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Healing by Design

Recently I gave a lecture as part of the Medical Humanities program at Drexel University in Philadelphia. I called it "**Healing by Design.**"

Yes, the design of places can significantly affect our immune system and healing response. New technologies are beginning to prove how the spaces through which we move affect our moods, our emotional memory, how they can change the brain's chemical and hormonal balance. The World Health Organization defines health as a "State of Complete Physical, Psychological and Social Well-Being."

Biophilic design is about creating places, which foster precisely that!

Physiologically speaking, the world around us has to be reasonably harmonious, in sustainable balance and vibrantly restful for us to experience such state of well-being. As such, biophilia is the very place, where sustainability and health begin to merge.



Helena van Vliet project.

Science meets Intuitive (Evolutionary) Preference

Intuitively we seem to find delight in those attributes which have contributed most to our survival as a species.

It turns out, the places we naturally love are also good for us!

We can now scientifically verify the physiological viability of our designs, by measuring pulse rate, blood pressure, heart rate variability (HRV), electro-dermal response, hormonal and adrenal response, brain wave activity, eye movements & muscle tension.

Biochemistry, cell biology, molecular biology and neuroscience have begun to piece together how sensory perception activates different brain centers resulting in feelings of joy, curiosity, awe, safety orfear, anxiety, depression, confusion and disorientation.

We can now measure the distinct neurological benefits of *Delight!*



Image from Sky Factory.

The Work of Architects & Physicians Begins to Merge

Too many of us are still living, working, even trying to recover from illness in stressful, monotonous and disorienting places of concrete and metal.

Colorless, minimalist surfaces and spaces can reproduce clinical symptoms of macular degeneration, stroke, cerebral achromatopsia, and visual agnosia.

We feel intensely stressed and anxious in such environments because they provoke in us similar sensations as sensory deprivation and neurophysiologic breakdown.

In contrast, recent research shows us how a pleasurable multi-sensory experience of relaxation, discovery, safety, and ultimately joy in our built environment can lead us to a state of greater physiological health and neurological well-being.

Below are some measurable health benefits of biophilic design:

- Stress Reduction & Muscle Relaxation
- Increased Production of Anticancer Proteins
- Higher Levels of immune defending NK Cells
- Overall improved Immune Function
- Cortisol Reduction & overall Hormonal Balance
- Lower Systolic Blood Pressure
- Lower Pulse Rate
- Improved Attention, Concentration & Cognitive Function
- Circadian Balance
- Decreased Cell Aging
- Vitamin D Metabolism
- Objective & Subjective Reduction of Pain
- Faster Recovery from Illness
- Improved Emotional & Mood Regulation
- Reduction in Fatigue

Places in which essential evolutionary survival elements are present evoke measurable positive physiological and neurological reactions in us. They boost immune function and activate our inherent will and love to connect with life.

We know these places as soon as we see and experience them.



Ravello, Italy. Photo by Helena van Vliet.

Biophilic design makes it possible to create *preventative places* which reduce the onset of illness by keeping immune function strong through the experience of joy, relaxation, connection, well-being.

This is where the work of architects and physicians begins to merge.



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