

# Natura Domestica: nature and/of/in homes

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## Nature and Homes

What does it mean to live in homes which go by names like 'Vasant Lawns', 'Hyde Park', 'M K Meadows', etc? The celebrated residential tower-buildings, dominant expressions of Indian metropolitan urbanity have shown a marked preference for such christening; increasingly so in the recent past. These names are remarkable for the presence of natural elements like 'Lawns', 'Park' and 'Meadows'. Cursorily, one finds expressed in them, perhaps at a symbolic level, an association with the foreign, the exotic, and the natural in various forms. At least in figurative terms their occurrence in the name provides a glimpse of their import. This paper takes this keenness of the name to express nature as symptomatic of a deeper relation between nature and the urban home.

The recurring motif of nature functioning probably for evocative appeal points at least to its being a prized element in naming the home. Does this strong presence, indicate to its being crucial, maybe even necessary in conceptualizing the home? An inquiry of this sort can be prematurely aborted with an obvious reason: that these names do not go beyond being indicative of an expressed desire for that which is lacking in congested urbanity<sup>1</sup>.

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1. With these names, the apartments also seem to make claims to have reserved more area so as to provide for such activities. In a space-starved Mumbai, one knows only too well the impossibility or falseness of such intentions, if they exist. It is more a result of building bye-laws which demand open spaces proportional to the height of the building, than that of any any well-meaning intent. The question to ask is not whether really there is a meadow or not. Or maybe it is not surprising after all,

This reason can be extended to connect the purpose of this evocation to the softening of the dreary urban reality. Even so, in no way does it inform us about the modality of expression of this desire. No clue is supplied as to which aspect of the complex category of nature is regarded suitable and subsequently structured for purposes of home-making. Even if the virtual presence of nature is a result of the actual distance from nature, it tells us nothing of the manner in which nature is comprehended. Therefore, it is imperative to ask: 'How is nature comprehended?' But the question: 'How is nature conceptualized in the apartment-block home', can only be posed with the awareness of it being nested within a bigger question: 'How is the apartment block-home conceptualized?' This investigation might be worthwhile therefore not just in grasping how nature is being interpreted for the home, but also for possible insights into the conceptualization of the urban home itself.

## Nature of Homes

The Urban House is a thing Architects design, Builders construct and people occupy. Such houses become homes through inhabiting or dwelling. The home can therefore be understood as a practice<sup>2</sup>. The above question regarding

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that nature would only be prized in places where it is not easily available, like the oasis in the desert. It would be well neigh impossible to find a meadow in Mumbai.

2. In Shelly Mallet, 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature, in *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pg 62, the phenomenological position of viewing the home as a verb and therefore not as a thing, but as a practice, especially helps observe how people perform the home.

the home-concept can be rephrased: ‘How do people do the home?’ allowing the role of nature within this performance to be examined. The house in a material-physical sense is an object of design; a most common architectural type. The home as a concept which involves intangibles is multi-dimensional<sup>3</sup>. In Urban India, especially metropolises like Mumbai, the Home cannot be thought of separately from the Apartment-block. The space-starved and skewed urbanity of Indian cities is legendary. So also are the exorbitant real estate, the homelessness and the vertical stack of compartments called home.

Literature on urban homes in India is dominated by discussion regarding lack of housing facilities and housing for the poor. Popular perception of urban homes, especially the intangible aspect of apartment-building homes, does not seem to have merited much discussion (except from a real-estate perspective). Various media like magazines, newspapers, movies and television could be potential sources for deposits of popular home images. These provide alternative indirect sources, other than direct discussion and interviews with people, to gain access to popular comprehension of home. The builder’s brochure for apartment-blocks is one such source which might make available insights into the function of nature in urban homes.

### Images of Home

If the architect’s drawings and renditions form part of the specialist discourse on the house, then the builders/developers brochure/marketing materials forms part of the popular discourse on the home. The brochure, produced by the builders, is primarily intended for eliciting investment

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3. Ibid. describes the home as a subject is at the intersection of various disciplines like architecture, psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, philosophy, etc.



Figure 1: The private housing brochure and its contents

for residential projects through bookings from prospective inhabitants. For this purpose, not only does it describe the house, but also happens to communicate intangible aspects concerned with the ‘feel’ of the home. This dual aspect takes the form of: the functional description (represented by technical drawings like plans) and the conceptualization of the home (represented by general images involving people and the tag-lines).

Both find representation through pictorial/visual and linguistic material. These materials also include evocative images and poetic texts of a very general nature. The brochure is a device to present an alluring image of the home with promises to actualize it. In doing so it also never fails to clarify its own status on the back flap – that all material contained in the brochure are of a conceptual nature and all images and drawings including the plans are subject to change; the developer holding the right to those changes<sup>4</sup>.

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4. Kabra and Associates, Builders and Developers, in their brochure, *An abode for every dream*, NOTE: “All the plans,

The Brochure acts as a source which attempts to articulate the meaning of a good home. It attempts to describe the home and tries to capture its attributes. It also professes what a home should be. The role of nature in both these operations could be gathered. The simulacral status attributed to the object via advertizing hence demands alertness when treating the brochure as a popular source<sup>5</sup>.

### Performing Home

An assortment of around forty contemporary private housing brochures (both actual and e-brochures) from various metro-cities in the country form the basic advertisement material pool for the ensuing analysis. Around two-thirds of the brochures are from Mumbai. These are then subjected to analysis which is primarily semantic in nature. As discussed above, some images and texts in the brochure explicitly deal with communicating the feel of the home; a significant number of which figure nature.

This theorizing is restricted to: (1) the middle/upper-middle class, (2) young and middle-aged couples whom the brochures seem to target, (3) Indian metro-cities (not smaller

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drawings, amenities, facilities, etc. are subject to the approval of the respective authorities and would be changed if necessary. This discretion remains with the developers". This is true for all brochures.

5. Jean Baudrillard in his 'The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures', London: Sage, 1998, describes third-order simulation which is a model which generates what is described as 'hyperreality' – which is actually a world without a real origin. The real is not part of the equation here. According to him, hyperreality becomes in post-modern situation, the dominant way of experiencing and understanding the world. The housing brochure falls into this category of the 'pure image' because of two reasons: (1) the object (apartment) does not yet exist, and (2) the disclaimer which attributes all images to the status of concept. Both these push the status of the home described to that of an ideal.

cities and towns), (3) 'new' homes (the brochures sell new homes), (4) the seller's view-point and portrayal of people's ideal home desire. The adopted method of analysis involves freeing the images and text from the brochure-context so as to enable their grouping into conceptual categories, which might not do justice to the brochure-experience as a whole, intended to perform as a marketing-device. The brochure might produce home-meaning as whole, which might not be reducible to its parts, therefore the limitation.

The aim is to observe and examine the nature-component within this home-meaning production; the premise being that the images will be revelatory with respect to nature's role in ideal home projection. Indications of nature in the form of elements are already provided by the home-names. The deposition of these representations in the images will be studied. Further, considering the home as a practice, activities of people in natural settings (through physical gestures and the setting in which these occur) will be examined. Only the general images from the brochure are separated out for analytic treatment; the functional descriptive images of the object are ignored. The images are isolated from the brochure such that they are whole, uncropped, as they were originally intended to be viewed. This reading of the advertizing material focuses on the content and not on the design of the brochure.

### Images of Nature

The possibility that names might be functioning purely at a symbolic level, prods us to observe the logo of various apartment-blocks for further indications to its existence. Flowers and leaves, in terms of recurrent occurrence, side-line trees, mountains, lawns and landscape (see figure: 2). In some few cases, nature is restricted to the symbolic color green.



Figure 2: Along with the name, the home-logo indicates the presence of natural elements

Nature conveyed through both photographic images and graphical renderings in the form of: (1) Vegetation, (2) Water, and (3) Sky, offer more insights. As vegetation it makes its appearance through the following elements: (a) lawns/grasslands, (b) potted plants, (c) flowers, and (d)



Figure 3: The forms in which Natural elements appear in the brochures

trees (see Figure 3). This manifestation happens essentially through two formats: the whole – which attempts to present a comprehensive view of nature and the part – which reveals only fragments, generally in close-ups. Each of these elements in terms of the photograph (refer to Figure 3) appears as:

**Lawns/Grasslands:** In formats showing nature in the whole, the grassland/lawn appears extending till the horizon, touching the clear blue sky. Other whole-formats include perspective views of the building which reveal the presence of the lawn in the garden, around the apartment-block. The birds' eye-view or site-plan especially shows the layout of the landscape around the building – all that is not the paved area is covered by green (indicating lawn). Part-formats display fragments – a patch of lawn; sometimes blades of grass.

**Potted plants:** Potted plants have an invariable presence in all terraces/balconies. Such spaces are almost always shown for their possibilities of opening to the outside and containing 'green'. The balcony/terrace being the only bit of private open space (not to mention the allure of this

aspect) in the urban context, is highly coveted. The projection of this valued space is proof of a strong desire for the house-nature interface. Though isolated views of this transition space itself are few in number, the images that portray the buildings from the outside display spaces like the balcony and the terrace. The presence of potted plants is evident in the external perspectives of apartments, in the rows of green smudging the parapet-lines of the balcony. Even in the plan-drawings, there is a strong desire to show the 'openness' of the space through depiction of plants. Therefore to possess a bigger balcony indicates more nature and very obviously, more expense! The threshold space is where the 'spillover' of the house onto the outside takes place; a private outside. But potted plants populate not just these threshold spaces, but also the interiors of the house. They are very conspicuously present in the all the interior views of the rooms.

Flowers: Flowers appear in the grasslands, as flowering plants in the landscaped areas, they appear in logos, in the brochure, in the interior in flower-vases, in people's hands. Symbolically, the close-up images attempting to capture the freshness and the blooming beauty of nature might stand in for a lot of things. Like they are displayed on a variety of communication devices like marriage invitations, greeting cards, etc. The flowers all appear to belong to exotic varieties, the kinds that grow in hill-stations and in cold climes. The brochure is interspersed with close-up images of nature – flowers, lawn, tender leaves, etc. these close-ups naturally blur the background thus erasing the context.

Trees: Whole-formats show trees crowning the landscape in the distance, at the margins. Sometimes dense tree-canopies are seen at a distance. They are conspicuously present in all site-plans. In the Part-format, snapshots of parts of trees – like trunks, branches and boughs are shown.

Water: As in the case of the images discussed above, the ones depicting water-bodies have less to do with providing a better idea of the place or site than evoking qualities other than that of the context. Rarely do they have a contextual basis – the presence of a natural water-body on or its closeness to the site. Even if they do, the attempt to depict the context is always too exaggerated, glamorized and exotic. Irrespective of their presence/absence on the site, images of water-bodies materialize in the brochure in two forms: (1) as the ocean stretching away onto the horizon or the lake and (2) as the quintessential swimming pool – images of the pool-side with colorful parasols, reclining chairs for sun-bathing, etc.

Sky: The clear blue sky is a favorite with all the brochures, appearing mostly as spring-time and by no means summer; occasionally as the sunset sky!

What does the presence of these elements and the manner of their presentation tell us about the role of nature? Let us examine more closely the elements and the modality of their being made evident.

The display of the grassland/lawn, is on the one hand, a broad and sweeping landscape extending till the horizon. On the other hand, it presents itself in finer form as blades of grass. This presentation as both lawn and blades of grass signifies the requirement to see it both as a whole and as detail. The part-format, in so far as they are close-ups (which predominantly they happen to be), attempt to showcase detail. Activities like sitting, sleeping, playing, sprawling, occur in close contact with the lawn. Trees generously scattered especially over site plans and elevations might have a purpose more than anything of projecting the developed site as aesthetic and beautiful. But in the close-up format, it appears as a fragment. The sweeping fields of flowers, in the whole-format, other than offering an abundant visual

treat, appear in the part-format, in close-ups, as single flowers or bunches of flowers. If in the whole-format, the potted plant is part of a space, like the terrace or the interior, then in the part-format, the potted plant itself is the central element of the image. In the first case, it is shown as having been included into the living space; in the second, the potted plants' property of 'containing nature', shows the potential for its inclusion into daily life. Both are part of the desire to incorporate and get intimate with nature. While representing water-bodies, in the first case, the visual quality of nature as beautiful and vast is projected. In the second, it is nature as contained for recreational purposes. The sky appears either as horizon against which human activity is silhouetted and something to be gazed at or as background for the apartment building itself. In

part-format, it appears as a view from the home-interior framed by the window.

On the one hand, the vastness of the grassland, the trees as elements of site plans and elevations, the sweeping fields of flowers, the huge expanse of the water-body, and the immensity of the sky and the horizon, project nature to be experienced as an abundant, grand spectacle. On the other hand, the patch of lawn, blades of grass, the tree-trunk and canopy, the bunch of flowers/single flower, the water-body as a swimming-pool, the sky/horizon as a framed element (through the window) of the interior, etc indicate the experience of nature up-close, as something to be lived close to; to be maintained at close quarters, made part of, organized and incorporated into daily life.

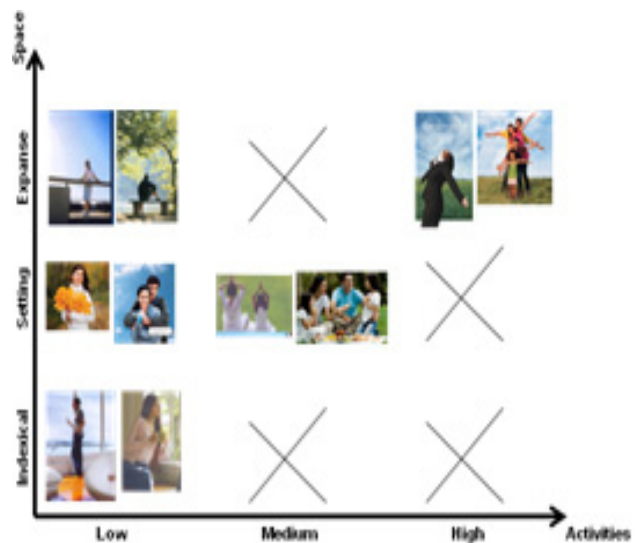
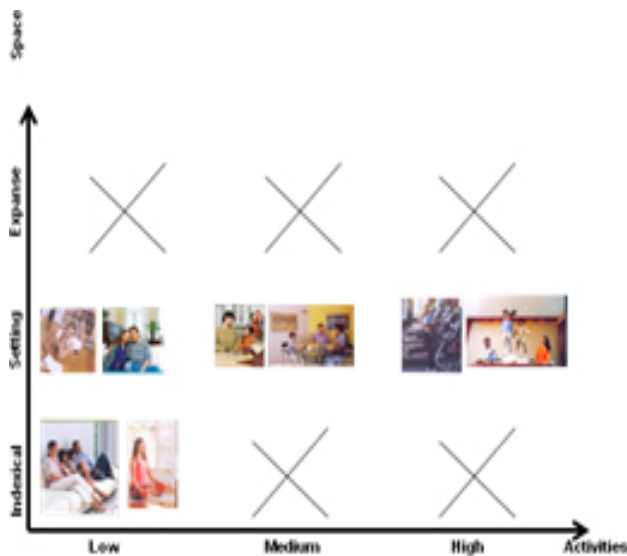


Figure 4: Space-Activity matrices for both Exterior (Nature) images and Interior images



## Performing Nature

'What is the ascribed role of nature in the performance of the home?' This query shifts the primary focus of examination from elements of nature to activities performed 'in' natural settings. This question, based on the premise of treating the home as a verb, i.e. as a practice, helps gather connections between the activities, nature and the home<sup>6</sup>. The depiction of nature through elements as an expansive, unrestrained space (as seen in the case of elements of nature), both directly and indirectly seem present even in relation to activities. In addition, are instances of natural space receding into the background as setting permitting the activity to dominate. Thus, there are three categories of representing the quality of nature as a space which is: (1) Expansive, (2) Indexes expansiveness, and (3) a Setting/background. The activities themselves, based on the level of the physical effort read from their gestures can be categorized into: (1) high (portraying tremendous physical action), (2) medium (actions perched between high action and quieter ones) and (3) low (physical activity at a minimum) (see Figure 4). Though the focus is on activities in natural settings (basically the exterior), comparison and contrast with activities in the interior, would not only make known activities shared between the two, but also the ones exclusive to the exterior.

High-activity (shown incapable here of indexing space), finds expression in the unbounded and unrestrained expansive quality of exterior natural space; this exuberance being tamped a little in the interior, which very obviously

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6. This question subscribes to the view that the home is a practice. This means the home needs to be seen as performance. Therefore here, the concentration is specifically on the performance of the home, and the role nature would play in this performance. How the home is practiced or how people 'do' the home in Shelly Mallet, 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature', in *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pg 62

is devoid of sweeping spatiality (Figure 4). High activity is restricted to using interior space like a setting; its quality being fully realized only in the exterior. Medium activity, on the other hand, in both the exterior and the interior formats, is associated with space only as a setting. Lacking the gravity of low-activity and the exuberance of high-activity, the commonplace and mundane medium-activity require the employment of space as setting. Low-activity, present in all three forms of space in the exterior, is excluded only from the category expansive of the interior-format. It is solely in low-activity that the expansiveness of space gets indexed. In the category expansive, people performing low-activity function as figures, turned away from the camera, part of the expanse.

If the indexical quality is a function of the low-activity images, then the setting-like quality belongs purely to the medium-activity images. Both these traits are shared by the exterior (nature) and interior (room-space). It is only the expansive quality associated with both low-activity and high-activity that belongs exclusively to the exterior-nature. This is perhaps the attribute, lacking in the interior, which is being compensated for by the category expansive. As already indicated by the indexical, this open spatiality is something that only nature seems to unambiguously offer.

High-activity images primarily employ nature as a spectacular setting highlighting the grandness of the extraordinary gestural expressions. Medium-activity images portray nature as being another space for the performance of the more ordinary activities of familial bonding. Low-activity images utilize nature as a finer component of the contemplative and reflexive relation people have with themselves and with nature. Nature appears thus in two roles: (1) as that which imparts in both a direct and implied fashion, a spectacular, vast spatial atmosphere; an anti-thesis of the restricted confines of the interior-home room-space, and (2) as a component, very much like the



Figure 5: Leisurely activities and setting as part of nature are expressions which tend to evoke vacations

interior-room, to be incorporated into the intimate texture of home-life.

### Leisurely Nature

These characterizations of nature through the settings, even remotely, fail to affiliate with urban spaces. Much of the depicted activity in no way appears conventionally domestic. As much as they seem to belong outside the city, they also belong outside the domestic realm. The human figures engaged in activities that seem chiefly extra-ordinary and extra-daily, can definitely not be done on a normal working day. If routine performances and the mundane everyday are out of question, what exactly are they busy in? Their remoteness from the domestic certainly reminds one of places and activities associated with holidays and vacations; notions belonging to the concept of leisure<sup>7</sup>. It becomes abundantly clear on conceptualizing the images explicitly in terms of leisure (see figure: 5).

7. Rob Shields, in 'The Production of Space', pp 141-185, in 'Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics', USA: Routledge, 1999. According to Lefebvre: if work excludes time for living, then non-work becomes completely identified with 'leisure spatialization' – spaces meant exclusively for leisure.

When read in conjunction with the tag-lines like 'Wake up to a new horizon everyday', 'the New World beside a lake', 'Discover Life in full Bloom', 'Choose to live green', this tendency is reinforced. Therefore, nature as conceptualized in the brochure, expresses desire for spaces and activities far away from congested urban confines. What does this mean for the home?

### Nature in Homes

Nature is employed for the exclusive projection of unbounded and unrestrained space. Both the direct and implied references to sweeping and expansive space through nature, difficult if not impossible in an apartment-home, point to the desire for such projections to overcome the restricted confines of a flat. This seems to be the primary role accorded to nature. Additionally, this role at least in spatial terms, fulfils the requirement of advertizing to exaggerate and glamorize the home<sup>8</sup>.

The mass-housing feature of the apartment-block, in its expression, is restricted to technical drawings like the plans and the elevation. The general images gloss over this actuality by framing a single individual or a single family as the primary consumer of the abundance that is nature. This focused portrayal of the exclusive private ownership of the bountiful and sweeping nature, by denying the presence of the community, evokes a single-family bungalow or a farm-house in the urban outskirts.

The representations of nature as both spectacular and something to be included into the intimacy of the home, both of these, are possible only in a place away from the city. The activities performed in nature also in no way evoke

8. Examples of the inclusion of nature in privatized public spaces have allowed conceptualization of nature itself as simulacra. Todd Gitlin 'Domesticating Nature', Theory and Society, Vol. 8. No. 2 (Sep., 1979), pp. 292-297.



domesticity. They point towards a very non-urban place. The disposition of the leisurely activities in nature towards holiday and vacation, reinforce the tendency of representations of nature (as spectacular and as something to be lived close to) to point to places outside the city. This projected landscape appears on the one hand as exotic and on the other as well-managed. This combination of both the exotic and



Figure 6: Artists rendition of Sky-villas in Unitech Developers, 'Unitech Grande-Noida', Noida<sup>10</sup>

well-managed quality of the landscape is only possible in a holiday-home or a hotel or resort. Therefore the question: 'Does the home (a place of relatively stable, permanent residence) desire to pull in features from another dwelling-type like the resort<sup>9</sup> (a place associated with travel culture and mobility)? From this perspective, the aspect of the exotic

9. 'A resort you will never check out of' advertized on a hoarding by Vijay Group, Vijay Vilas, Thane

and foreignness in the name (eg: 'Jasper' in 'Jasper Lawns') begins to makes sense.

What do representations of nature and activities performed therein suggest in terms of a home-nature relation impossible to actualize in the urban realm? Does it indicate an expression of the urban romanticism for dwelling-types like bungalows and farmhouses? Or does it announce the coming of a new type resulting out of a negotiation between a desire for the single-family house and the apartment-home? At least the recent concept of sky-villas, which are essentially apartment-blocks consisting exclusively of duplex flats (see Figure 6),, having liberal terrace-area, advertized as being vertical bungalows, advocate this negotiation.

#### References:

- Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, London: Sage, 1998  
 Rob Shields, 'The Production of Space', pp 141-185, in Lefebvre, Love & Struggle: Spatial Dialectics, USA: Routledge, 1999  
 Shelly Mallet, *Understanding home: a critical review of the literature*, in The Sociological Review, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pg 62  
 Todd Gitlin, *Domesticating Nature*, Theory and Society, Vol. 8. No. 2 (Sep., 1979), pp. 292-297.

#### Images from the following Housing Brochures:

- Omaxe, Park Woods, Baddi  
 Parshvanath, Exotica, Gaziabad  
 Skylark Housing Pvt. Ltd, Skylark Apartments, Mohali  
 Runwal Group, Runwal Pride, Mumbai  
 Wadhwa Developers, Palm Beach Residency, Navi Mumbai  
 Marickar Group, Morning Glory, Cochin  
 Marvel, Zephyr, Pune  
 Lodha Group, Lodha Imperia, Mumbai  
 Vijay Group, Vijay Vilas, Thane  
 Arihant Universal, Arihant Darpan, Mumbai

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