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## DAVID OAKLEY IN CONVERSATION

20 JUN 2012



*Lead designer for Interface David Oakey is undisputedly one of the foremost advocates of biomimicry. Here he talks about how nature informs his work.*

Sustainability was never an important factor for [David Oakey](#) early on in his career. Then 2 game-changing events occurred. In the first, Ray C Anderson, the founder of modular carpet manufacturer [Interface](#) where he worked made it his mission in the 1990s to eradicate the organisation's environmental footprint by 2020; and second, he chanced upon a book on biomimicry that began to inform his approach to design.

Today, Oakey is a fervent champion and speaker on biomimicry – the study of natural processes and designs to solve human problems, and he tells us why.



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Flow – part of the FIT collection

Can you elaborate on how joining Interface and reading Janine M Benyus' book Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature became turning points for you as a designer?

When Ray Anderson decided that his company would become sustainable, it challenged me as a designer. And for about a year I didn't understand what it [meant]. I thought we would have to go back and start to design with wool and natural materials. Most people think that's the sustainable way. It is in a way but it's [also] not. Because we've outgrown the carrying capacity of the earth to go back to nature, we can't all have wool carpet or cotton or hemp or bamboo, it's just not practical anymore. The population has grown so much... we're going to need all the land to feed us.

That's when I read the book [Biomimicry], which was the big thing that changed me. Janine [the author] taught me one thing. She said everything is natural, even the computer, the car, the building... The materials came from fossil fuel – ancient sunlight. The problem we have is that they do not fit into the cycle like natural materials, and we [have] kind of messed the whole system up because we've taken, we've extracted, and then we've just buried them again. We're not putting them into a closed loop [to be] recycled. And that's what we need to get to.

The concept of biomimicry has been around for ages, has it not?

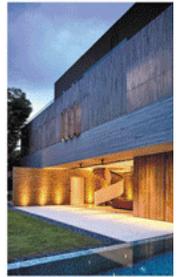
Yes, it's not new. In fact if you go back far enough, that's how people would learn – from nature. Because there were no books... you would learn from what you saw, and you fit it in. And now we've kind of drifted away from that... We've tried to overpower nature, and we can't do it.



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There's no question, it's frontier. But if you take even the people who are just thinking of sustainable design, there are principles [of this] in there... designs will start to get closer and closer to nature.

I think biomimicry is a place where you can go and learn. If today you're trying to solve a problem, you have choices. You can go to your computer and start to look up history or what other [made-made] ideas have happened.... What I'm suggesting is to go ask that question to a biologist, and they [may] give you an answer that's a little different.

So you can get biologists [to] come up with [the] secrets or you can have an engineer or an architect ask a biologist, or you can start to bring these professionals together...



*The Raw collection*

Can you take us through your work process at Interface?

What we look to do is really to create good design, good products that perform, but [in] everything we do we've to keep pushing sustainability. So every new product must contain more recycled content than last year's. We measure each year as we keep going forward. And so we keep pushing the limit as far as we can go in sustainability.

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*David Oakey's award-winning office, Pond Studio, in LaGrange, Georgia is suitably surrounded by nature and designed to fit the land on which it stands*

Biomimicry – we ask the question every time we're designing something. What can we learn from nature?

We've been working in the last couple of years on the change of the office... the Millennials are changing the office completely. It's about these young people – attracting them, retaining them, and making sure that they will come to work.

So if that's the question, go to nature and you can even type in 'attract and retain in nature' and one Sunday morning that was what I was doing on my computer and [out] pops the Bower bird... It is probably the plainest bird, no colours, no plumage, and so it has to [find other ways to] attract a mate. And so it builds an elaborate Bower nest out of twigs on the floor. Then it starts to decorate the floor with little flowers [in] different colours. Each male is competing for the next female to come. So they become interior decorators!

And so suddenly we're finding interior designers starting to think that they've got to design interiors [like] the next Google office or the next Apple office that will be a fun place for the next recruits to come in... So even [for] something like that we go and ask nature.

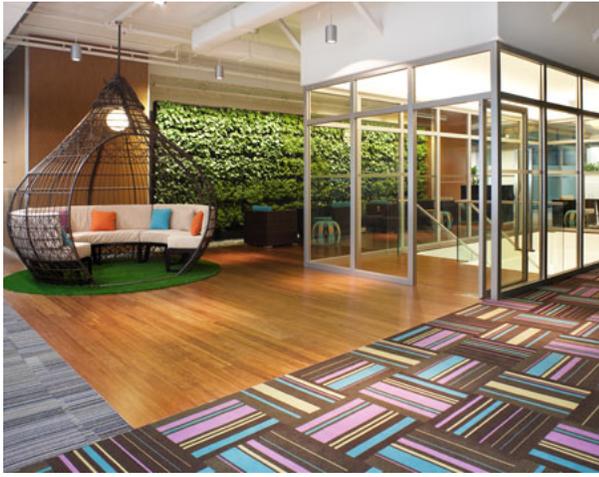


*Oakey at work*

**So how does that relate back to designing a carpet?**

The colours of our carpets that we're starting to design are so colourful; they are more like small area rugs that get inset into big areas of carpet [for] spaces where people come together. We started this 3 to 4 years ago when we worked on a project for Google in Zurich and they put in carpets that we would have never dreamt... it was all custom-made.





*The SAP office – an Interface project*



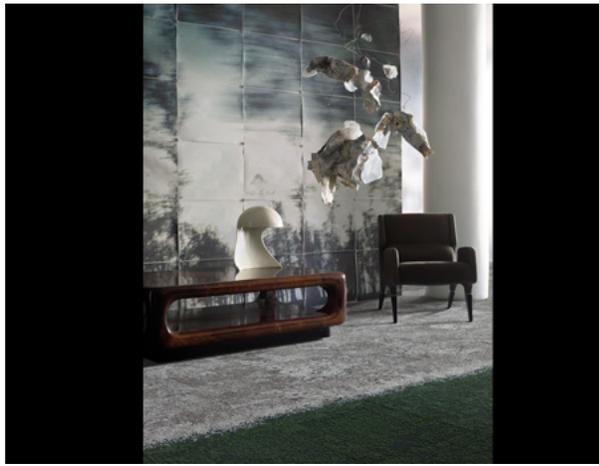
*DBS – another Interface project*

I also hear that Interface has just launched its first global product offering?

[Another] global trend that we're going to bring out [in the collection Urban Retreat] is actually kind of connected back to biomimicry. One of the other big trends we are seeing all round the world is a trend we call megacities... So as the cities get bigger and bigger, we're going to see a change to bring nature back into the cities. Every time [you] start to see the next new building, especially [a] green building, you're going to see a blend of nature and structure together.

So we're seeing a big trend [where] we want to be connected to nature. [In] this global trend, colours are going to be very natural, the textures, they're all going to have this real feeling of nature.





The new global product offering, Urban Retreat, explores man's connection with natural elements and the intersection of nature and manmade materials. It will be available in Singapore in September

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