

Life Indoors

Rachael Wakefield-Rann

Life Indoors

How our homes are shaping our
bodies and our planet

palgrave
macmillan

Rachael Wakefield-Rann
Institute for Sustainable Futures
University of Technology Sydney
Ultimo, NSW, Australia

ISBN 978-981-16-5175-5 ISBN 978-981-16-5176-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-5176-2>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2021

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © Retro AdArchives/Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Preface

As I write the first words of this manuscript, I am sitting in Heathrow Terminal 3, awaiting my expedited flight home to Australia amid the COVID 19 outbreak. Like pandemics and epidemics before it, this virus' success is bringing into sharp relief the invisible processes that link us in ways we hadn't previously appreciated.

The ways that different groups of people over time have imagined invisible yet ubiquitous 'things', such as microbes, genes and chemicals, has been a preoccupation of much of my research. Different ideas about the boundaries, trajectories, and intentions of these micro-agents, and the material proxies that allow us to sense their presence—such as foul odours or discoloured surfaces—have been an enduring interest. The ways diverse groups of people individually and collectively imagine the forms, intentions and mutability of microscopic things tells us something about how they understand matter and life, and the relationship between them. What is at stake here is not only how the relationship between bodies, and the environments that support them, are understood, but how we envisage and attempt to construct immunity to the many perceived dangers of the world.

In this book I look at how the kinds of things have been made perceptible, and those that haven't, have influenced our relationship with our most intimate habitats: our homes. Homes are intended to provide a form of immunity against the dangers of the world. The ways they have been designed and assembled into cities reveal much about dominant cultural ideas of health, wellbeing, immunity and disease at specific times and places, and what and who they have missed and marginalised. At a time when research across scientific fields is beginning to suggest that many of these cocoons of immunity we have built for ourselves may actually be making us sick, I propose it is time to look beyond minor structural tweaking to reexamine the concepts of health, immunity, bodies and the environment that have been layered into our cities and buildings over the past two centuries.

Like much of my research, this book sits at the crossroads between multiple disciplines that are often disconnected, yet generate insights of great mutual consequence. *Life Indoors* assembles and synthesises recent and historical research from the history of medicine, design and architecture, the philosophy of biology, process philosophy, microbial ecology, human ecology, complex systems research, the sociology of health and sustainability, geography and anthropology to probe the classifications and abstractions that produce ideas of healthy dwelling.

When considered together, this body of work suggests an ancient metaphysical question: is it more helpful to make sense of the world in terms of bounded building blocks or ever-changing processes? This may seem like an abstract, and even irrelevant, debate to call upon at first. However, as I will show throughout this book, the ways we conceptualise the world at its most basic level underpins how it is theorised, measured, the metaphors used to comprehend it, and ultimately how we intervene in it to benefit ourselves and others.

Acknowledgements

This book was written on the traditional lands of the Wiradjuri, Gadigal, and Wodi Wodi peoples. I want to begin by acknowledging and paying my deepest respect to their Elders past and present. I recognise and respect their continuing culture and the great contributions they make to this country. I know my (very partial) engagement with the Aboriginal cosmologies of Australia in the process of researching this book represents the beginning of a lifelong interest.

A few more brief thank yous: first to my family and friends, for providing me with space, food and patience as I scribbled away over weekends and early mornings—particularly mum and David, and the Lee family—but most importantly Tom, for the constant emotional, intellectual and material sustenance.

The core ideas and impetus to write this book began bubbling away in the back of my mind as I was finalising my Ph.D. I would like to thank Dena Fam and Susan Stewart for guiding me through that journey, and the truly unique transdisciplinary research program offered by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney. My

confidence and commitment to transgress disciplinary silos owes much to these influences.

The early threads of this book were pulled together during a Visiting Fellowship at the University of Cambridge, in conversation with Jennifer Gabrys and others from the Citizen Sense research team. Some of my early ideas were also tested at the wonderful Chemical Kinships panel organised by Angeliki Balayannis and Emma Garnett at the Royal Geographers Society—Institute of British Geographers Conference in 2019.

Finally, I would like to thank the exceptionally careful and generous reviewers tasked with scrutinising the proposal and final manuscript of this book, and my editor Josh Pitt. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to shepherd me through this process.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Pathogens as Substances: Hygiene, Germs and Domestic Design	45
3	Inflammatory Urban Atmospheres: Biodiversity, Climate Control and the Materiality of Buildings	77
4	The Ecology Makes the Poison: Toxicant Exposure, Antimicrobial Logic and the Biology of History	123
5	A Relational Approach to Life Indoors	169
	Index	213