



Helena vanVliet Architect, LLC
Restorative Biophilic Design

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Evolutionary Responses

Why do we lower our voice when we enter a Gothic cathedral? Why does a certain room appeal more than another?

Is it our instinct that activates a behavior change in certain settings, or that draws us toward "beauty?" Or, is it an inherent sense of harmony, or belonging, that we are pulling forward from a long ago memory and discover feels familiar and satisfyingly fresh?

Could both answers be correct?

For years I have studied these questions as they relate to architectural place and space. I am not alone. Many scientists, neurologists and designers of all fields have examined how our sense and experience of "beauty" is directly connected to our survival-related choices on comfort, refuge and prospect for nourishing habitats. Is our experience of "beauty" indeed then an evolutionary response? Recent research strongly suggests that this is likely the case.



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Architecture's Innate Appeal

Grant Hildebrand, author, American architect and architectural historian studied English geographer Jay Appleton's theories about the innate appeal of certain landscapes. In his book, *Origins of Architectural Pleasure*, Hildebrand describes the complex mechanisms driving human intuitive behaviors. He explains that our real motivators for choosing comfort and refuge are based around two basic needs: seeking pleasure and avoiding discomfort.

So, in seeking pleasure and in avoiding discomfort we are drawn toward predictable repetitive patterns, spacial sequences, universal colors, textures and sounds. Hildebrand says that these innate desires have been bred into us since the dawn of time.



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Identifying Nourishing Habitats

We know that in nature survival depends on a species' ability to identify/create nourishing habitats for itself. This is also true for the early humans who sought habitats filled with lush greenery and brightly colored flowers (fruit as an indicator of fertile soils and ample rain fall), fresh, moving water for drinking and cooking, and safe shelter that was elevated (dry), open to the warming winter sun, but also equipped with plenty of shade in the heat of summer. Ideally this habitat would overlook open space where interesting things happen (prospect)...



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Refuge and Prospect

We seem to still be most content, yet energized, at the edge between "refuge and prospect."

A window seat, a porch, a balcony, a terrace overlooking a garden, a cliff dwelling, a street café, a beach. Think of that cozy corner overlooking a room with a view, a roof terrace overlooking a street, a sleeping loft, or even a theatre seat with an illuminated stage where interesting things happen.

In other words: we experience those spaces as beautiful that our species through evolution has identified as good for our survival. Ultimately, such places are pleasurable to us and make us feel safe and energized, rejuvenated and relaxed.

They make us feel well and at home.



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The design of all our projects incorporates many identifiable archetypal patterns, such as "refuge and prospect" which you see throughout this newsletter. There are other patterns, which I will discuss in future newsletters.

Nature-Inspired News

[The Benefits of Natural Swimming Pools](#)

[Nature Therapy: The Health Benefits of a Natural Environment](#)

[Biophilic Design: The Architecture of Life](#)

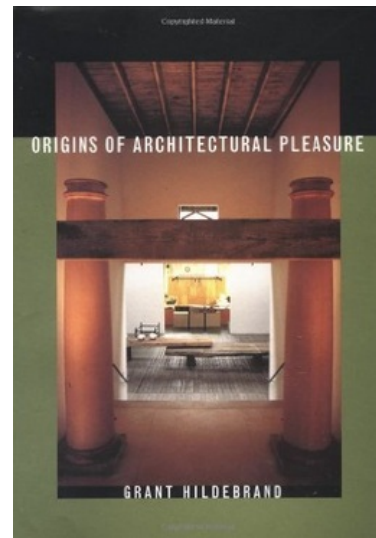
Recommended Reading

Origins of Architectural Pleasure

by Grant Hildebrand

From The Book:

Do survival instincts have anything to do with our architectural choices—our liking for a certain room, a special stairway, a plaza in a particular city? In this engaging study Grant Hildebrand discusses ways in which architectural forms emulate some archetypal settings that humans have found appealing—and useful to survival—from ancient times to the present.



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