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San Francisco Chronicle

Nature may offer vital clues on rebuilding New Orleans Forests and butterflies hold key to better design, says author

Susan Fornoff, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

PRINTABLE VERSION

When Katrina's winds flattened Gulf Coast homes and businesses, biologist Janine Benyus looked to the trees for clues on how to rebuild.

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"Under a forest, you have as much biomass as you have on top -- there are root systems grafted to other root systems," Benyus said at San Francisco's Palace Hotel last week. "So when the wind blows, ... notice how many trees stood among buildings that fell. When we go back to build, we have to ask those trees: How are you still standing?"

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Houston Chronicle

New Orleans Times-Picayune

It's all about "Biomimicry" for Benyus, who in 1997 wrote the so-titled book on the maverick science of appropriating the best ideas of nature to solve problems and improve conditions for humans.

Thursday, at the International Interior Design Association's Leader's Breakfast honoring architect Richard Hannum, Benyus connected some recent findings and current projects in her field to the design, architecture and building tasks of her listeners.

Bird feathers show a Georgia carpet tilemaker how to put together a seamless product low on adhesives so that health care facilities will want it. Trees combing moisture from fog prompt a scientist in England to find a way to extract potable water from humid air. A kingfisher's beak inspires engineers in Japan to construct a quieter bullet train.

"We're surrounded by genius," Benyus told them. "These other organisms are elders compared to us. We are a very young species. ... Three-point-eight billion years is a very long time to do R&D."

Benyus ventured that "our interiors will tell us when there are contaminants in the air." Canes with eco-location inspired by bats will guide the blind; jewel beetles, which "can smell and feel a fire 50 miles away," will lead us to

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new smoke detectors; the lobster's ability to sense chemical plumes in a molecule of water will translate into a way to make sure we're not drinking sludge.

Studies on how butterflies and peacocks display brilliant colors yet contain no pigment except brown are paving the way to chemical-free hues. Work by Jay Harman, with Pax Scientific in San Rafael, has answered the question "How would a nautilus make a better fan?" with spiral-based air handlers that save energy and are quieter than electric fans.

The "lotus effect," where rainwater does the cleaning, could revolutionize car paints, roofing and even our household cleaning products -- a prospect that Benyus said didn't go over too well when she shared it with an Amway convention.

The lotus effect also has led to the development of a formaldehyde-free plywood that, according to Benyus, is "very cheap" and is being tested by Columbia Forest.

Benyus urged listeners to create "designs that are conducive to life" and promised them free access to a database of natural design solutions that is being tested by the Biomimicry Guild at database.biomimicry.org.

More information about "biomimicry" is accessible online at www.biomimicry.net.

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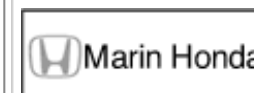
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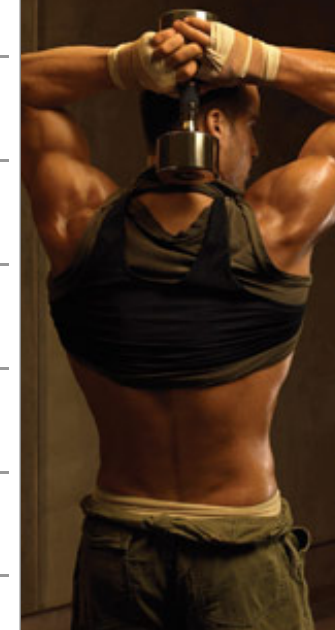


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