer of reinforcing mesh was installed.
3. A plastic drainage cell layer was laid down.
4. Then a water-retention and drainage layer.
5. A geofabric lining.
6. A light-weight 150mm-deep growing medium, which, if not so carefully composed, we would call soil.

7. The garden was framed by a band of gravel to provide extra drainage,
8. And finally planted with species that were carefully selected to ensure they could thrive in beds of this depth and accommodate the roof's wind and sun exposure.<sup>10</sup>

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**10 <https://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/rooftop-gardens-might-save-our-wildlife-so-why-aren-t-we-making-more-20210212-p571vk.html>**



Render of the Fuse Valley development in Porto, Portugal

This is a relatively small project compared to some, such as Sanjay Puri Architects' building for Prestige University in India with multiple stepped gardens, or the Fuse Valley development in Porto, Portugal which has a whole valley style hill on top of it. The first phase alone will see an investment of €200,000,000. The project, for a fashion retailer and a real estate developer, will ultimately be comprised of gardens, plazas and offices.<sup>11</sup> The 'Smart Valley' project as a whole includes 62,800 square meters of offices, a hotel with 75 rooms and 42 apartments as well as 5,000 square meters of retail space. The development in Matosinhos in northern Porto will start soon with the first phase expected to be completed by 2027, the last phase of the project is expected to start in 2030.<sup>12</sup>

A much smaller but interesting example of a designed 'wild' space is the Axel Vervoordt project in Wijnegem, Belgium where in order to create a public walking path through the site, Kanaal landscape architects directly hand poured a simple concrete mix onto the raw soil with all of its lumps and bumps, drawing a path system through the gardens. In my opinion this gives a beautiful rough effect that blends into the wild looking surroundings, and contrasts against the clean straight lines of the architecture. However relating to what was mentioned earlier about the permanence and non porosity of concrete as a material, I eventually find this to be another human-centric approach. The path doesn't spoil the wild aesthetic of the site, but in its materiality it denies the fluid qualities of the matter it looks to compliment. Concrete draws a harsh border between man and other species, such as insects and plants, as it is impossible for a new sprout to push through. There is however a trend of stone or concrete paving being laid loose to one another to allow grasses to grow in-between them, a good example of this is the Roche Campus Kaiseraugst in Switzerland by urban designers Bryum. I find this approach to be a clever intersection between human built infrastructure and *nature*, this is also known as '*nature*-inclusive design'. The term describes the

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<sup>11</sup> British luxury fashion retailer 'Farfetch' and US real estate agency 'Castro Group'

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.portugalbusinessesnews.com/post/first-phase-of-portugal-s-ionic-fuse-valley-starting-with-investment-of-eur-200-m>

process of designing and building a world where humans are not the only priority, but also flora and fauna. I am brought back to one question that inspired this text; do we 'make things look *natural*' simply in order to keep building in our destructive way without making any major sacrifices? Is it only a convincing greenwash or are there sincere intentions to be found, and even still we can ask what does good intentions mean?

A good example of something that puts the value of good intentions (in the context of human-design-*nature* relationship) in question would be biomimicry design. It is the attempt to follow patterns and devices that non human entities use to survive. So far it seems that most trials and experiments within the modern sphere of biomimicry have been novelty, actually quite technocratic and few and far between. They don't try to recreate *nature*, but rather use it's devices as principles that can be incorporated into something to serve humans. For example a public sunshade structure made of steel and rooted into the ground with concrete, with the shape of a leaf that directs rain water down into a reservoir of some sort, as would a large banana plant leaf in a rainforest.<sup>13</sup> To me this feels like a step in the right direction, perhaps through incorporating these devices into our systems the landscape could become more *nature*-inclusive. However the intention switch of designing with more than just the human in mind is still not there, it's simply making it act *natural*.

In an interview with Jan Maas, co-owner of BOOM Landscape architects in Amsterdam, he told me of an assignment he was given while studying landscape architecture, its basis was to turn a canal back into a creek. A creek is a waterway formed by flowing water pushing its way through the landscape, creating a *naturally* occurring groove in the ground. A canal on the other hand is a streamlined human made version of the same principle, usually straight lines of water uninterrupted by rocks and topographical variation. The assignment was to take a canal that was once before a

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.smartcitiescouncil.com/article/inverted-canopy-recycles-water-then-generates-solar-energy-too>

creek, and turn it back into a creek again. The creek is a biotope that fosters much more biodiversity than a canal, its nooks and crannies allow for different fish, insects, amphibians and plants to live in and around it. The canal on the other hand is designed to benefit the human life surrounding it. Essentially it is an efficient means of water management, it gives the water somewhere to be, without effecting other human activities in an undesirable way. The vital grading criteria of the assignment was to make the waterway liveable for a sturgeon fish once again, as that is the most fragile surviving species of the local creek habitat, the hardest to keep alive. In order to make it liveable for the sturgeon you have to cater for every prior stage of it's food chain, from the phytoplankton and grass vegetation which is eaten by small invertebrates like snails and insects, to dragonflies and butterflies, to the birds that feed off of them, all the way to the sturgeon. The sturgeon in this project is known as the target species, you're supposed to design to facilitate the needs of your target. Throughout most of human civilization we have very much been our own target species, Jan Maas lightly theorises that designing the built environment in a less human centric way can open us up to living better among one another with our differences, that goes for plants, animals and our own species. By living in a way where we think further than our own needs and interests, we can become generally more empathetic and blur the borders between the self and the other.

In the context of architecture and the built environment, covering a facade in *nature* to me just feels like an attempt to keep surviving with the luxury apartment blocks, paved streets and resource expending transport systems that we've gotten so comfortable and reliant upon. These efforts to re green our world are supposed to level out the carbon footprint that our impression leaves on the living environment, a sort of trade off or compensation that allows us to keep building the way we do, with toxic, non circular materials that keep the temperature rising and species dying. We are not intuitive like the rest of *nature* which has the simpler goal of survival. We humans seem to prefer to thrive, despite the fact that that in turn lowers our (and everything else on the planets) chances of survival. We want to develop vigorously and dangerously.

# Entertainment Industry

## *Through the lens of a sceptical millennial*

To further understand our desire to make it look *natural* I will turn to the ever more dazzling human phenomenon of entertainment. Not only do we look to expand our lives beyond limits we ourselves can fathom, but we also want to watch others do the same, from the comfort of our polyurethane filled couches, while our spines slowly but *naturally* deteriorate...

In 2019 the voice of Kourtney Kardashian graced our ears with the statement from Kim Kardashian: "I have seven stylists who put me in sweats and leggings. Just like that effortless look, you know? But it's really a lot of effort."<sup>1</sup> This quote brought to light the same phenomenon that arose in my thoughts around covering a building with vegetation to make it look *natural*. It is unfortunately the truth that Kim Kardashian has an expensive team of stylists to put her in lounge wear so she can go to the shop looking like she's effortlessly rolled out of the most glamorous bed in LA. It could also be that she requires such curated lounge wear for her television career, to convince not the public but the viewers of 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' of such a paradox.

Reality television made its first uttering in 1948 with the US television programme 'Candid Camera', but it only became a distinct genre in the 1990's. Since then it has become a huge worldwide industry that now dominates network and cable television in airing and viewing numbers in most countries. Shows like Keeping up with the Kardashians, Love Island and Kitchen Nightmares show 'real' people doing 'real' things in 'real' life scenarios (heavy use of the quote on quote device). It is widely accepted by now that these shows are not just made by means of cameras following people in their daily unscripted lives. Most know that these are often staged scenarios with prompted dialogue and choreographed screenplays, but somehow even under this knowledge we still name it, and choose to perceive it as reality. A clear early

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<sup>1</sup> *Keeping Up with the Kardashians, S17, E12: Cattle Drive Me Crazy, aired December 15, 2019*



example is "The Hills," a reality television show seemingly portraying real-life events, was exposed for scripting scenes to enhance drama, most notably in a confrontation between stars Lauren Conrad and Heidi Montag. This 'revelation' raised doubts about the authenticity of the show's narrative and highlighted the extent to which producers were shaping the storyline.<sup>2</sup> Reality television claims it's showing reality, but choreographs it's content as heavily as a theatre production, and finally attempts to execute it as if it's a *natural* situation by using certain camera, lighting and editing techniques. For an audience to be gripped by these television shows, it again takes a good portion of suspension

<sup>2</sup> <https://screenrant.com/the-hills-fakest-moments-on-the-show/>



Kim and Kourtney Kardashian filming a season finale with an rigorous camera crew

of disbelief, just like in the instance of accepting the persuasive pruned and trimmed bushes presented as *nature* in the different landscape architecture periods.

Moving from the television screen to the telephone screen, another globally welcomed form of making it look *natural* is posing for a camera. The art of the 'candid' portrait is one that goes back to the dawn of the photograph itself, the earliest example being Robert Cornelius' pioneering self portrait of 1839. He removed his lens cap, sprinted into the frame, pulled a dapper expression (not looking directly into the camera) and sat for more than a minute before covering up the lens again to stop the exposure. The image he produced that day is widely considered as the first successful photographic portrait of a human being.<sup>3</sup>

We can also take the painted self portrait as a case study, before cameras existed, wealthy royals would pay top dollar to have a painter capture them in a certain light. One of many examples is Hans Holbein's 16th century commissioned portraits of Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell.<sup>4</sup> These esteemed gentlemen would've had to sit for hours in an uncomfortable pose for Holbein to capture the desired outcome.

Nowadays people don't accept sitting still for hours to be captured, no, we want to see ourselves in action, as others see us, but in the best moment of that action. Not when our eyebrow is flexing from concentration, or when the wind blows our eyelid shut, but when we are in relaxed control of the situation in front of us. Currently, 85% of the worlds population has access to a smartphone with a camera on it, so the self portrait has never been so accessible and shareable as it is now.<sup>5</sup> The visual regurgitations of our daily doings on social media are the most widely used form of communication in 2024, and even the

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<sup>3</sup> Dinius, M.J., 2015. *The Long History of the "Selfie". J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, 3(2), pp.445-451.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Holbein the Younger - *Portrait of Thomas Cromwell, 1534 & Portrait of Sir Thomas More, 1527*

<sup>5</sup> <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/smartphone-stats>

key to security and survival for some.

The term 'influencer' roots from influence, and has been used for hundreds of years. Its earliest uses in astrology were to describe the mystical movements of the stars we see in the nights sky. It's often linked to power in the context of political leader figures, where someones values and opinions can have a wider influence, and this influence helps to expand their following, eventually giving them the majority vote to make decisions for an entire nation. According to about a quarter of Shakespeare's plays, being influenced is usually linked to a kind of irrational servility.<sup>6</sup> The condition is rarely happy or dignified in these scripts, rather a person is torturously gripped, beyond their control, by the mystifying influences of another person or power stronger than themselves. The word however only became a job title since the prevalence of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and twitter. While some who make their money through these means seek big bucks and fame (like the life of a 'celebrity'), for most it's a viable basic income, so in some ways we can call this a modern day survival. Scroll through a social media platform to see countless pictures, either taken by a friend or by the subject themselves (behold, the selfie) looking pensively toward the sunset. Then look at the comment stream that follows, 'love-heart-eyes-emoji' x 3, then repeat 7000 times. We as an audience can't get enough of this theatre, and the cheesy caption will be something between the lines of "Do what you like, like what you do" or "Don't quit your daydream." We love to see someone beautifully and '*naturally*' in their element, when we have all by now watched said influencer in the public square try 20 times for that picture, often adorned in beige garment props and 3 different changes of shoes. We know of its orchestration, yet we still choose to enjoy the 'effortlessness' of the end product. Either theatre really is becoming reality (like the prolific work of Shakespeare), or we are deeper into the previously mentioned suspension of disbelief than we know.

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<sup>6</sup> *A History of the Influencer, from Shakespeare to Instagram, para. 5. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/a-history-of-the-influencer-from-shakespeare-to-instagram>*

# Fashion

## *Through the lens of a 'h8r'*

For a long time now there has been pre torn, pre worn, washed out, clothing on high street and luxury brand fashion shelves. We see jeans with tears in the knees, hoodies with all the loose stitching hanging out waiting to catch on something and dishevel the rest of the garment. There are pre laddered tights, denim with paint stains or an acid wash, it's known as 'distressed fashion'. Until this fashion trend came around it was the case for most people that wear and tear in your clothing either meant the need for a repair or the need for a new garment. Depending on your class or paycheck these two options are differently available, not everyone is able to go and buy a new garment every time theirs gets a tear in it. Therefore having tears in your clothing used to be a sign that you share a less comfortable financial position, fashion industry has never been known to at all represent poor people. However fashion designers thought they would take that *natural* process of degradation into their own hands, call it a 'feature' and charge more money for it. The flaunting of torn clothing however started in a very different world with polar intentions.

In punk and anti establishment movements, tank tops with holes in them were a revolt against the clean clinical 'working order' aesthetic of mainstream culture. The intentional wearing and tearing was done by the punk themselves as a further act of resistance. The wear and tear was also functional in that it communicated the values and voices of the wearer. So to buy a mass produced, pre torn pair of jeans from a capitalist corporation for €2,000 seems a little pretentious, and boldly put, perhaps even a fetishization of poverty or revolt!

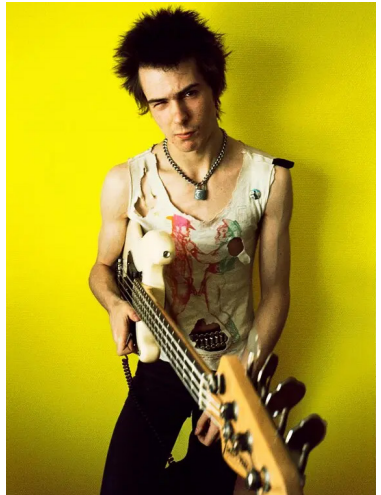
This pair of Balenciaga jeans doesn't look far off what you'd expect to see on someone that's been sleeping rough for the past years. It seems here that an act of resistance has been misconstrued into the thing that it used to resist against, through the glamorization of being

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mrporter.com/en-nl/mens/product/balenciaga/clothing/straight-jeans/super-de-stroyed-wide-leg-jeans>



Left: Yeezy 'Ripped Homeless Sweater' designed by Kanye West



Right: Sid Vicious, lead singer of famous punk band Sex Pistols

poor and angry. We can easily think that there is no need to say that there is absolutely nothing glamorous about homelessness. But do not forget that in a small population such as Amsterdam, a city of around 850,000 people, there are roughly 10,000 without a home. They sleep on streets, on boats and under bridges, and this number doesn't even include under 18 and over 65 year olds, or undocumented immigrants.<sup>2</sup> One pair of torn up, grass stained Balenciaga jeans could provide food and shelter for a homeless person in the Netherlands for 333 days, that's just shy of a year, quite the societal paradox one could say.<sup>3</sup> This 'upscale homeless' (a term used by multinational lifestyle retail corporation Urban Outfitters, to describe their own demographic) aesthetic blurs the lines of poverty and wealth gaps, and makes it harder to see and feel the problems we face, or arguably the problems we create for one another. It allows us to disassociate, through a very

*2 Official homelessness figures fell last year, but shelters report helping more people, para. 6, <https://nltimes.nl/2023/09/27/official-homelessness-figures-fell-last-year-shelters-report-helping-people>*

*3 Cost estimate calculated on government statistics, <https://www.utrecht.nl/zorg-en-onderwijs/hulp-en-ondersteuning-wmo/hulp-bij/hulp-als-u-dakloos-bent/>*

skewed form of association, from the people we share our worlds with. So by this point in my writing, we have disassociated from *nature*, and now from the rest of our species, we are becoming more and more individualistic, and further away from the collective '*natural*'.



# Make Up and Beauty Industry

*Through the lens of someone who applies cheap moisturizer once every 4 days*

The cosmetics industry is an ever growing market, serving for the most part people who wish to apply things onto and into their bodies to modify their appearance in some way. Reports show that the industry globally grossed \$104B in 2023, a clear indicator of how many people will spend their well earned cash to achieve a flawless porcelain facade.<sup>1</sup> The term 'make up' hails from the theatre world in the 1800's. It was used in reference to an actor preparing for impersonating a role, by applying their costume and literally painting their face. It meant to put together or assemble the 'look' that was required for the scene and the role. By 1886 the term had been replaced by 'cosmetics,' which was still being used primarily in theatre. Nowadays 'make up' refers solely to products in the cosmetic industry that enhance or alter the appearance, such as powders and oil based creams and lipsticks that are applied to the face.

Many cosmetics manufacturers have released lines of make up products under the name 'nude,' it has become a staple category in stores because of a growing appeal for a 'natural look.' A successful 'natural look' is achieved when you apply make up in such a way where it doesn't look like you've applied make up, what another might call a 'waste of time.' According to hundreds of tutorials online from different sources, it takes various complex processes to get to said result, cosmetics giant L'Oreal Paris suggests;

1. Priming for your skin type.
2. Reaching for a light-coverage base.
3. Concealing in the areas that need more coverage.
4. Swiping on some bronzer.
5. Adding cream blush and highlighter.
6. Applying mascara and neutral eye makeup.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1272313/worldwide-revenue-cosmetics-market-by-segment>



7. Filling in your brows.
8. Adding a hydrating lipplie.
9. And finally setting your make up with setting spray <sup>2</sup>

All of these steps involve carefully applying layers of powders, creams and glosses to build up a blemish-less glow, much like the layers on top of the rooftop garden that give it that wild untouched look. One could only achieve this level of desirability otherwise by treating the body with absolute dedicated care and attention, and by being born into a gene pull of the current beauty standard. As we know beauty is subjective to its time and context, it changes over time, moving with cultural nuance and the evolution of aesthetics. It wasn't always desirable to look this *natural*, for example in the 1500's in western royalist society, women applied vinegar and white lead to their faces daily, giving a paper white complexion that would symbolise youth and fertility. This trend was born out of Queen Elizabeth the 1st's desire to cover up the scars that remained from her fight with smallpox. When she came out of her hospital bed she caked her face with this equally deadly lead based concoction, the people saw it and quickly deemed it the beauty standard of the time. It's also said that people believed it represented high class, in that a face this pale surely doesn't see the outdoor manual labor that the working class paupers would be subjected to.

The 'beauty mole' is another cosmetic adornment with a long history within beauty standards. A beauty mole, mark, or 'impurity' on the face, often with certain placement, supposedly marks a *natural* beauty. Throughout different times and trends a mole would be seen as a blemish - a small mark or flaw which spoils the appearance of something, or in other words, a *natural* occurrence that takes away from the 'beauty' of something. Contrary to this definition, we see that throughout history facial moles have been perceived in often positive and desirable ways.

In Ancient Greece they called them 'olives,' an olive on your cheek

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lorealparisusa.com/beauty-magazine/makeup/makeup-looks/how-to-create-a-natural-makeup-look>

would suggest a future of prosperity, in 18th century Mexico faux moles were applied by women as a trendy style. Meanwhile in Europe faux moles were used by aristocrats to again cover up smallpox scars, but also as a beauty trend, a mole on the cheek was a sign of flirtation. In more recent times the 'beauty mole' has been adored by cultural beauty icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Cindy Crawford, Madonna, Eva Mendez and Blake Lively, all of which have made it an essential part of



Armada portrait of Elizabeth I (1588) - artist unknown

their *signature* style and image.<sup>3</sup>

If applying a new face on the surface doesn't satisfy, we can now have things pumped in under our skin to achieve the current beauty standard. 'Fillers' are bodily injections most commonly made up of Hyaluronic Acid, Calcium Hydroxylapatite, and Poly-L-lactic acid. They are used to plump and buff the skin, and in many cases to reverse the visual effect (or *natural* progression) of ageing in the skin and muscles. There are lots of treatment options, you can practically get your whole face pumped with fillers, as many people end up doing after treating the initial areas of concern. If you inject fillers into the under eyes of the average 60 year old, it will stand out against the rest of their ageing face, so you have to blend the effect in by re plumping the sagging upper cheeks, as well as 'ironing out' the frown lines between the eyebrows. And even then we have the eyes of a 30 year old above the nose, mouth and chin of a 60 year old, which starts to look slightly *unnatural*. Some people seek to modify their features for other reasons than reversing ageing, for example a burns victim or someone with birth 'defects' (in quotation marks because defect is also a subjective definition) may require facial reconstructive surgeries. Although not everyone has access to cosmetic surgery, for monetary reasons,, or just the fact that not all parts of the world have medical infrastructures that can facilitate such procedures.

One of the most popular make up products on the market is concealer, used to disguise imperfections or blemishes on the skin. Concealing something means to cover it up, for it not to be seen, humans have found a lot of other reasons to use this tool, as apparently we have a lot of things to conceal. An explicit example would be concealing our 'private parts' with clothing everyday, for as long as we wish to be socially decent, because seeing another person nude was at some point agreed upon as offensive, and thereby a prosecutable offence. We conceal our defences against a threatening neighbouring country, so that our attack comes as a surprise and we are better

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.townandcountrymag.com/style/beauty-products/g36611056/beauty-marks-facts-history/>

able to dominate and control. We conceal the wires and pipes in our floors and walls because they are too dangerous out in the open, and they're too 'all over the place and ugly'. We conceal our honest feelings and emotions because they're weird and embarrassing and if people see that they won't love us. We poorly attempt to conceal the 10,000 sq. meter warehouses on the sides of our highways in different shades of green to substitute the feeling of *nature*, because we are so embarrassed of the eyesores that we are forced to impose on people to maintain a steady production of goods.

There is a large element of theatre in all this concealing, just as a Hollywood film set is just a tall wooden board covering up the rest of the studio in order to create a reality, so is the tacky gradient from grass to sky on the roadside warehouse. To cover up the reality that we've established but we'd rather not face, with a false one that we'll accept as 'convincing enough' for us to again, like the French formal garden and the reality television, suspend our disbelief.



## DOT IT

Using your finger, take a little bit of Concealer from the pot and dot it onto any areas you'd like to cover.

**WAR PAINT.**  
FOR MEN

## Defence Industry

*Through the lens of someone who's never been in a fight*

I've mentioned survival as the motivation to 'make it look *natural*', the most explicit human example of this is military camouflage. This case ties in with all forms of concealment mentioned prior, the building covered in plants, the influencers glamorous Instagram posts covering their coreographed lifestyle, the torn jeans covering the rich millennials regressive values. It can be rough out there in the world, from navigating bureaucratic systems to beauty standards, there's threats everywhere. Although on a battlefield it's quite literally kill or be killed, and many methods of preventing the latter involve covering up and concealing.

Camouflaging is formally known as the act of covering something or someone in order to be concealed, often we use it to prevent being visible to an enemy. In the context of military combat usually the mind jumps to nets of faux leaves, that make an individual or a checkpoint blend into the trees in a remote location. We can also consider less explicit forms of camouflage such as the behaviours of an undercover agent while concealing their identity, or laying down a fake airbase to divert the enemy missiles to a false target, or the encryption of information.

In both flora and fauna we see this self protection device used by many different species to hide from predators, ensuring survival for another day. This is something evolutionary, that species have developed to survive, as they live even more so in an unforgiving reality. Camouflage can be a pattern, made up of fragmented organic shapes that match the contours and colours of the backdrop one wishes to hide within. Green and brown for jungle or forest warfare, brown and tan for desert warfare. These shapes and colours are not always organic however. For example, if you want to hide within a cityscape you'd better off adorn linear patterns as the surroundings

are much more uniform and human designed, this is known as 'urban camouflage'. During world war 2 the 'Ferret Armoured Car' was a popular defence vehicle and the models designed for Berlin were covered in block shapes in different shades of grey, illusively blending into the architecture of the city.

A ghillie is a suit made of fake grass and vegetation, covering the wearer head to toe, again used mainly in military combat situations, by a sniper hiding in a bush or a foot soldier navigating through a forest in enemy terrain. The term ghillie suit may be a reference to the Ghillie Dhu ('black-haired youth' or 'dark-haired lad'), an earthen spirit clothed in leaves and moss in Scottish mythology. The visual of this archetype links back to the vertical gardens mentioned earlier, tall mossy structures draped in vegetation. We also see non human structures draped in vegetation in the military. Bunker is the word for a (nearly always underground) fortified structure designed to protect people or materials from incoming attacks, they are spaces where people can shelter in in times of vulnerability. They are often blended into their



British snipers from No. 34 Squadron RAF Regiment training in ghillie suits in 2015

surroundings using earth and topography to cover them, to further disguise and protect the users from harm.

Moving from the human to the artificial lens, there is a vast network of cameras and surveillance systems now that can see far further and more detailed than the human eye. With all of these new technologies it is much harder to remain concealed, this makes things more difficult for not only those in military defence situations but also in our digital presence. We are being tracked and monitored by eyes, cameras and cookies more often than not. There is an increasing number of websites and companies that employ your phone's front camera to track your eye movements. The companies then use that data to target you with certain information and advertising. Such platforms include social media platform TikTok, clothing retailer Bestseller, and even more worryingly Google, the fourth largest company in the world!<sup>1</sup>

Camouflage can also be used to conceal from cameras and surveillance in public space. Disruptive camouflage with pixellated designs prevent a camera recognizing an individual within its square grid of pixels. These pixellated camouflages are now often used in military combat as we fight more in cities and inhabited areas than ever before. We can see examples in fashion of the same visuals being used, a whole wave of 'pixellated fashion' spearheaded by high brow designers such as Kunihiko Morinaga and Loewe in the last five to ten years. Another less obvious example of concealing in urban environments is the recent wave of technical outerwear in streetwear fashion. Designers such as Arc'teryx, Goldwin, North Face and J.L-A.L have been designing high function shell suits with hoods that cover the entire face, completely concealing the identity of the wearer.<sup>2</sup> These garments would have once been used by the likes of outdoors enthusiasts and arctic voyagers, but now they are worn in urban areas, perhaps by vulnerable civilians who feel the need to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.accessnow.org/tiktoks-focused-view-creepy-feature-monetise-your-emotions-2/>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://j-la-l.com/pages/aw23>



cover up from the oppressive levels of visibility we face. Comme Des Garçons designed a fashion collection purely around these themes, it saw garments similar to the concealing streetwear clothing, along with other pieces that conceal the identity of the wearer through different means.<sup>3</sup> The Washington post reported on the collection saying "In the right setting, among like-minded souls, even the most eccentrically dressed person fits in. The woman in a \$5,000 coat does not look extravagantly dressed among her peers. A man in a cheap T-shirt and torn jeans does not seem poorly clothed within his own tribe. They can, in a sense, become invisible — not in an anonymous, solitary way, but in a comforting one. They can disappear into the warm embrace of their community." Visibility levels are higher than ever before, in the realms of the physical, digital, and possibly soon even mental and emotional. With a growing interest in brain implanted computers such as 'Nuralink', we may one day soon be offering full visibility of our thoughts and feelings. Perhaps we will then have to cover up internal thoughts and emotions somehow, hopefully this doesn't cause the same disconnect within the self as we face with *nature*.

It seems blending in is part of surviving, to not be killed, eaten or exiled within worlds of potential predators. Whether it be a flounder fish changing the colours of its scales to evade its predator, the rooftop garden of a building project ticking off the regulations of a 'green policy'. The layers of luxury cosmetic concealer protecting the high schooler from the social blacklist, to reality television distracting us from our own dreadfully boring existence. These are all methods of covering up, camouflaging, and evading the threats we identify.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/10/04/the-power-of-being-invisible-in-oversized-clothes-from-comme-des-garcons/>





# Guilt

## *Through the lens of a fellow hypocrite*

I have recently and quite intensively been exposed to the practice of landscape architecture. This leads to a fresh but very limited understanding of the workings of public space, infrastructure, ecology, and the politics underneath these complex structures. What I have seen in the practice is that there are a lot of genuine efforts and intentions of professionals to work in a progressive and conscious way. The practice often has fundamental cross overs with environmentalism, ecology and botany, after all a large part of the job is planting trees and vegetation, to make things 'greener'. Another large crossover with landscape architecture is urbanism and social infrastructure, we design the spaces between the buildings where different people and species eventually mingle and interact. Many professionals in the field are working far beyond planting trees to improve the prosperity of life on earth, they are active in discussions of social wellbeing, environmental reparations and future strategies. They are helping to maintain the survival of our world and everything on it.

However what I have also seen is that there are many stakeholders in these operations, all with varying backgrounds, motivations and bank account balances. From the investors, to city councils, to environmental agencies, engineers, residential developers, architects, urbanists, they all have their own grand intentions within a project. In the end unfortunately it's usually the people with the most money and power who have the final say. So if the investor favours packing in a few extra small living situations into the site over the wild bee-garden the landscape designer proposes, that's what will most likely happen. If the car-free network of paths that the urbanist lays out for bikes and pedestrians to peacefully move through their neighbourhood doesn't fit into the city's zoning plan, it will mean (often with no room for negotiation) that priority goes to car traffic. It kind of makes sense in a capital driven world where resources seem to exist solely for the humans disposal, and are primarily used in order to form more efficient

and lucrative cities.

Stakeholders could choose to feed their resources into something else to benefit that something, but often the 'powers that be' choose to feed them into something in order to better themselves. Reciprocal transactions between an investor and their subject do exist but more often, at-least in the context of environmental sustainability efforts, you have to sacrifice some personal gain to better the other. This is known in our society as a charitable act, when an entity has more than enough to ensure its own survival, it has the opportunity to give some of its excess to better something else. In capitalism, the progressive and less monetarily-profitable approaches usually get shut down in the name of impracticality, when really it says something about the priorities of the people who have that final say.

I like to believe however that public opinion enters the situation at some point to spoil the day of the investor. If it becomes acknowledged enough that, for example, something as normal as ordering a household device from Amazon means supporting a company that has no regard for the environment, that practices supply chain slave-labour and evades taxes, people will stop supporting it eventually! This is evidently not always the case, take fast food giant McDonald's as another example. Despite the countless voices telling us that the food and how it's produced is harmful for the consumer, the employee and the environment, and of course the slaughterhouse cow, we still continue to eat more of it globally each year, \$14B worth in 2023 in fact.<sup>2,3</sup> While this doesn't necessarily apply to McDonald's, food is essential to survival. A €1 cheeseburger might hit the spot in the short run, especially for a low income working-class person. But unfortunately that's what keeps these unsettling companies thriving, it

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1 Boewe, J. and Schulten, J., 2017. *The long struggle of the Amazon employees*. Brussels: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 28.

2 <https://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/MCD/mcdonalds/gross-profit#:~:text=McDonald's%20gross%20profit%20for%20the%20twelve%20months%20ending%20September%2030,a%204.98%25%20increase%20from%202021>.

3 Kincheloe, J.L., 2002. *The sign of the burger: McDonald's and the culture of power* (Vol. 27). Temple University Press.

would seem, after all the horrifying evidence, that this is exactly what policy makers want in the end, to allow these companies to render the public powerless, in the shadow of their own survival.

From fast food to furniture, the home interior industry equivalent would have to be the Swedish company IKEA, the largest homewares producer in the world. I sit here writing from my very own IKEA dining room table. It is made of formed wood-scrap, then wrapped in a 0.5mm plastic layer of faux hardwood textured laminate. The ground beneath me consists of

1. A thin cosmetic veneer of European Ash
2. Resin based panels of laminate
3. Followed by a polyurethane insulation layer
4. 6mm of sound absorbing cork
5. A plywood sub flooring
6. And finally a thick concrete foundation.

Half of the furniture I share this room with is wrapped in a layer of IKEA textured plastic to make it look *natural*.

If only these thin layers of *natural* material at all represented the trees and other life forms that I share the world with and carelessly exploit for their resources. There is no doubt that most humans intrinsically seek a connection with *nature*, and for very good reasons. Studies show that exposing people to physical (and even virtual) forms of *nature* led to an increase in participants' overall well-being.<sup>4</sup> Visiting *nature* even once per week, can increase our well-being and health, surely that's a relationship worth nurturing. Instead, the worlds largest furniture producer IKEA uses an entire 1% of the worlds wood annually, and out of those 13.56 million cubic meters of solid wood, only 23% meets environmental stewardship standards.<sup>5</sup> All of this wood goes

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4 [https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ecs2.4677#:~:text=Previous%20research%20on%20connection%20to%20nature&text=\(2009\)%20found%20that%20exposing%20participants,increased%20well%2Dbeing%20and%20health](https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ecs2.4677#:~:text=Previous%20research%20on%20connection%20to%20nature&text=(2009)%20found%20that%20exposing%20participants,increased%20well%2Dbeing%20and%20health)  
5 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/environmental-stewardship>

into roughly 100 million pieces of furniture per year, shipped and sold across the world.

We have reduced the notion of *nature* to a look, by means of highly exploitative and choreographed practices, this further disconnects us from it.

For many of us, *nature* is now nothing more than theatre. A convincing movie set facade that maintains the thin veneer of connection with the rest of life on earth that humans still nostalgically cling onto. At the beginning of this text we pondered together upon semantics; tearing apart notions of *nature* and *natural*, and establishing a base on which to investigate the urge to 'make it look *natural*'. Based on the things I have talked about since, our ideas of *nature* do not seem very *natural*. The treatment of these words represents the beliefs we hold for them, and we, the strongest force on this earth, must decide where we wish to take this notion. Are we happy to keep on making things look, feel and act *natural* to satisfy the denial we have for our own actions having very real consequences? Wouldn't we rather move forward with honesty, integrity and love?





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