

Chapter 5

Restorative Environments

R&R, or “rest and recuperation,” is an acknowledged need for soldiers on the frontlines. It is not, however, uniquely the concern of the battle-weary. Many people suffer from mental fatigue, decreased attention span, and irritability, and few seem to have an abundance of tranquillity, serenity, or peace of mind.

The patterns in this chapter address the following issues:

- Natural settings are particularly effective for R&R.
- They do not have to be dramatic.
- It is not essential that one is in the setting.
- Even a very short exposure can be helpful.
- Restorative benefits can be achieved even if that was not one's intention.
- One does not necessarily realize the gain immediately.

The importance of nature in restoration cannot be overemphasized. A natural setting can be small, quite large, or anywhere in between. The type and kind of involvement with the setting can also vary widely, including hiking a nature trail, walking in an urban forest, planting or tending trees, watching birds or squirrels, or simply viewing nature through a window.

A research literature on restorative environments is growing (see “Readings”). What may seem like a surprising finding (Hartig et al. 1991), that individuals returning from a wilderness trip are better at proof-reading than members of a control group, serves as a demonstration of how restorative experiences can lead to a clearer head, making it easier to tackle tasks

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that require great concentration. Cimprich (1992) reported greater gains in recovering cancer patients who carried out nature activities (three times a week for about half an hour at a time) than in members of a comparison group. Tennessen and Cimprich (1995) showed that college students whose dorm rooms looked out onto natural settings performed better on attention-demanding tasks.



Restorative benefits are more likely to occur when one can feel secure enough to let down one's guard, when one can become absorbed in the environment without feeling vulnerable. (Patterns related to way-finding and reducing fear, discussed in previous chapters, also speak to issues that enhance restoration.) In the section on the psychological costs of managing information in chapter 2, we discussed several characteristics of restorative settings. Of these, extent and fascination are particularly amenable to design and management. They are, therefore, central to the patterns we propose in this chapter.

The patterns:

Restorative Environments

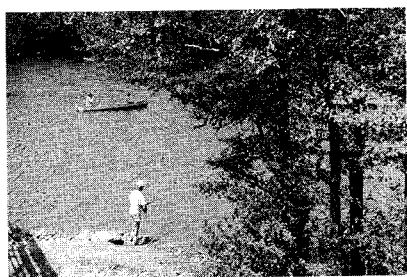
- R1 *Quiet fascination*
- R2 *Wandering in small spaces*
- R3 *Separation from distraction*
- R4 *Wood, stone, and old*
- R5 *The view from the window*

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R1 Quiet fascination

► NATURAL SETTINGS CAN FILL THE MIND AND ENHANCE RESTORATION.

Many things in the environment are fascinating. Fascinations, however, come in different forms. Some, let's call them "noisy"—such as spectator sports—tend to be distracting, making it difficult to think of anything else. What we are calling quiet fascinations do not totally dominate one's thoughts. They permit reflection; they make it possible to find out what is on one's mind. Many natural environments have the capacity to evoke quiet fascination.



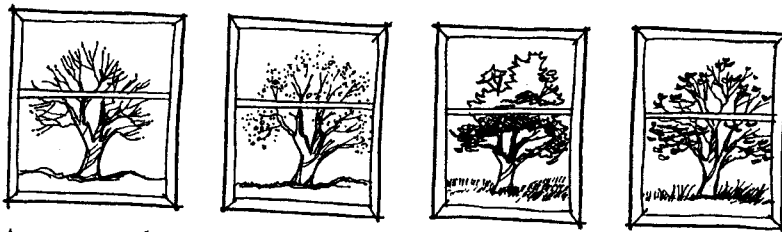
Fishing, canoeing, and wildlife viewing are activities that involve quiet fascination. So is walking on newly fallen snow.

Quiet fascination can come from activities. For example, for some people activities such as gardening and fishing are mind filling. Quiet fascination can also come from the setting itself, from the sound patterns, the motion, the intensity of forms and color. The "action" in such a setting may be no more than the antics of birds and squirrels, the changing colors of the foliage. Fresh snow falling in the woods. The sun glistening on a drop of rain. Fancy coffee-table books filled with glorious photographs of everyday images of nature provide many examples of quiet fascination.



Open woods and rushing streams are just two of the many patterns of nature that can be fascinating.

There are many ways to provide for occasions that foster quiet fascination: places to stop and notice nature, for example, such as a bench at the water's edge or a footbridge permitting a view of the stream below. Even the view of a tree outside a window brings opportunities for observing its changes over the year's cycle and the chance to be engrossed by visiting birds.



A tree outside one's window can provide an opportunity to reflect on the change of seasons.



Footbridges are great places to observe nature.

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R2 Wandering in small spaces

- EVEN A SMALL SPACE, IF IT HAS EXTENT, CAN CONSTITUTE A WHOLE DIFFERENT WORLD.

When people talk about getting away to a “whole different world,” they are not referring to a setting that is different, but to being somewhere that constitutes a “world” of its own. What seems to be necessary to make a place a different world is extent, that is, the sense of extension in time and space. There needs to be the sense that there is more beyond what meets the eye, that one could go on and on.

A restorative environment permits the eye to focus on things that do not require any special effort yet are inviting and fascinating. In such a setting the mind wanders easily, absorbed by what the eyes take in, and also by one's thoughts. Such mental wandering is more likely when the setting gives the impression of having extent. While the sense of extent is important, the physical area need not be vast. In fact, vastness, if lacking in structure and interest, can interfere with restorative benefits.

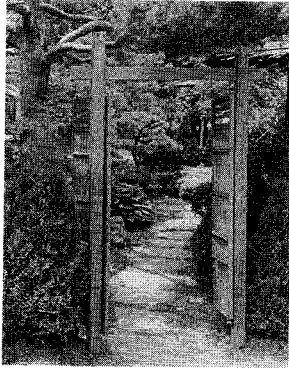


Small natural areas around schools and workplaces can provide welcome restorative opportunities.



Depth and mystery in a small space.

The Japanese garden provides an excellent example of how extensive even a small area can seem. In addition to incorporating the ideas offered in the photograph below, such gardens pay careful attention to the details of nature (for example, stepping-stone pathways that compel one to stop and notice the small ferns or fallen leaves at one's feet). Other principles used in the design of Japanese gardens include open screens or fences or vegetation that divide larger spaces, circuitous pathways that create the sense of a larger area, and positioning viewing points so that the entirety of the garden cannot be seen from any one place. Many of these concepts are useful to consider in creating environments that are restorative.



Japanese gardens provide a sense of extent in a small place. The scene on the left is rich in mystery. In the scene on the right, the layering of interesting textures creates a sense of depth.

Divide area into separate regions with layers of less densely foliated plants.



Put finer textures and darker colors in background.

Put bolder textures and lighter colors in foreground.

Some ideas for creating a larger feel in a small space.

A small park can
canopy trees can
restorative nature

R3 Separation from distraction

- THE SENSE OF BEING IN A DIFFERENT WORLD IS EASILY UNDERMINED BY INTRUSIONS AND DISTRACTIONS.

A place with extent is a coherent whole. It is free of interruptions and interference from things that do not belong. In the work setting, efforts to remove distraction often involve enclosure. Enclosures not only help focus on the immediate area and offer privacy, they also mark a separation from adjacent spaces.

Enclosures are also useful in removing distractions outdoors. A very small, "vest-pocket," urban park can effectively reduce nearby noise and distractions by creating a sense of enclosure. This can be achieved by using distinct textures underfoot and vertical features to mark its separateness, as well as by limiting the space overhead (for example, by a tree canopy). In larger natural areas the sense of enclosure can be realized by creating distinct "rooms." (See chapter 9, "Places and Their Elements.")



Small park can create a much needed oasis from busy downtown streets. A few large trees can provide separation from an urban environment as well as a restorative natural setting.

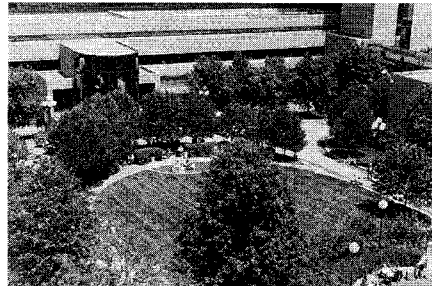


Restorative natural areas can even be created near industrial settings.

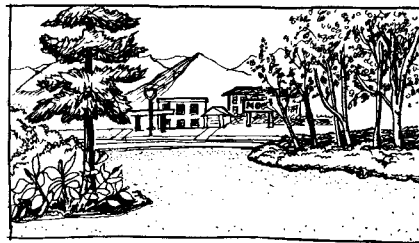
Separation from distraction can also be achieved in a large area that does not offer a sense of enclosure. Consider a setting that leads the eye to a distant place, a vista. In such settings, one is often unaware of much that lies between oneself and the vista because of its pull.



Courtyard plantings define a sheltered area while also providing restorative views from hospital rooms.



Enclosures can remove distractions. In addition, in certain settings, they can help focus attention on distant vistas and thus increase the perceived size of a small natural area.



Before



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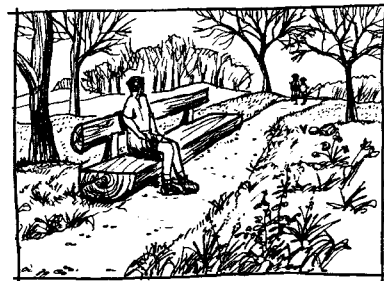
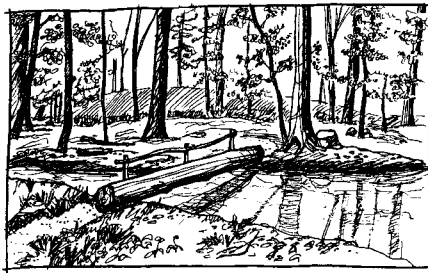
Enclosures can remove distractions.

R4 Wood, stone, and old

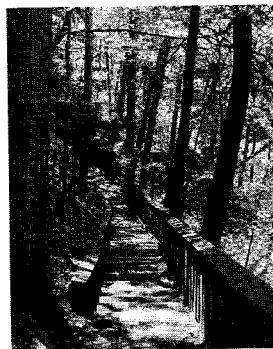
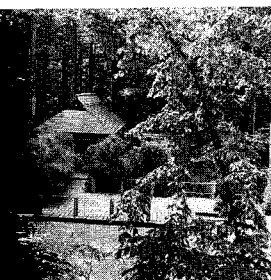
► THE CHOICE OF MATERIALS CAN ENHANCE RESTORATION.

Providing separation from distraction, marking a place as distinct, and permitting the mind to wander are all more likely to provide restorative benefits if the materials that are used do not themselves detract from the setting. The series of photographs here have in common that the materials that were used tend to be seen as fitting or appropriate to the setting.

Non-natural settings.



Here a fallen log serves as a bridge for a wilderness trail (top) and as a rustic trail bench (bottom).



material, the structure, stone steps, and wooden bench provide examples of materials that are compatible with their surroundings.

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R5 The view from the window

► EVEN IF ONE IS NOT IN THE SETTING IT CAN HAVE RESTORATIVE BENEFITS.

Restorative settings come in many sizes, and restorative opportunities can vary substantially in length. A few weeks away from it all, in an appropriate setting should do wonders for one's R&R, but none of us can count on that to get from one day to the next. It is striking, however, that many of the benefits from restorative environments discussed here can be achieved by having a view from a window. Of course, to be restorative a view must have certain characteristics.

A tree outside the window can be mind filling. It tells about the seasons and the weather; it serves as the setting for diverse animal life; it symbolizes the past and promises a future. Even a single tree can make a difference. A view of a little grove of trees, a natural area, a garden, a pond . . . these all provide a context for the mind to wander, to take time out from pressing demands. Such views, indulged in even briefly, have been shown to affect health and well-being in many settings—home, work, hospital, and even prison (see “Readings”).



A view from a window can provide the mental respite one needs to make it through the day.

The implications for design and management of natural spaces are vast and vital. A natural setting may be precious not only to its visible users, but to those who view it from elsewhere. The all-too-frequent occurrence of funds running out before “the landscaping” is done can have expensive repercussions in human costs. The landscaping is not just an adornment. If treated as the opportunity for increasing the sanity and

A window can be es

welfare of those who can see it, it becomes every bit as important as hallways and lighting. ✓



A view that allows the mind to wander.



A single tree outside the window can create a restorative focus.



A window that looks into the treetops can be especially engrossing.

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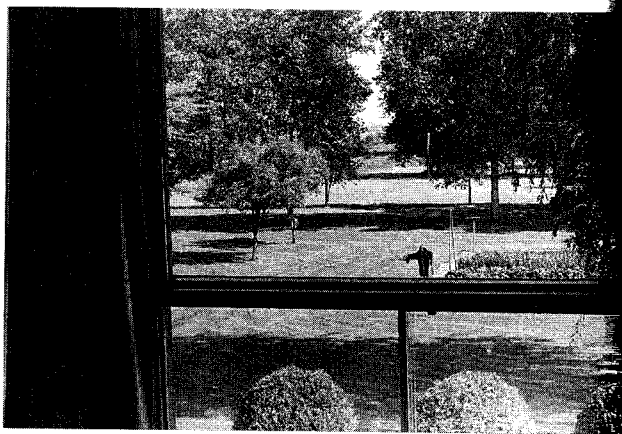
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Conference rooms can be greatly enhanced by adding windows.



Window views of ordinary nature can be just as satisfying as grand vistas.