

Biophilic Cities: A Sustainable Strategy for Urban Residents and Their Habitats

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One of the most important initiatives for urban areas in this century is the emerging Biophilic Cities movement. Biophilia is the recent, science-based understanding of the importance of nature for our health, our happiness, and our economic and environmental sustainability. And it is the basis for a paradigm shift in urban planning.

The benefits that come from everyday experience with nature stem from the genetic evolution of humans in nature, and the continued responses we have through our senses to the myriad stimuli of natural sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. These translate into physical, mental, and emotional responses that help restore, refresh, ease anxiety, bring focus, and just make us feel good.

The biophilic effect has become established in fields from neuroscience to endocrinology to child development, and its importance is increasingly acknowledged in a wide range of professions. Nature promotes physical and emotional health and also soothes and protects us from some of the negative effects of modern urban life. The reality and recognition of that value carries over to everything from the workplace and schoolroom performance to property values, retail sales, community identity, and environmental stewardship.

For centuries, poets, philosophers, and others have espoused the importance and benefits of nature. Now we are learning why and how this is true. Our science is catching up with our human instincts. Ironically, it is also in these same decades that we realize how many urban residents—children, adults, employees, and retirees—do not have nature in their lives. As more people live in cities, and residency becomes increasingly dense to preserve efficiencies, this deficiency becomes more serious, with impacts on all aspects of urban life.

Importantly, the Biophilic Cities initiative also promises to enhance “green” goals, both as a direct result of the substantial emphasis on natural environment and natural solutions, as well as in public awareness and commitment to stewardship. It can stimulate resident appreciation of their local environment and help incentivize residents to learn about and care for their urban habitat. A biophilic perspective helps residents see the connections between global and community green efforts and their own daily experience. In doing so, it expands the reach of all environment-related initiatives, giving more people more reasons—from intensely personal to altruistic—to support community commitments to a healthy and sustainable urban environment for all residents.

Around the globe, cities are formalizing their commitment to a natural urban environment as both an expression of identity and a guideline for development. The Biophilic Cities Project at the University of Virginia School of Architecture (biophiliccities.org) provides information resources and a forum to exchange ideas and experiences among cities that become partners in the Biophilic Cities Network. Cities such as Washington, DC, Austin,

TX, Portland, OR, Pittsburgh, PA and both Norfolk and Richmond, VA have already joined this international network. At their December 17 meeting, the Arlington County Board unanimously adopted a Biophilic City Resolution that recognizes the value of urban nature and commits to joining the Biophilic Cities Network. Currently, key county staff are preparing an application to become a partner jurisdiction, as well as the means and mechanisms for this commitment to be realized in county planning and policy in the future.

Biophilic principles, which explain, guide, and justify the incorporation of natural features and spaces in our built environment, are the key to successful planning and design for all urban jurisdictions in the 21st century. Caring for the Earth and caring for our urban selves is a symbiotic duality. The concept of biophilia ties it all together.