

Fungus

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The discovery had, like most things, been an accident.

A rock sample had been taken from near a deep sea geyser, by a biologist whose main interest was the molluscs who were able to survive under such extreme conditions.

In the lab, it turned out the fungal growth that had been covering the bivalves was an active part of the process – it was colour adaptive, and adjusted its thickness according to temperature fluctuations, seemingly to allow the molluscs to blend in with whatever material they were moored to.

Tests with aluminium, granite and velvet surfaces backed this up: each time the mould mimicking the background's texture and shade, even spreading to adjacent surfaces and shifting accordingly.

The lab quickly readjusted its focus to the fungus, in line towards developing a strain that could be used as a camouflage in almost any situation. Military contracts were created to fund this new research.

There were the inevitable delays, particularly in figuring out how to apply the mould to larger bodies and entities: it would replicate the surface of what it was applied to, rather than what the object was resting on.

But they also found that the fungus could be trained, and seemed to have a memory of sorts.

The breakthrough came when a lab assistant left a sample open on their desk and went home for the weekend. When they came back the following week, the mould had covered

the entire desk, shelves, and desktop computer, all textured and shaded to look like the dark green, corrugated shipping container that they had been training that strain on.

Most remarkably, though, was where it had coated the assistant's notes and papers: the typed papers had been in English and the notebook's handwriting had been in a western Armenian dialect. On the outer surface of the desk slash shipping container, just where the papers and notebook had been, was the text and handwriting, both translated perfectly into French.

They developed several strains, marketing primarily to mixed-used property developers in fringe areas – places where building styles were heterogeneous and tenants had a high turnover. The most popular turned out to be the beige mould, used for box-tops and low rise buildings throughout suburbs, giving the location a uniform look and a median feel: easy on the eye, not too noticeable, from a distance it looked a bit like stucco. It proved most effective on the outer ring roads of cities, the retail strip malls with open windows facing the street, where specialty shops and immigrant restaurants tended to open: shop holders could decorate their space entirely as they saw fit, write on the windows in their own language, then a layer of the fungus would adapt it to blend into the property, translating words to a set language and font.

There were three new tenants in one stretch of the strip mall, so he'd mixed up a new batch that morning: 20 mils of the liquid provided, Autumn Brown, per litre of water, and put it in the plastic pump sprayer.

A quick coat over the windows and lower stoop, and an hour later a light fuzz was already visible, the glass turning opaque.

The couple who had set up the tailor and repair service had written a set of prices and services in Vietnamese with bright red marker, and he could see the mould setting it into simply all capitals in white: TAILORS.

Next door was a phone repair shop set up by a Lebanese guy who'd gone for a pink striped motif that the mould quickly settled into its uniform matt beige: PHONE REPAIRS.

Greens turned beige

Greys, turned beige

Yellow flourishes and exclamation marks, beige

It had gone well, breaking records for construction – who needed to build facades or integrate design, when it could be sprayed on after? It was only after they'd realised that one site had a slow stream running behind it, and the spores had gotten into a local water supply that things changed yet again.