Writing Sample_Carrie Smith

The Uses of Houseplants in Interiors: A Review

Byron Company. Residential interior, probably New York City, c. 1890. CCA. PH1980:0116:001

For millennia, humans have brought living plants inside our built environments as a way to have year-round access to plants. Archaeologists have found evidence of clay pots inside ancient Chinese and Egyptian buildings, which are thought to have been used by the aristocracy and clergy to house indoor plants used in perfumes, seasonings, and medicines (Horwood, 2007, p. 8). As Europeans began to colonize the world in the 15th-18th centuries, the removal of plants from the lands being colonized and their relocation to Europe signified the “taming” of those lands and people, and as such, the plants became a profitable luxury commodity (Sparke, 2020, pp. 15-17). But it was not until after the Industrial Revolution that a number of economic, social, and technological changes—such as the growth of the middle class, increased personal wealth, increased

rates of literacy (especially among women), and advanced building technologies (such as indoor heating and cheaper glass)—contributed to the viability and popularity of plants in interiors (Sparke, 2008, p. 17). From that moment forward, we have lived alongside plants in our homes, offices, and commercial spaces.

As indoor plants became more commonplace, varieties that were functional for food, medicine, etc., were exchanged for decorative plants that allowed people to express their tastes within their interior environments (Horwood, 2007, p. 10). This expression of the self was a key aspect of the rise of modernity. Prior to this era, much of life was lived in the commons, where the privatization of property or of the self was impossible. The French philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin connects the rise of modernity/modern life and the private individual, and describes how our modern interiors became “the inside location of people’s experiences of, and negotiations with, modern life” (Sparke, 2008, pp. 8, 12–13).

Since that modernizing transition, decorating with plants has become so commonplace that we barely register the presence of plants in our interiors today. Houseplants are found everywhere—banks, schools, magazine spreads in *Elle Decor*—and they are sold widely in places as disparate as big box hardware stores, grocery markets, IKEA, and boutique plants shops. It is perhaps because indoor plants belong to multiple disciplines—the cultivation of plants falls into the domain of horticulture while decoration with plants is within the purview of interior design—that they have gone unnoticed and have not attracted much academic study. No single discipline has claimed indoor plants for itself.

Rather than being a detriment, this ambiguity allows indoor plants to operate in ways that are not subject to the functions, expectations, and disciplinary boundaries that constrain other objects in the interior. There are almost no rules for who can sell plants, who can buy plants, what they can be used for, and where they can be located. For these reasons, plants encourage fluid and novel ways to participate in the designed environment, as we will see below.

Decoration

Representations of plants and flowers have long decorated our built environments. Ancient structures were adorned with flora on column capitals, arches, wallcoverings, and other architectural elements. Humans have long found delight in the representation of nature in our indoor environments, and have decorated our indoor spaces with those representations. It has been mythologized within architectural history that the genesis of the Corinthian capital—an incredibly ornate ancient Roman column crown that uses an acanthus leaf motif—occurred when a first-century BC sculptor spotted wild acanthus leaves growing through a woven basket set upon a grave. He was delighted by this serendipitous mixing of human-made and natural, and replicated it in stone to top off a column (Vitruvius, 1914, pp. 104–106). This became one of the most identifiable and widely-used decorations in ancient Rome.

When plants moved indoors, opportunities arose for them to become part of this same decorative palette. For example, many Victorian indoor gardening handbooks encouraged the practice of growing ivy around interior arches to mimic carved wooden archways from the Middle Ages. The live ivy recreated the effects of the wood-carved representation of ivy, and in the process, became decorative itself.

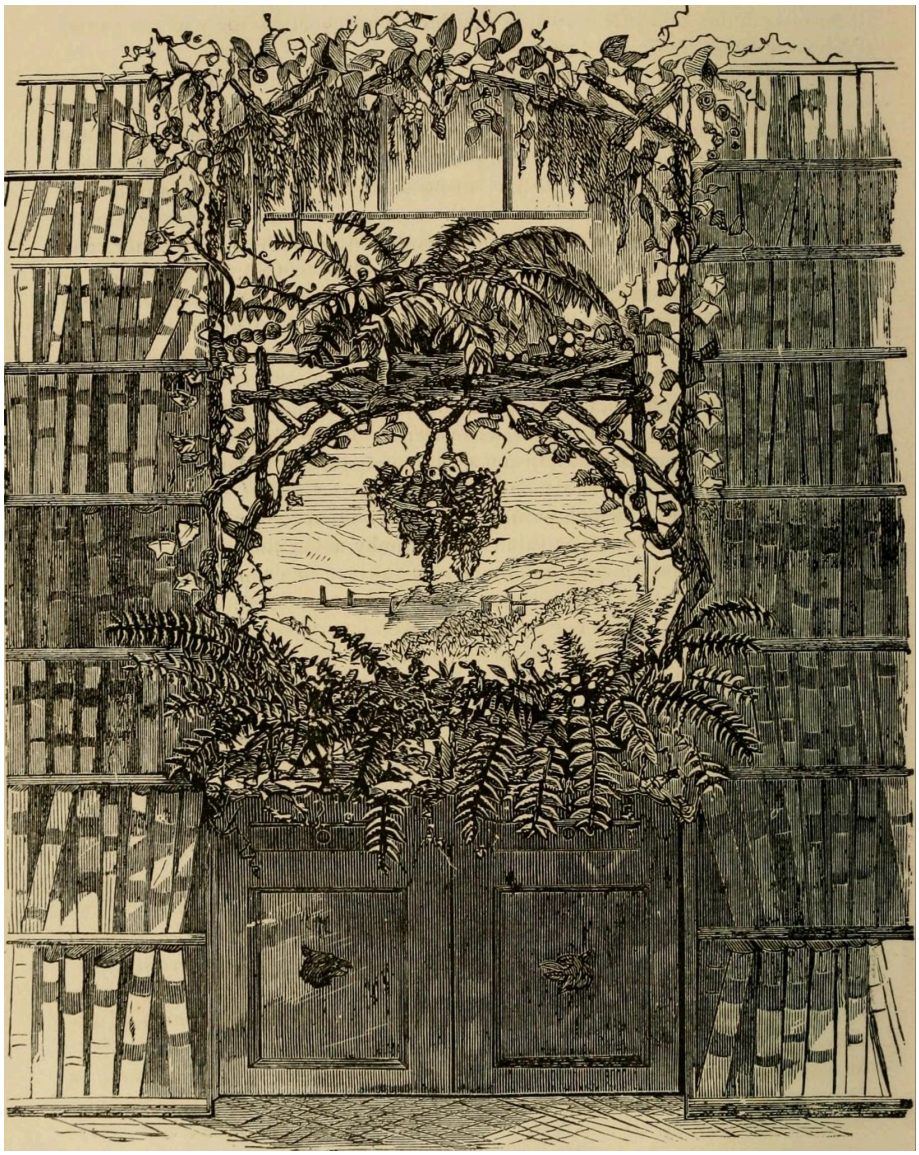

Illustration from Henry T. Williams's Window Gardening, 1878. Image courtesy of LuEsther T. Mertz Library, the New York Botanical Garden

This decorative function replaces any previous *practical* function that indoor plants may have had and creates a new way for humans to impart beauty and delight—the functions of ornamentation and decoration—in our interior spaces (Sağlam, 2014, p. 127).

Spatial Delineation and Mediation

In 1608, the British agriculturalist and inventor Hugh Plat wrote *Floraes Paradise*, one of the first English-language volumes on gardening to contain a chapter on indoor plants. Even in those early days of the Enlightenment and the burgeoning fields of biology and ecology, it was understood, if only empirically, that

indoor plants needed sustenance from the exterior. Platt writes, “You must often set open your casements, especially in the day time, which would be many in number; because flowers delight and prosper in the open air” (Plat, 1608, p. 31). As humans brought plants inside, we knew we had to maintain the plants’ relationship to the outdoors and we located them near openings within the opaque surfaces of our buildings. Although this seems to be an obvious and simple fact, it created a nuanced relationship between the plant and their possible location within our interiors. Plants can live with us within our interiors, but with a strong and nonnegotiable relationship to their source of energy: the sun.

In the centuries since *Floraes Paradise* was written, plants have been used in numerous ways to create varied readings and delineations between *inside* and *outside*. One common way uses plants to enlarge, expand, and blur the threshold between the two. Garden windows bulge out from their typical planes in line with exterior walls, thrusting plants placed inside towards the outside. In urban streetscapes where plants are sparse, indoor plants lend their greenness to the outdoor landscape, inverting the more typical understanding that we go outdoors to experience plants and nature. Furthermore, in the context of exhibitions, theatre sets, or other spaces where an interior is built within a shell, indoor plants can be used as a way to designate a space as *indoors* when we need cues to help us understand the designer’s intent

For example, in Berlin in 1931, an International-Style model home was built within an airport hangar for the *Deutsche Bauausstellung* (German Building Exposition). To demarcate the interior of the residence from its location within the existing interior space of the hangar, tropical houseplants (including the ubiquitous rubber plant) pressed up against the inside of the residence’s window while a topiary-style plant signals “outdoors.” Here, the type of plant helps the viewer designate what part of the exhibition we should understand as *interior*, and which we should understand as *exterior*.

Arthur Köster, photographer. Interior view, Deutsche Bauaustellung, Berlin, 1920s. Otto Haesler Celle, architect. CCA. PH1982:0249

In a more contemporary example, the Japanese architect Junya Ishigami is known as a kind of disciplinary anarchist; it is not coincidental that houseplants are featured heavily in his designs. His body of work moves fluidly between furniture design, architecture, and landscape design. For example, in his project “Tables for a Restaurant” a series of giant communal eating tables function as sites for miniature landscapes created with potted plants, allowing diners to select a spot for their picnic-like dinner within a model park. Here, he combines landscape design and furniture design to create spatial divisions and set moods.

Junya Ishigami - Tables for a restaurant, Yamaguchi 2008.

These cases exploit the ambiguity of the indoor plant to encourage new and at times surprising readings of the relationship between the interior and the exterior. The indoor plants create situations that defy our expectations of the roles of the interior and the exterior and, in doing so, encourage us to rethink the distinction between these two spatial categories.

Status Symbols

From early on, indoor plants have been understood as objects capable of conveying information about social status, indicating wealth, taste, and environmentalism. In the 1800s, plants were expensive and required an interior environment that could only be achieved in houses with certain technologies and luxuries. Plants also required quite a bit of care and attention in order to survive in this less-than-ideal environment (Martin, 1988, pp. 19–21).They quickly became entangled in the spectacle of wealth and status display—what Thorstein Veblen termed *conspicuous consumption* (Veblen, 1912, p. 68). Indoor plants were fully objectified and

commodified as Victorian housewives consulted guidebooks and periodicals to keep up with the most fashionable varieties and houseplant trends.

As the Victorian era came to a close, indoor plants had become commonplace and inexpensive (Horwood, 2007, pp. 92-94); consumer culture had grown to include more veiled symbols of social status. Keeping in step with these changes, our use of indoor plants evolved to signify more nuanced concepts of lifestyle. Because plants have a connection to nature, indoor plants came to signify health- and eco-consciousness—concepts that have been shown to be closely associated with higher education levels and social standing (Buttel and Flinn, 1978, pp. 17–36). Status is no longer conveyed through the conspicuous display of time and money invested in the plants; rather, indoor plants are now able to symbolize status indirectly, through indicators of lifestyle and values.

This conflation of living object and status symbol allows indoor plants to be used in ways that were not commonplace a century ago. Today, houseplants are used in advertisements to sell eco-friendly washing machines, and hydroponic window gardens are marketed as part of a healthy lifestyle. Because indoor plants are both decorative objects and living organisms, they have become symbols, and their meaning and uses in the interior has expanded.

From the Samsung Newsroom's "How Samsung's Washing Machines Can Make Your Laundry More Eco-Friendly", published March 1, 2021.

Summary

Plants, when brought into our interiors, serve many functions: decoration (the addition of something that is pleasurable and beautiful in our interiors); space delineators (indicating and sometimes blurring the distinction between indoors and outdoors); and as status symbols (representing our values and social standing). That they are able to serve all these functions is a by-product of their long history within our interiors and their evasion of a discipline or field of study. Our relationship to indoor plants continues to evolve and will likely produce more functions, like NASA's claim (which has not been verified) that houseplants can be used to cleanse our air–an important function in this time of climate catastrophe (Wolverton, 1989, p.2). This is a field of study that should continue to be monitored and cataloged, so that we might learn more about ourselves and our relationship to nature.

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