

# Nature of Space

2021 TALKING POINT NATURE

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**Disclaimer**

This paper is based on research carried out between January 2020 and March 2021. Whilst this paper has been sponsored, the analysis is completely unbiased. →

**Throughout COVID-19** and during times of uncertainty, we have the immediate need for comfort and calm. We tend to experience high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress as things around us continue to change or remain unknown. One antidote to the chaos and stress is nature. Many have returned to nature during these “dark” periods – strolling along beaches, hiking in hills and mountains, boating, and fishing in rivers and parks. →



# INTRODUCTION



## INTRODUCTION



It's proven that individuals connected to nature exhibit more vitality, positivity and life satisfaction (Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski, 2014). Also, a proven fact is that nature boosts our immune system, increasing our energy levels and ability to focus while reducing our blood pressure (Li, 2018).

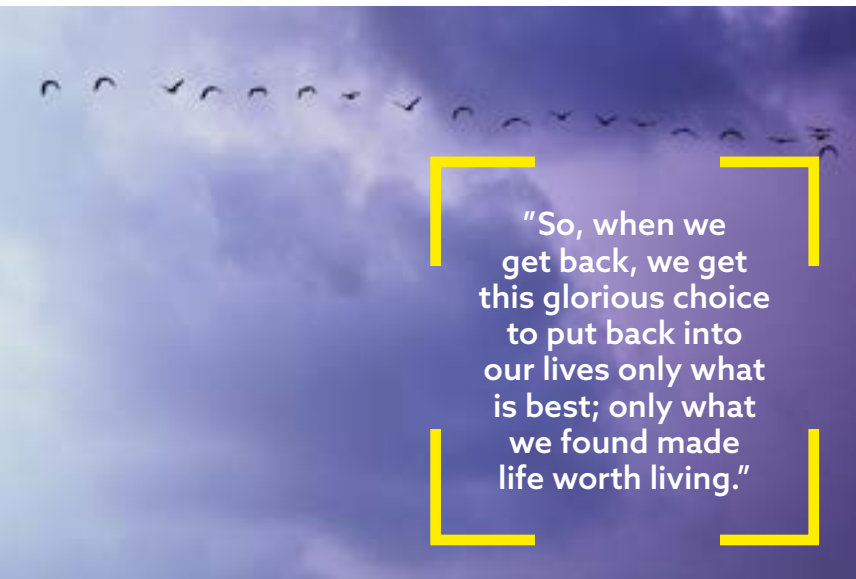
People identify with, and personal fulfillment depends on, one's relationship with nature. Biophilia, the idea that humans have innate affinity for the natural world, was first introduced by E.O. Wilson in 1984. He has studied humans' tendency to focus on life and life-like processes for many years. He believes the connection to the nature of space is a biologically-based need and integral to our development. This explains why access to nature and other natural elements is linked to a range of positive outcomes, such as

"Simply, we go to nature to rejuvenate, recreate and recharge."

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reducing cognitive fatigue, lowering stress, reducing or eliminating depression, and improving mood (Li, 2018).

Nature should be viewed as a whole ecological system and explored through the elements that flow within this complex system. Biophilic design incorporates this evidence by integrating environmental elements, light, patterns, sound and colours of nature, as well as access to the outdoors to support positive mental health while indoors. In an interview with LEED designers and builders, Josh and Kevin Stack, they emphasised →



"So, when we get back, we get this glorious choice to put back into our lives only what is best; only what we found made life worth living."

that "gratitude is at the heart of any long persisting culture because it is structurally the underlying foundation of health." Kevin discussed his approach to design which always "begins with place and you must take care of place. As place takes care of you. You have to understand what lives there and what should stay there." The power of place cannot be overstated, as the essence of humanity is inextricably linked with our natural world. Events create powerful experiences that provide deeper meaning and context and influence how we think and what we think. When designing an event experience, it's the inclusion of natural elements within the event space

that offers us the opportunity to create a powerful ecosystem of learning and building relationships. Now more than ever, event professionals must understand and think about how to create this connection to nature and consider the space and environment of future live and virtual events. Using biomimicry, defined as the design and production of materials, structures, and systems that are modelled on biological entities and processes, human mood and ultimately performance can improve. It's this imitation of the models and elements of nature that ultimately will aid in the solving of complex human problems. **Scott Weidensaul**, author of *Living on the Wind*, observed



"Bird migration is the one truly unifying natural phenomenon in the world, stitching continents together in a way that even the great weather systems fail to do" (Preface). **Kevin Stack** challenged us to think about event attendees as "hummingbirds"—creatures that migrate with purpose, pollinate their environment before departure, and bring energy and nutrients with them into their destination. Our events are experiences that people "migrate to." How are we helping them prepare for their journey to the event? How can we help them meet pre-event with other attendees, speakers, suppliers so that established connections and conversations are already "pollinated"? We need to think about not just feeding the body and the brain, but also feeding the soul. The hope is attendees will go back home and to work happier and healthier. Nature can help us achieve that.

**We have a lot to learn from nature.** **Janine Benyus**, a reputable biomimicry expert and renowned author, said it best in her fireside chat hosted by the Biomimicry

Institute: "The other paradox of the pandemic is that though the natural world is frayed, when we step back for a moment and rest, it heals. I mean I don't care about the economy roaring back...I want the land to roar back with coyotes in the streets and dolphins in Venice. That to me is the paradox. It is frayed and yet we are watching what the master class of nature is giving us right now...we're seeing massive cooperation. We're seeing that people are doing things differently...we're seeing a bit of a utopian glimmer come through right in the dystopia and natural selection chooses what works over and over. So, when we get back, we get this glorious choice to put back into our lives only what is best; only what we found made life worth living."

**As we continue** to focus on the event experience, the connection with nature, use of space and attendees' human needs, we must do so with a new lens and a grateful heart. The time is now to remake the way we make and begin designing events with nature for a better world. →



## DESIGN EXPERIENCES WITH SPACE OF NATURE IN MIND

According to Rick Fedrizzi, Executive Chairman, International WELL Building Institute, "The current pandemic has shown us that besides having an enormous impact on how we feel, how we think and how we perform, our event space (buildings) can play a critical role in our very survival. This moment represents a unique opportunity to reconnect with the importance of place, and recommit to ensuring that our buildings, communities and organisations are safe, healthy, inclusive and resilient into the future. Part of that is to challenge the industry to commit to well-being the same way it has embraced sustainability. This would include a total redesign of event spaces to include more light, vastly improved thermal comfort, better food choices and more attention to acoustics. We need to design event spaces that are filled with more greenery, stress reducing enclaves, and hydration stations everywhere. Despite the short



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duration, events should be specifically designed to make the most of the time by keeping attendees engaged, energised, inspired and paying attention to the spaces in which we hold them."

We have become really good at making sure these spaces save energy, conserve water, and mitigate waste and greenhouse gas emissions. All this is important because it contributes to a healthier planet, a critical factor in supporting healthier humans. But recently have we shifted our focus from the building's environmental performance to the performance of the people inside? That is what's at the heart of the WELL Building Standard (WELL), which currently is in use across more than 900 million square feet of space in 66 countries.

WELL looks at 10 different concepts that the science says can affect our health - Air, Water, Nourishment, Light, Movement, Thermal Comfort, Sound, Materials, Mind and Community. By introducing initiatives and

interventions that put people at the centre of decisions made about these factors, we can intentionally create better buildings and spaces that enhance, not compromise, the health of the people who use them every day. In response to the 2019-2020 pandemic, the International WELL Building Institute created the WELL Health-Safety Rating to address public health concerns brought into focus by COVID-19 and help organisations to be better prepared for future crises. Spaces are rated on commitment to improved air quality, promotion of good hygiene, increased cleaning practices to address surface spread, and use of low-hazard cleaning products. The display of this seal indicates consumers should feel confident entering, as the management of the space has demonstrated priority to health and safety, as well as implemented a robust emergency preparedness and response plan ([wellhealthandsafety.com](http://wellhealthandsafety.com)). More than 1 billion square feet of space, including many restaurants and hotels, are participating in this initiative. →





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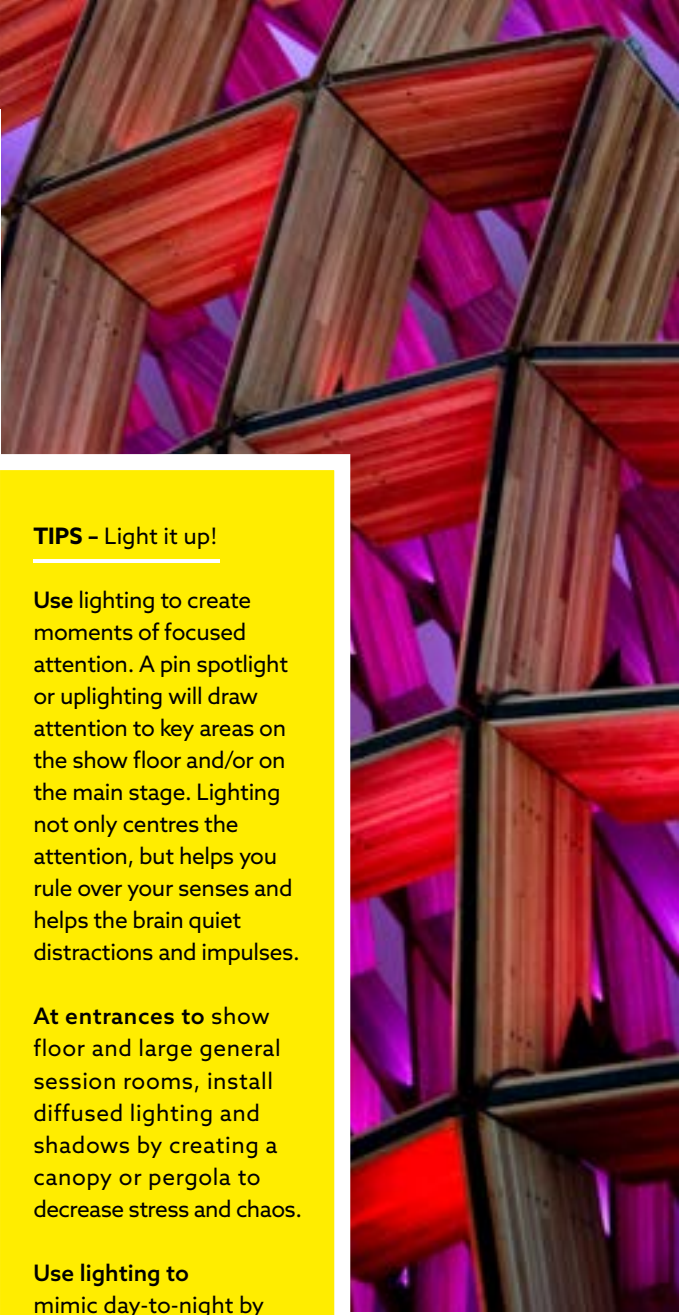
"Colour is light and light is colour and without both you have darkness."

Deborah Burnett, Health and Wellness Design Authority

USE OF LIGHT

The use of dynamic and diffused light can be powerful in helping attendee engagement and cognitive performance. Humans are sensitive to circadian rhythms, or commonly known as the natural rhythm of one's built-in body clock. Deborah Burnett, lighting expert and the published author of an upcoming book, Evidence-Based Lighting Design, discusses how the emerging field of Evidence-based Lighting Design is tied to and influenced by human health, well-being and behaviour. Her work examines the impact of ambient light sources on sleep, obesity, and cognition.

As Kevin Stack shared, light fosters trust. Event professionals know that key to a successful event is fostering relationships. Unleashing the power of natural lighting to influence collaboration, networking and building trust to do business sets up an event experience for success. We need to think about lighting like we do sound - dynamic and diffused. →



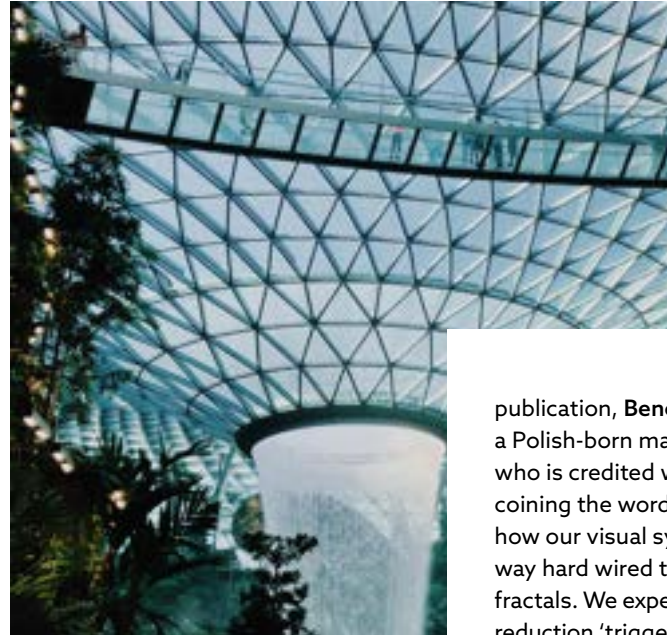
TIPS - Light it up!

Use lighting to create moments of focused attention. A pin spotlight or uplighting will draw attention to key areas on the show floor and/or on the main stage. Lighting not only centres the attention, but helps you rule over your senses and helps the brain quiet distractions and impulses.

At entrances to show floor and large general session rooms, install diffused lighting and shadows by creating a canopy or pergola to decrease stress and chaos.

Use lighting to mimic day-to-night by uplighting or dimming fixtures and décor.





## PLACEMENT OF STRUCTURES, SURFACES AND TEXTURES

It's critical that structures such as walls, tables, seating, lighting, etc. can be moved easily to adjust to the event's needs. The notion of everything remaining stationary and in fixed place is an outdated idea.

Textures, patterns and colour schemes have good physiological impacts on people and become memorable, symbolic references. Customising the colour schemes and décor of the space to each

locale will bring in authentic feel and flavour. Also incorporating woods, oxidised metal, or stone in the event design immediately connects the space to nature allowing for surfaces and spaces that can be used in more than one way.

The human brain loves to look at fractal patterns, a self-similar pattern that repeats itself. In nature, fractals can be found in every level of the ecosystem from broccoli to butterfly wings, tree canopies to clouds, and from seeds to snowflakes. These are beautiful, yet complex images and designs. Dr. Rangan Chatterjee discusses the healing power of fractals in his book "The Stress Solution." In the

publication, **Benoit Mandelbrot**, a Polish-born mathematician who is credited with originally coining the word fractal, explains how our visual system is in some way hard wired to understand fractals. We experience a stress reduction 'triggered by a physiological resonance when the fractal structure of the eye matches that of the fractal image being viewed.' 'He found that when we look at fractals even for a short amount of time, we get a spike in alpha-wave brain activity which is present when we're in a thrive state. Brain scans reveal that looking at fractals can activate the parahippocampus, an area of the brain which helps us to process and regulate emotions' (pg 222)

Looking at the flow of water in a river delta, we can mimic the regulation of people movement like we do water flow, using eddies, a place for people to →

### TIPS - Bringing the outdoors inside

Place live, air-purifying plants in high-traffic areas (peace lily, English ivy, Gerbera daisy).

Schedule programme breaks outdoors or in areas with low-profile windows that do not block light nor view.

Create a residential feel that layers elements to produce a sense of refuge. Attendees would enjoy sitting in a park designed on the show floor or experiencing a sense of curiosity with shadows and semi-transparent light through draping that obscures sight. This resembles turning the corner on a city street - where your site is obscured, and the mystery is often just around the corner.





rest or, using things to resist the natural flow (i.e. free-standing signage, tables). The purpose is to slow down or speed up the movement of people to avoid the overflow or build-up of traffic pressure for better enjoyment and engagement for attendees. This offers a new lens to create new solutions for an event professional. There are fractals in nature everywhere and event professionals can use fractal designs and images on screens between sessions, signs, gobos, or even in the symmetry of table placement, and meeting room and show floor designs.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, the average American spends 93% of their time indoors (Li, 2018, pg. 34). Leading us to question - what percentage of attendees' time is spent indoors at educational sessions, on the exhibit floor, networking in lounges and restaurants? How can we encourage attendees to get outside or how can we bring the outdoors inside? Social distancing and outdoor events are going to be encouraged to restore attendee confidence, as we recover from this pandemic. In 2021 and beyond, hosting events outdoors will be the new indoors and a trend that event professionals cannot ignore. →

## PROSPECT AND RANGE

Humans have a psychological need to be at the highest point for the best view. Long and open views are optimal and give people a sense of their surroundings. Again, this gives us a feeling of calm and an understanding of the unknown before we come down and enter on ground level. Our mind is pre-disposed to life on a savannah with open spaces but not empty and barren land. A keen observation is that people with power, status and money traditionally like to build on high ground.

Meeting professionals are considering new ways of using auditoriums, coliseums, stadium seating, and balcony views that allow attendees to experience an event at a higher view. At the 2018 MPI World Education Congress in Indianapolis, Indiana, the general session format was re-imagined and attendees were invited to

attend a "pep rally" in bleacher-type seating. In an interview with Melinda Burdette, MPI's Director of Events, she described the change as strategic and purposeful. The idea was originally executed to embrace the Indianapolis' brand as a sports town. More importantly, it also allowed for communities to sit together in blocks, creating a different type of crowd dynamic. With attendees sitting higher than the main stage, Melinda noted "there was an unanticipated outcome - a high level of energy was coming down to the stage. The speakers and performers felt and responded differently. This 'Saturday Night Live' layout allowed those on stage to feed off this enthusiasm." →



### TIPS - View from the top

Consider using gradual raised seating such as in an amphitheatre or stadium seating for large sessions to ignite the senses and need for a feeling of safety.

Install a raised terrace inside the entrance to a show floor as a viewing area or elevated food and beverage seating area.





## SENSES

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**Dr. Li's book, Forest Bathing,** explains several specific examples on senses and scents and how they can be connected to design. He describes the state of Yugen, a word from Chinese poetry that has been adapted into Japanese aesthetics. It essentially means a profound sense of beauty that is "felt from the heart, not seen with the eyes." Watching a sun set into the ocean while standing on the shore or witnessing a boat disappear into the horizon would give one a sense of Yugen.

**Often, this awareness** of the universe is too deep and powerful for words. In current times attendees are looking for purpose from events. Moments for intimate, deep connections that foster a sense of bonding and togetherness and not isolation. What if we surveyed not just their feelings of satisfaction, but also if the experience brought them wonder, harmony, peace and a sense of awe? We are so good at creating excitement, anticipation, heightened emotions at events, but now we must ask ourselves, "can our events create moments of Yugen"? →





"Add artificial trees in walkways as studies have shown when people walk where there are trees, they remember 20% more" Dr. Li

**TIPS** - Creating a sense of Yugen

**Smell is our most primal sense.** Breathing in a forest's natural aromatherapy provides a boost to our immune system and frame of mind. Since the brain does not know what is real or fake (our senses tell us that), save money by placing artificial trees with essential oil from pine trees or cedar shavings by registration, entrances and throughout show floors or in bowls on tables to decrease stress and increase a positive mood. Improve your attendee's mood by adding in scents of citrus and evergreen to your event spaces.

**Add artificial trees in walkways** as studies have shown when people walk where there are trees, they remember 20% more (Li, 2008).

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**Art inspires creativity.** Adding art on session walls and screens, live art and music in receptions, registration, and other common spaces can help create moments of wonder and awe.

**Sound mask common spaces with natural sounds.** Piping unobtrusive, natural sounds into meeting spaces can enhance an individuals' cognitive function and increase overall satisfaction (DeLoach, Carter, & Braasch, 2015; Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008).





“Design your event like a winding river rather than in simple straight lines”

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS - LIFTING OUR GAZE TO NEW HORIZONS



In reflecting on Janine Benyus's comments noted in the introduction, now is the time for us to put back into in-person events those elements that make them memorable and worth attending. Meeting professionals have a new set of realities; new questions to ponder; new considerations; new ROI metrics.

How can planners look at the programme and sessions differently, shifting from delivery of knowledge to helping people connect in a more intimate way with the content and with each other?

The reality is most meetings and events in the near future will have a smaller or reduced attendance. With more space to work with, now is the time for event planners and show organisers to change their mindset from the quantity of offerings to a focus on human performance and personalised experiences. Instead of assigning rooms by track or topic, can we imagine designing our programmes and rooms under these headers: focused strategic attention, awe and idea generation, eco-system of collaboration, and inspirational problem solving? How do you think your attendees would react?

Is this a beautiful event?

Both in design and meaning.

Do people just attend your event or do they lean in and experience it? Experiences should be memorable in the heart and mind. This is the time for your event to illicit an awareness of the universe and environment that triggers emotions that are too deep and powerful for words.

Can we have an event experience that is designed with biophilia in mind? The simple answer is yes!

We cannot afford not to, no matter the size of the meeting. Designing event experiences that use well-recognised natural elements like wood and water add variety to the sensory experience in transition spaces (entrances, exits) and allow our attendees to feel and think better. We need to think about integrating nature into our designs. Consider designing the event layouts more like a winding river rather than just straight lines and right angles; placing curved end-caps or curved walls in corners of

rooms or at the end of an aisle to allow a natural flow, an easy transition and continued attendee movement.

**Remake the way you make!** YOU have the power to unleash the human capacity for innovation and creativity to solve difficult problems in these unprecedented times. Using the answers found in nature will help you drive success for your attendees and organisations. All we have is now. Start today to make a difference, your stakeholders and attendees are counting on you. ■





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