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March 2001

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MICHAEL PORTER

• STRATEGY! (NOW MORE THAN EVER)

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• "IF I WERE STARTING A COMPANY TODAY..."

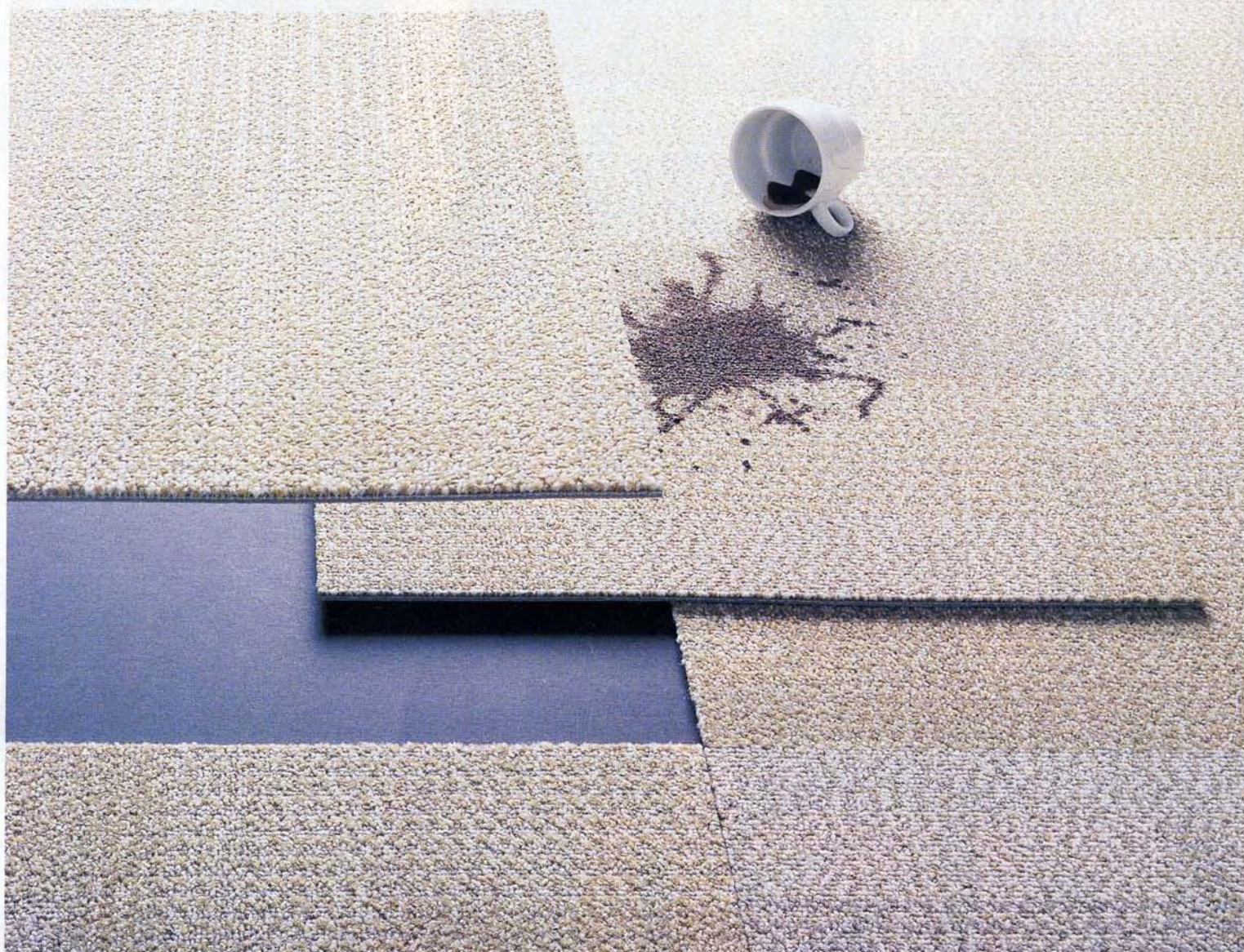
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IT GETS WEIRD

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LANDSCAPE of the interior

"I USED TO THINK THAT BEING A DESIGNER WAS ABOUT color and pattern," says David Oakey, 49, a leading textile-design consultant who has been in the business for nearly three decades. But it wasn't until a few years ago, when he happened upon a book by Janine M. Benyus called *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (William Morrow & Co., 1997), that he changed his ideas about design wholesale. "Biomimicry is about how we can learn from nature to solve the problems of the future," explains Oakey, who is also the primary design consultant for Interface Inc., an ecologically conscious carpet manufacturer. "After all, nobody ever visits the forest and thinks that the colors and patterns clash."

Oakey and his LaGrange, Georgia-based team have created a carpet tile for Interface called Entropy, using nature as their design guide. Like stones or leaves, each tile is slightly different, yet when laid side by side, the pieces blend together perfectly. The result: In addition to creating a natural-looking interior landscape, the tiles can be installed faster, since they don't have to be oriented in a specific way. And there's less of a need to buy run-over stock to ensure a seamless dye lot, since single tiles can easily be pulled up and replaced if they become soiled or torn.

Interface is not the first textile company to develop products using the principles of biomimicry,

Oakey says. The designers of the Speedo suits worn by swimmers during last summer's Olympic Games used the cellular patterning of a shark's skin as a model to create virtually drag-free swimwear.

The Entropy line has been a high-performance hit for Interface as well. Introduced in eight earth tones last June, Entropy is now being offered in shades like blues and burgundies, colors typically associated with corporate environments. Says Oakey: "From designers to facility managers to end users, everybody just shakes their head and says, 'Why didn't you think of this before?'"

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