

Design

Biophilic design is more than a workplace trend

What if the “real” green movement took root thousands of years ago and had little to do with conservation or sustainability? What if the United States was not the vessel of today’s green movement, but only an unwitting bit player in the Earth’s natural history? Suppose the original green movement espoused the utility of nature rather than the specific preservation of it?

Consider the popularity and proliferation of “biophilia” – and more specifically, biophilic design. The practical applications are redefining how the architecture and design field evaluate the core benefits of human beings in the built environment.

Biophilia is the innate human tendency to associate with nature, which can enhance the overall well-being of people. The term was coined by social psychologist Eric Fromm in 1964, but the concept goes back to the very genesis of mankind. That is, human beings are wired to respond favorably to nature. That’s the condensed version, of course, but there is no lack of evidence to bolster the claim.

We know that early man was a consumer of the environment, but did he have an affinity for it? In his 1994 essay, “Love It or Lose It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution,” educator and environmentalist David W. Orr noted that “On balance, the evidence further suggests that biophilia or something close to it was woven throughout the myths, religions and mindset of early human-



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kind, which saw itself as participating with nature.”

Granted, early man did not opt for biophilia over an alternate lifestyle or value system because there was no other choice. But, as Orr suggests, “In varying degrees humans have

always modified their environments.” Indeed, it is recognized that most of human history has evolved in adaptive response to nature, rather than human-created spaces or situations.

Unfortunately, our principal environments today are the places of our work, at which we spend 50 to 90 percent of our waking hours, depending on what research findings you choose to accept. Or maybe it’s not unfortunate at all if you really love what you do and where you do it. In any event, many experts who advance the theory of biophilia claim that there is little or no happiness to be found in modern office buildings filled with stuffy, inoperable window suites, which can trigger sensory deprivation or worse.

Architects and designers tend to have a sunnier outlook.

The practice of biophilic interior design is new, but the principles are not. As a design practice it cannot yet match up to the metrics and certification levels of LEED or WELL Building Standards. On the



Ron Johnson

Biophilic design includes fractal patterns, vibrant colors and simulations of nature.

other hand, biophilic design can be free-flowing and creative, offering the benefits of the natural world in a variety of ways, which don’t yet need to be quantified. For example, biophilic design’s direct benefits include natural light, plants, water and air. That is, integrating those natural elements into an office design will enhance the well-being of its inhabitants.

In a structured trial, a group of Australian researchers found that subjects who were offered a 40-second break from menial computer tasks in which images of grass and flowers were flashed to their screens showed a 6 percent rise in concentration levels, which held up for the remainder of the exercise.

Forty seconds? That’s a pretty

low bar by any standard. If a few glimpses of simulated greenery can reveal those kinds of results, what could live plants in an office suite or a building lobby do for employee well-being and increased productivity?

“Plants just have an instant effect on people,” said Rich Bristol, owner of Bristol Botanics, an Englewood-based commercial interior foliage designer. Bristol has seen a wide range of foliage trends across 30 years in metro Denver, but notes that biophilic design is a relatively new target.

“It’s a return to nature for sure, and building owners are buying in,” he said. “They believe in it. They

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