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Using healing, sensory and therapeutic gardens

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Landscape and Urban Design for Health and Well-Being: Using Healing, Sensory and Therapeutic Gardens

Gayle Souter-Brown

London: Routledge, 2014, 318 pp, £34.99 pb, ISBN 9780415843522

This book focuses on design approaches that can boost the healing, sensory and therapeutic affordances of urban environments, advocating for the role of landscape as a cost-effective method of enhancing the health and well-being of the urban populations. Souter-Brown explores themes such as healthy ageing, healthy child development, and the prevention of lifestyle-related or non-communicable diseases such as depression, obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and attention deficit disorder. The book presents evidence linking the lower prevalence of these diseases to better access to 'biophilic' environments, as named by the author. All chapters present real case studies of newly designed outdoor spaces that have made a difference in people's lives. Some of these cases consist of work done by the author's design practice, imparting to the book a grounded and applied character.

Part I sets the scene by discussing how different garden styles through history (for example, monastic, Islamic, and Asian gardens) were conceived as offering benefits to both physical and mental health. Gardens provided shade and sun, edible plants, and a sense of order and peace. According to Souter-Brown, these remain features of successful healing environments to this day. The author presents an extensive review of research linking access to outdoor spaces, designed with what she describes as 'salutogenic' principles in mind, to stress relief, improvement of mood, increased physical fitness, longer attention spans, and prevention of self-harming behaviours such as binge drinking, indulgent eating, or drug use. She acknowledges, however, that understanding what makes a successful healing or therapeutic outdoor space requires the studying and interpretation of existing evidence, as well as the collection, and analysis of post-occupancy performance data. These results are often difficult to predict beforehand.

Part II explores design principles for spaces that respond to the needs of particular groups such as children, disabled people, or adults suffering from high levels of stress. Some of these principles appear to benefit a wide variety of users, while others seem to benefit particular groups. For example, sand, water, and touchable plants are particularly beneficial to children. Gardens with informal spaces for meeting help adults suffering from depression, while either hyper- or hypo-stimulating environments appear to help autistic children, depending on the type and severity of the disorder. For those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, clear sight-lines appear to provide them with a sense of order and security. The empirical evidence arguing for particular design approaches is sometimes unclear, however. The end of Part II assesses the cost-benefit ratios of particular salutogenic outdoor spaces. Such calculations are precisely what many readers will be looking for, so it is unfortunate that these cases are relatively few in number. More examples and more analysis in this section would have strengthened Souter-Brown's argument.

Part III focuses on the process of design aimed at improving wellbeing, a salutogenic design process. The author argues that it is important to base this kind of design on empirical evidence provided by existing outdoor spaces. Another important component is a design brief carefully tailored to the needs of users, whether citizens in general or specific groups of people. Souter-Brown, therefore, advocates bringing stakeholders into the whole design process through brainstorming exercises, funding campaigns, or even site construction. The book concludes with a consideration of how to fund the development of salutogenic outdoor spaces, and provides several examples of degraded urban sites that have been transformed into thriving community hubs.

This book lies within a wide domain of research into the impact of designed outdoor environments on people's health and wellbeing. The author's goal is first to review the evidence for this impact, then to offer practical guidelines for designing successful salutogenic outdoor spaces. The first part of this goal is achieved, and the book, undoubtedly, will be a valuable tool for designers and decision makers wishing to understand how designed outdoor spaces can be a cost-effective tool for preventing many of the health problems that afflict contemporary urban societies. The second part is interesting but would have been more convincing had Souter-Brown been more systematic and detailed in her approach to post-occupancy assessment. Despite this shortcoming, the book will be valuable for a variety of students and practitioners in the fields of design, healthcare, and the social sciences.

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