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in



Helena van Vliet, LLC  
Restorative Biophilic Design

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## Soft vs. Hard

Imagine a long wall made of dark glass. It stands 30+ feet high and at its corner, turns a sharp edge. The building's perimeter is a hard straight line, windows un-openable, skin pierced only by tall twin glass doors: the entrance. A merciful hand tried to soften the edge with some measure of shrubbery. You would have little reason to engage with this building and most likely pass it by, unless you'd need to visit someone within.

This a building with a hard edge.

Buildings with soft edges, by contrast, encourage involvement and curiosity by way of their very skin; the edge "zone" connects inside with outside in a casual gliding manner. There is protection from weather. There are porches, verandas, and balconies offering opportunity to see from safe vantage points. There are trellises, arbors, wall seats, seating walls, wall fountains, wall niches, wall flowers...

A building becomes a place if life happens there, if memories are created, if a story can be lived there. Life only happens when and where we get involved.



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*Carved door by Harrington Design Studio*

## **Aging Gracefully**

*"It is important for the walls of a building to have depth and volume, so that character accumulates in them, with time." (from "A Pattern Language" by Christopher Alexander)*

Time: time leaves its mark on us as on any building. As well it should. Buildings with soft edges become more beautiful with time. They become personalized, customized, like an old face with deep-set lines and wrinkles....nooks and crannies take on the look of life having been lived. They tell the occupants' story. A facade's interior and exterior edges are defining crenelated borders, giving a room or wall its character. If you add depth, you add character.



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## A Building's Exterior Skin

You can also think of a building as a body, and of its wall as the protective skin.

Let's concentrate on a building's exterior skin. Layered walls provide protection, buffer noise and offer places to sit, lean or experience the weather. Like our own body's skin, the building skin should be malleable and able to breathe. It should be able to open and close responding to weather and wind conditions. The building should be able to inhale fresh breezes through its doors and windows and exhale (ventilate) through roof windows or vents without mechanical system support, taking advantage of natural chimney effects.

Akin to our body's skin, we like to decorate the "skin" of our buildings: Window boxes filled with herbs or flowers add more layers that connect us to nature. Trim, columns, railings, brackets add a sense of depth, add shadow patterns, which change through the day, making visible the daily touch of the sun's path on our walls.



## **The Building's Skin as a Medium**

If the walls of a building are designed to connect us with rather than separate us from our surroundings, we experience ourselves as more rooted, more at ease, more confident and more "in tune" with life's seasons and rhythms.



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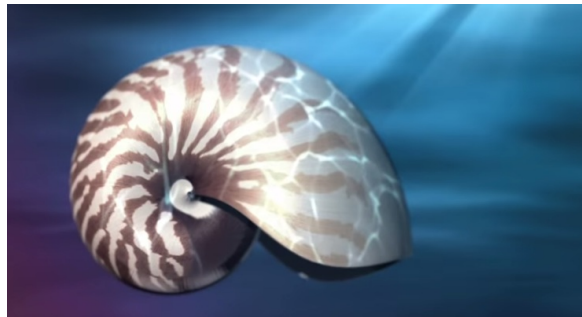
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## Nature-Inspired News

Nature by Numbers

6 Lessons That Businesses Can Learn From Bees

A selection of images from June  
(*National Geographic*)



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