



The rise of biophilic design

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Trielle by Mirvac delivers a life of leisure and luxury, page 19

Domain Apartment Spotlight

Publishers Domain Apartment Spotlight is published by Domain Holdings Australia Limited and is printed by IVE, 25-33 Fourth Avenue, Sunshine VIC 3020

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The pandemic has accelerated our need to improve our wellbeing through closer natural connections in the built environment.

Despite our inherent desire to connect with nature, modern-day living over the past few years has seen us spend more time indoors than ever. “Early man spent most of their waking hours out in nature, and ancient cave drawings indicate the cave was where, having retired from the daily hunt and gather, they could lower their defences,

take comfort in the company of their tribe and relax,” says psychologist Dr Maria-Elena Lukeides. Thousands of years later, we still hanker for a connection to nature, especially in our homes. “The power of a single minute spent meditating by a babbling brook in a forest is better understood today than

ever before,” says Decibel Architecture creative director Dylan Brady. “Given recent challenges with connection and social responsibility, the growing desire to embed this closer relationship to nature in our dwellings is understandable and necessary for building a healthier, more self-aware society.”

Biophilic design principles embrace raw materials, sunlight, fresh air and plants to create soothing interiors that bolster our health and create beautiful living spaces.

“The simplest links to nature we can build are to air, natural light, plantings and water,” Brady says.

“Biophilia in our built environment simply enables natural systems, harnessing the lessons of billions of years of practice.”

Cramped, cluttered places and poorly lit interiors can negatively impact our mood, leading to agitation and increased mental stress, and also affect our circadian rhythms, which can cause sleep problems.

“A neat, clean living space evokes a sense of competence, self-discipline and calm, which is the optimal environment for relaxation, sense of safety, intellectual creativity, emotional processing and wellbeing,” Lukeides says. “Noise also



Xeriscaping: Succulents and cactuses add energy to any space.

REPRESENTED



Natural benefits: Filling a space with tactile materials and integrating plants are two steps towards better health.

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creates a decreased sense of privacy, which leads one to feel more exposed and therefore less relaxed, which can increase stress.”

Biophilic design has become more central to designers’ practices as they become increasingly conscious of nature’s benefits. Architects place windows that purposely frame the landscape and incorporate plants into the structural interior designs of buildings, from green rooftops to lush indoor courtyards, so interior spaces feel more like nature than bricks and mortar.

Living with greenery, whether it’s growing plants or nurturing our gardens or indoor plants, brings us close to nature and its benefits no matter how we live.

“Nature therapy, or ‘forest bathing’ as it’s called in Japan, has highlighted that exposure to nature decreases stress, lowers heart rate, increases physical immunity and creates altered states of consciousness by inducing relaxation,” Lukeides says.

Filling a space with tactile materials such as ceramic, wool, linen and cotton, and hanging artwork and wallpaper depicting cloudscares, florals and trees does much more than simply beautify; they can soften hard edges and robust materials and provide a calm and soothing aesthetic.

“Wood is reminiscent of a forest environment more than a material like concrete,” says Sophia Kaplan, author and co-founder of Leaf Supply.

“The same goes for natural versus artificial stone. If financial constraints make this untenable, choose smaller areas to focus your biophilic intentions.”

Natural light can be created in abundance with floor-to-ceiling windows and reflective surfaces, like white walls, mirrors, glossy finishes and glass that bounce light around the smallest of rooms. Skylights are experiencing huge popularity for their ability to draw in sunlight and fresh air and convert dark, unused spaces into liveable and light-flooded interiors.



Planting for pleasure

More apartments integrate nature and planting into their designs in countries where climates make indoor-outdoor living essential.

“Balconies, planted terraces, and common rooftop gardens are a requirement for any new product on the market,” Brady says.

“I love that people understand the benefit of connection to nature and that

this leads to investment on the supply side to meet that demand. Legislation around balcony spaces, cross ventilation requirements, light and air go some way to establishing a solid baseline.

“Long-term renters are more inclined to be swayed by ventilation, landscape and green spaces, and the increasing awareness of the benefits of biophilic design is pushing the market ahead of these rules.”

While biophilic design is ideally addressed from the outset of creating a new building, nature can still be incorporated into existing spaces.

Plants are one of the easiest biophilic additions to make to a space; not only do they absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen, but they can elevate its aesthetic.

“Gardens and balconies are great for growing sun-loving species, but there is a huge variety of plants that will happily thrive in lower-light indoor settings,” Kaplan says. “Consider the vigorous *Monstera deliciosa* [Swiss cheese plant], *Hoya carnosa* [wax plant] and *Epipremnum aureum* [devil’s ivy], which can be trained up a wall, and do simple things like throw open curtains and windows to let sun and air flow freely through your home.”

While sophisticated plantings soften our relationship to the built environment, there’s a growing trend for the “wild” and “natural”. Horticulturist Mark Morrison from Zerascapes in North Fremantle says the xeriscape (Greek for “dry-scaping”) landscaping method is taking off in Australia as a more sustainable and climate-appropriate choice.

“Xeriscaping embraces cacti and succulents and can be expressed as a large garden or in an apartment using a large pot or a cluster of smaller ones,” Morrison says.

With their characterful forms and vibrant colour, succulents and cactuses add energy to any size space.

“They are extremely low-care and require very little water, so they’re ideal for high-rises with a balcony, courtyard or window sills that get sunlight,” he says.

Look for agave species like blue glow, *Agave celsii*, *potatorum* or *Aloe mitriformis*, and *Aloe vera* varieties like southern cross, ivory dawn or fairy pink.

While Australia’s approach to biophilic design continues to improve and gain traction, we still have some way to go.

“We lag behind some cities and countries, like Singapore and France, when it comes to legislation around biophilia, green space and planting,” Brady says. “I have faith we will continue to listen, learn and improve.”