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NEW THINK

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Edited by Julian Sancton



AIR FARE

Remember the good old days, when the best things in life were free? Now the very stuff we breathe may come at a premium.

by ALLISON ARIEFF

As fresh air becomes more rare, it becomes, well, rarefied. Last year, a British company called Aethaer began selling “heritage-style glass jars” of air collected from various bucolic British locales, from “wild untouched meadows to wind-kissed hilltops,” for \$100 a pop. While Aethaer’s founder claims it’s foraging air in part to increase awareness about pollution, he also admits there’s a market for it, and not just as

Dadaist objet d'art. Shortly after the product was announced, a factory in China ordered 100 jars. Indeed, the air in the People's Republic has become so unhealthy that respiratory problems kill an estimated 4,000 people each day, which helps to explain why people are willing to pay for just a few gulps of a healthier alternative.

Aethaer has a Canadian competitor, Vitality Air, that harvests its air from the Canadian Rockies and compresses it into spray cans to provide “dozens of clean breaths for use by your entire family.” (A \$23 can of “Banff” promises about 80 “shots” of air.) Vitality's co-founder Troy Paquette has said he hopes future climate talks will obviate the need for such products but remarked that “if China remains looking like it does right now, then absolutely I can see clean air becoming a commodity.”

The problem isn't limited to China, of course. As ridiculous as paying a premium for a lungful of canned air might sound, Aethaer and Vitality are targeting what is, sadly, a booming sector. The World Health Organization now calls air pollution “the world's largest single environmental health risk,” contributing to 3 million deaths each year (more than twice the global death rate from auto accidents). With toxic smog reaching emergency levels in cities from Mumbai to Paris recently, our enjoyment of something we thought was plentiful and free is increasingly at risk. No wonder fresh air is becoming a luxury good: It's plain old supply and demand.

Evidence of this trend can be seen worldwide. Visionaire, a 35-story condominium

loft building in New York's Battery Park City with units priced at \$2 million-plus, circulates fresh air to individual apartments (part of the homeowners' association fee, one suspects). Jing Yue Hui, a dim sum restaurant near Shanghai, caused a stir in 2015 for charging its patrons for clean air. In Caracas, Venezuela, Simón Bolívar International Airport introduced a charge of \$13 per passenger to fund its new air-conditioning system, which the

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airport claimed would help “eliminate contaminants in the environment and protect health.” Hotels like the Ellis in Atlanta offer “fresh air” floors (usually at an extra cost), where all mattresses and pillows are sealed, carpets are specially deep-cleaned, all hard and soft room surfaces are treated to remove dust and germs, and every room and even the hallway have an air-filtering machine that runs 24 hours a day.

Fresh air and sunlight have long been tied to quality of life and marketed to the leisure class (think spas and summering and sanitoriums in the Swiss Alps). But this idea of clean air as a premium product is newer. “Not long after 9/11,” says David Gissen, author of *Man-*

hattan Atmospheres: Architecture, the Interior Environment, and Urban Crisis, “projects emerged like the Cesar Pelli–designed Solaire, a luxury green apartment building with multiple levels of air filtration—a feature prominently advertised by the developers as a green amenity that enabled them to mollify the fears of potential residents who would be anxious about moving into an area so close to the World Trade Center site, with its questionable air quality.”

Gissen adds: “I don't think architects or engineers consciously think of themselves as transforming clean air into a luxury amenity. But I do think that this is the obvious result.”

It doesn't have to be. Some companies have started thinking on a grander scale about the social benefits of clean air. Based in Connecticut, AtmosAir is working on improving air quality in sports arenas to bolster athletic performance, office buildings to increase productivity, and hospitals to cut down the risk of infection. The global architecture firm Gensler recently issued a report called “Design for Polluted and Toxic Environments,” concluding that it was imperative, no matter how challenging, to reduce both indoor air pollution and energy consumption in its buildings. Airlabs, a London-based start-up, has installed filters that lower the level of nitrogen oxide from exhaust fumes at London bus stops and subway stations, to better the pedestrian experience.

This last example points to a more hopeful model: fresh air not as private amenity but as public good. And free. ♦

PICTURE THIS

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL (AGAIN)

The trade-off between camera size and quality has dogged photographers for decades. Finally, there's no more need for compromise.



Oskar Barnack, an optical engineer in the early 20th century, loved taking pictures on his long hikes through the woods near Wetzlar, Germany. Back then, that meant lugging around cumbersome field cameras and equipment, which only worsened his asthma. This challenge prompted him to design one of the first handheld 35-millimeter cameras, circa 1912, merging portability and quality for the first time. His innovation opened the door for guys like Robert Capa to capture the soldiers

landing on D-day and Alfred Eisenstaedt to memorialize their return.

When digital technology first arrived, in the '90s, once again size and weight mattered. Top photographers faced a dilemma: They could opt for heavy DSLRs that broke the bank, and the shoulder, or poor-quality point-and-shoots.

The quest for lossless miniaturization has finally yielded a product without compromise with the 20.2-megapixel **DxO One**. The palm-sized gadget works well on its own, but perhaps its most

impressive feature is the way it can couple with an iPhone, directly or remotely. Once connected, your smartphone becomes a remarkably versatile control panel, allowing you to adjust everything—from depth of field to focus to shutter speed to ISO—at the tap of a finger. With its outstanding low-light capability, 32-millimeter prime lens, and superfast *f*1.8 aperture, the device is a boon for pros and hobbyists (and spies) alike. Oskar Barnack would approve. \$500 —*Alexander Spacher*