



Homes That Heal

Biophilic design, a concept that connects people with nature, blurs the boundaries of indoor and outdoor for a healthier mind and body

BY MICHELE LERNER



When Fred Wilson and his wife Elissa Morgante, co-founders of Morgante Wilson Architects in Chicago, look out their window, they see far more than a glimpse of Lake Michigan. Their vista isn't just a pretty scene; it brings them psychological and physical benefits.

"At our home on Lake Michigan and in the homes we design for our clients, we don't just frame the view. We create a way to look across the view into the distance," Mr. Wilson says. "We bring glass windows and doors all the way to the floor, so in the foreground you see our garden, in the middle you see the lawn, and in the distance you see the water."

Custom-home architects nearly always design site-specific residences that connect with their natural surroundings. For many, the term "biophilic design" simply puts a name to something they have done for their entire careers: embracing nature as part of the design process.

Simply put, biophilic design "makes people feel good," says Rick Cook, a founding partner of CookFox Architects in New York.

"We've known that anecdotally throughout history, but now researchers help us understand

the importance of connecting with nature and how we can design buildings to enhance that relationship," Mr. Cook says.

While biophilic design might seem to fit best in an area with spectacular natural views, such as mountains, water, or desert, the design aesthetic can be found everywhere, including single-family homes and condos.

According to 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design, a 2014 report by Terrapin Bright Green, a sustainability consulting firm, numerous studies show that connecting with nature reduces stress, improves concentration, lowers blood pressure, increases productivity, improves moods, and makes people feel safer.

"Biophilic design means more than adding a green wall to a lobby," says Josh Kassing, vice president of design and development for Mary Cook Associates, an interior-design firm based in Chicago. "Designers have done a good job of bringing in the visual elements of biophilic design, such as views of ponds and trees, but in the future I think we'll see more integration of all five senses. It's about lighting, sound, smells, and textures, too."

Building with wood, stone, and

The best rooms in a house are outside, such as this lounge and alfresco dining area by Rill Architects, opposite; while walls of glass, above, help connect the interiors with nature.

Helen Norman



Biophilic design doesn't just frame a view, but creates a way to look across it into the distance—such as this home by Chicago-based Morganate Wilson Architects.

natural materials can be part of biophilic design, along with using fabrics that mimic nature, he says.

“At its core, biophilic design is less about what's applied to a house and more about the layout and the visual connection to the outdoors that makes people comfortable,” Mr. Kassing says. “It's important for biophilic design to be a priority from the beginning, to be site-specific first,

then for architects and designers to layer in space-planning and decor.”

CONNECTING HOMES WITH NATURE

For Tyler Jones, founder of Blue Heron Homes in Las Vegas, designing a house is about creating an emotional experience for residents and their guests.

“We want to design homes that

make you feel good physically and emotionally,” Mr. Jones says. “People are wired to feel good with a wide vantage point where they can feel safe and protected in a cozy space with a view.”

Mr. Jones integrates water into his home designs for its calming effect, and carefully considers air flow and cross ventilation. He adds fire pits and fireplaces to satisfy the innate need for warmth and integrates natural living plants wherever possible.

“At our ‘Vegas Modern 001’ showcase home in Las Vegas, we designed the home with an intentional journey, from a portal of locally sourced stone at the entrance that feels like a natural canyon, then past desert landscaping that has a water feature that trickles into the home,” Mr. Jones says. “Throughout the home we have glass pocket doors, so you don't always know whether you're inside or outside.” Even the primary bedroom has an indoor-outdoor bathroom with pocket doors leading to a private outdoor shower and an outdoor tub with a long view across the desert to the Las Vegas Strip, he adds.

Jim Rill, founder of Rill Architects in Bethesda, Maryland, makes nature part of every home he designs.

“I start with the sight lines and the flow of a house to create an ease of movement between the controlled environment inside the house and nature,” Mr. Rill says. “The best rooms in your house are outside, so we design homes so that you don't feel the difference between being inside or outside.”



For example, Mr. Rill created an outdoor living room when he renovated a house on a lake in Reston, Virginia, and added walls of glass to connect the interior living space with the outdoors. Materials such as stone and wood link the rooms to the surrounding trees and shoreline. Rill designed a new home on Little Assawoman Bay in Delaware with a wood interior that resembles a ship.

“The owners wanted two separate houses connected by a breezeway, so they could entertain guests but have their privacy,” Mr. Rill says. “The most important part of the house is the bay itself, so we designed the houses on either side of a pointed deck that leads your eyes to the horizon across the bay.”

The flow of space in a home, also part of biophilic design, can help residents relax.

“We designed one home with a courtyard in the center that’s

completely open-air yet enclosed, so that during a snowstorm it seems like it’s snowing inside the house,” Mr. Wilson says. “We ran a stone wall from outside the front door through the courtyard and the family room and out to the backyard, to pull your eyes through the entire house.”

Floor-to-ceiling glass pocket or bifold doors offer opportunities for a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor rooms. Mr. Wilson designed a home with an indoor swimming pool with a 50-foot-wide glass wall on one side that could be opened during pleasant weather.

BIOPHILIC DESIGN IN URBAN LOCATIONS

Urban site constraints challenge architects’ and developers’ ability to increase residents’ exposure to nature. For example, at 25 Park Row, a 50-story condo in Manhattan designed by CookFox Architects,



every apartment faces City Hall Park and includes railings with botanical patterns that filter light as if it’s coming through the trees in the park, Mr. Cook says. 25 Park Row opened to residents in summer 2020.

The upper floors of the building include views of the East River, the Hudson River, and New York Harbor. CookFox’s condo at 378 West End Avenue on the Upper West Side overlooks the historic Collegiate Church.

“We try to replicate that feeling of being on your front porch looking out at the world with the refuge of your home behind you,” Mr. Cook says. “In a high-rise, that can mean a loggia where you feel a sense of enclosure while you’re outside, or a Juliet balcony, so you feel the fresh air while you’re still inside.”

Exposure to seasonal and daily changes in light patterns help people feel better, Mr. Cook says.

Even from inside, a tranquil getaway, left, by Morganate Wilson feels perched at the water’s edge; while urban developments, such as the Cirrus condos in Chicago, right, are also incorporating biophilic design concepts.

Views of water and greenery can be especially important in urban environments like New York and Chicago.

“Every residence will have a view into a one-acre park, Lake Michigan, or the Chicago River at the Cirrus condos and Cascade apartments in Lakeshore East in Chicago,” says Linda Kozloski, creative design director of LendLease, a property and investments group headquartered in Chicago. The residences are designed with floor-to-ceiling glass for full exposure to the views.

“We designed the conservatory, an interior courtyard that faces south into the park, with natural wood floors and pebbles and big tropical plants, so that residents can take advantage of the sunlight and warm environment even when it’s cold outside,” Ms. Kozloski says.

Back in New York, in Brooklyn’s Gowanus neighborhood, Tankhouse developers and SO-IL architects created 450 Warren, an 18-unit condo building where every apartment has an exterior entrance.

“Instead of designing one big block, we designed three towers with three courtyards,” says Florian Idenburg, an architect and partner with SO-IL in Brooklyn. “We pulled all the connections between the units outside, so the homes are linked with exterior corridors, bridges, and stairs. Every home has private outdoor space and at least three orientations to the



outside, so they can trace the sunlight throughout the day.”

INCORPORATING BIOPHILIC DESIGN INTO EXISTING HOMES

The benefits of biophilic design can be achieved on a smaller scale in existing homes.

“Even if you don’t have a big view, you can use natural materials like wood and stone and bring in inspira-

tional artwork to give the illusion of blue sky,” Ms. Kozloski says. “Potted plants can bring greenery inside and filter the air.”

Something as simple as opening your windows in all kinds of weather and seeking out even the smallest view of nature, such as a pot of flowers, can bring some of the mental benefits of biophilic design, Mr. Wilson says. ■

Brooklyn development 450 Warren Street includes three courtyards, and units are connected by exterior corridors, bridges, and stairs.