

Instant
Impact for
Your Library

100+

IDEAS TO INSPIRE
SMART SPACES AND
CREATIVE PLACES

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INTRODUCTION

We all know that life is getting busier. As librarians we strive every day to listen to our community, provide the services that enrich the lives of our users, and occasionally find the time to do some reading that furthers our professional skills and sparks our creativity.

I wrote this book for those small chunks of time when librarians have the energy and interest to learn something new that might be useful at their library. The chapters are short and meant to stand alone, so you can read whatever captures your interest. I provided examples of space and design elements that can be used by libraries. There are photographs, so you can see how some of these space ideas look in real life. At the end of each chapter, I have provided a few online resources that I found useful and that should assist you in learning more about a specific topic.

I try to keep my eyes open, and when I see a good idea, no matter where I find it, I think about how I might be able to use that idea at my library. At the end of the day, my goal is just like that of every librarian. I want to make sure my library is doing useful, relevant work and that it is an institution valued and frequently visited by its community. I hope this book will help you in that endeavor.

WHY THESE IDEAS MATTER

When I started writing this book, I wanted to identify space and design ideas that libraries could model or that would spur the development of new ideas in readers' minds. Here are the key reasons why all of these ideas can make a difference in your library:

- People today want experiences. They want to be entertained and educated. Libraries are not exempt from this expectation. If you can ensure that a visit to the library will include the opportunity to experience something new (art/displays/hands-on exhibits/etc.), it will greatly enhance the likelihood that your patrons will visit the library on a regular basis.

Plus, given that libraries have plenty of space for their books, space is an obvious tool with which libraries can work.

- Many of these ideas will draw people into your library who don't visit often or, in some cases, ever. The ideas are meant to be fun, different, and of a nature that will appeal to lots of people, not just those who visit the library regularly. Innovative ideas will help expand the number of people who experience your space. Plus, once you've got those folks in the door, you'll have the chance to share all of the other wonderful things your library can do for them.
- Some of the ideas included in this book are good for library staff and visitors just because they improve the health or attractiveness of the library space. For example, green spaces are innately eye-catching. They encourage stopping, relaxing, and enjoying, all of which are beneficial to our health. They also add to the oxygen level of the space they inhabit, and more oxygen is good for everyone!
- Libraries are still accused by critics of being dusty, musty, old spaces. I think nothing can do a better job of combating that image than new ideas, demonstrated in a very physical, real, and unexpected way. Imagine if people came to town in the summer and were told at the visitor's center, "Don't miss visiting the bathrooms at the library!" (Keep reading if you want to know what that means.)
- Creating spaces for specific groups, such as millennials, is a fairly simple way of beginning to build a relationship with that group. You probably don't want to turn your whole library into a millennial-enticing zone, but it can't hurt (and might help) to think about what they want and how you might provide them with that. At the same time an idea that is meant for millennials must just as easily appeal to others. You never know until you try.
- Space has the potential to amplify the standards espoused by a library. If a space can articulate what your library values and believes in, it can act as a powerful tool to reinforce that message to your community. Instead of walking into a library and feeling as if your surroundings resemble those of other libraries you've visited, imagine how powerful it would be to walk into your local library and immediately experience what is important to that organization and what makes it unique and relevant to its community.

- Libraries were built to last, and they weren't meant to change much in terms of their physical presence. In the 1960s and '70s, you could probably walk into almost any average library in America and understand very quickly where the books were kept, how you were supposed to go through the process of borrowing books, and where you were meant to go if you had questions. Libraries were *the* source of information and of books to borrow, and no one expected much more from them than a predictable experience and available reading materials.

Obviously, things have changed. The internet is a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of ideas, information, and entertainment, and that has become the new norm. By creating a library with spaces that reflect that vibrancy and fluidity, we will be taking yet another step to define today's library as relevant, exciting, and an institution worth supporting.

- Most of the ideas in this book will help you move your library from being transactional (someone gets a book, checks out that book, and leaves the library) to being much more experiential (a patron sits down in a comfortable chair in the sun to spend some time reading a book, and in the process ends up chatting with a newcomer to the community or watching a program). Experiential use of the library develops much stronger ties between the library user and the institution and helps create a sense of community and belonging. That's worth a great deal to both the library and the people who use it.

Pick a chapter that looks interesting and jump in. You don't need to read the chapters in any particular order, nor do you need to read all of the chapters in the book. Keep in mind that some of these ideas can be combined. For example, you might create Instagram bait by developing a green space in your library or by turning your bathroom into an art display. If that sounds confusing or weird, keep reading!



BIOPHILIC DESIGN INVITING MOTHER NATURE INTO YOUR LIBRARY

Biophilic design is the inclusion of green, living things into a space with the goal of making that environment healthier, more enjoyable, and more attractive. It advocates the use of natural light, natural materials, living greenery, water, and the sounds and smells of nature.

The term was coined by Edward O. Wilson, who in 1984 published a short book on the topic, titled *Biophilia*. He identified biophilia as “humans’ innate tendency to focus on living things, as opposed to the inanimate.”

People like seeing green inside a building just because it looks nice and creates a pleasant environment. However, biophilic design goes beyond simply creating an attractive space. It is also championed as a method to lower stress, improve the quality of oxygen, and increase creativity and innovation. Adding greenery to a space also helps make that space a quieter and more contemplative environment.

How do you know biophilic design when you see it? Think about what you might see on a walk outside. Water flowing across rocks in a stream, moss on the banks of a river, lawns, flowerbeds, and rows of trees all would qualify.



When you see those elements inside a building or in an urban environment, you are seeing biophilic design. Biophilia has become very popular as a design concept, and you are likely to see some version of it in almost every type of public space, including hospitals, malls, retail centers, office buildings, schools, hotels, and homes.

The Ford Foundation atrium on 42nd Street in New York City is a wonderful example of biophilic design at its best. When you walk into the lobby from the busy, urban street, you feel like you have entered a forest. The light is dappled, the air is warmer and cleaner, and you immediately feel less frazzled. If libraries could recreate even a small version of what is done here, the effect on our buildings and the people who use them could be immense.

BIOPHILIC DESIGN THROUGH PATTERN AND TEXTURE

Biophilic design need not be executed merely through the use of living greenery. It can also be incorporated into a space via uses of pattern and texture that *suggest* nature.

The standard resource about this concept is *14 Patterns of Biophilic Design: Improving Health and Well-Being in the Built Environment*, written by Terrapin Bright Green, LLC, an environmental consulting and strategic planning firm.

The authors have developed a definition of biophilic design that has become a benchmark for architects and is useful in providing insight into the basics of the concept. They identify three different forms of biophilic design:

1. Putting nature *into* a space, which is the incorporation of plants, water, rocks, wood, air, and light into a specific area. The Ford Foundation atrium, mentioned above, is an example of this.
2. Using natural analogues or substitutes in a space to reference nature more indirectly. These are shapes, forms, and textures that remind you of nature.
3. Using the nature of a space to replicate the feelings or perspectives that you experience in nature and like or appreciate because of our evolution as a species. For example, humans like a sense of danger (not real danger but the thrill that ripples across our nerves when we encounter something that *could* be dangerous). An example of this is the Skywalk, a glass bridge built out over the Grand Canyon, which can be seen below.

Incorporating nature *into* a space, and using the colors, shapes, and materials of nature, are the most obvious ways that libraries can use biophilic design.





IDEAS TO TRY

- **Let in the fresh air.** The simplest and least expensive way of making a space more nature-oriented is to open up doors and windows whenever you can. It is a simple idea, but it can make a real difference in the energy in the library.
- **Create small, tabletop gardens to place around the library. Or, create terrariums using moss.** You can use a bowl, plate, or even a plastic container for a succulent garden. A terrarium can be made from anything that allows the sun in (photosynthesis is what keeps a terrarium active), such as a glass bowl, a small fishbowl, or even a clear glass Christmas ornament.
- **Experiment with incorporating plants into your library's interior design by grouping a number of hardy plants together near existing seating.** The goal is that when someone sits near the plants, they feel like they are in a mini oasis of green. You don't have to create a greenhouse in every area in your library to incorporate biophilic design. Rather, your goal should be to create small, interior parks in your library that make patrons feel they are experiencing the peace and calm of nature.
- **Purchase small tabletop fountains and put them near seating in the library.** The sound of water is wonderfully relaxing and adds to the sense of the outdoors being brought indoors.
- **Use natural light in your library by ensuring there are chairs and/or tables situated anyplace where there is sunshine or a view of outdoor green spaces.**
 - » Do a review of your library by walking around at different times of the day. Note when spaces have natural sunlight and which windows have good views. Then, consider how to reposition your furniture to take the greatest advantage of both light and views.
 - » For newcomers to your library, create a map identifying which places are best for natural light at which times of day. If your library is located in a cold climate, tell your library users where they can sit to absorb the most sunlight on a cold winter day. This is a public service—seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is caused by lack of sunlight and is a very real thing if you live in the northern part of the country!
- **Experiment by putting natural lightbulbs in defined areas of your library.** Natural light is too bright for some individuals, but others love the clarity and energy it provides. It is also a simple way to bring the outdoors inside.

- **Incorporate a fish tank in your library.** This idea can be very simple (a small goldfish bowl) or complicated (a saltwater aquarium with multiple types of fish). In either case put the tank where people can sit near it and watch the movement of the inhabitants. It is mesmerizing and proven to lower blood pressure, which is why you tend to see fish tanks in doctors' offices.
- **Use color and natural materials to simulate the outdoors and energize a space.** While you might not be able to create a full biophilic environment due to space/financial constraints, you can always use paint and simple houseplants to create a sense of the outdoors. Incorporating natural materials like stone and wood also supports this, as does including shapes that remind you of the outdoors.
- **Incorporate organic shapes into your space through art, furniture, or textiles.** This idea can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. In the children's area at Curtis Memorial Library, a "tree" was made by a volunteer at the library who enjoyed woodworking and was excited to help create this organic-shaped element. The mural was painted by a local artist. Sun streams into this room in the morning, making it a wonderfully warm and welcoming space for children and their caregivers. Plus, the biophilic components of the room cost nothing, although they



did take time and energy to execute. Also, I will mention that the room was not originally designed to be a biophilic space. It was designed this way because it was fun, it created a pleasant space for families, and it was an agreeable place to spend time. However, it does show the power of this concept.

Another incorporation of biophilic design can also be seen in the same children's play area at Curtis. The children's librarian wanted to create a space for children that was full of energy and movement. In addition to the wooden tree and wall mural, she purchased carpeting for the floor that had wave shapes designed in it. The colors are muted but contribute to the sense of movement and space in the room. This space is one of the most popular in Curtis Library and provides an environment where kids can play, parents can converse, and everyone can feel like they are outside, even on the coldest of Maine days.

- **Plant aromatic indoor gardens in small boxes.** These gardens can be small, but they still pack a punch because their aroma creates a bigger impact than their size might warrant otherwise. Consider plants like geranium, thyme, jasmine, or eucalyptus.
- **Create a moss wall.** A (dry) moss wall is fairly inexpensive and works well in spaces that are not conducive to plant life because of lighting, irrigation, or budgetary concerns. If you are interested in developing a moss wall, consider partnering with a local greenhouse. Your library will benefit from their expertise, and the greenhouse can expand the reach of their services by supporting a very visible project in a high-traffic space like the local library.
 - » Another way to develop a moss wall is to make it a community project. Provide a frame, the glue, and the dried moss. Ask your community to help build the moss wall by adding a piece of moss to the frame whenever they visit the library.
- **Create a living wall that encompasses multiple types of plants.** Living walls are truly breathtaking and attention-grabbing (see photo on following page). They change the energy of any space they inhabit, reducing noise and creating an environment in which people want to spend time. They are also expensive to create and require regular maintenance, so those issues should be considered before starting.
- **Create an indoor water feature.** An indoor water feature has same attributes as a tabletop fountain. It is just bigger and provides a larger focal point in a space. The noise of water is very calming and also tends



to pull people into a space. The statue *The Little Water Girl* is an example of a water feature inside the Portland Public Library in Portland, Maine. It was moved to the library many years ago. When the library was recently renovated, the statue was turned into a focal point in its atrium. The sound of water falling is relaxing and serene, and makes the entry space to Portland Public Library very appealing.

WILL THIS WORK AT MY LIBRARY?

To decide if you want to incorporate biophilic design in your library, consider these questions:

- **Do people spend time in your library? Do they hang out there, meet their friends, chat quietly, knit, read, do crossword puzzles, study?** If the answers to those questions are “no,” incorporating more green spaces into your library can be very helpful in increasing your institution’s usability as a sought-out meeting space.

- **Are there spaces in your building that are often empty?**

If so, biophilic design is a wonderful tool for pulling people into under-utilized spaces. Adding plants and comfortable chairs immediately makes a space more attractive and desirable.

- **Do you have spaces for green displays?**

If you do, bear in mind that one lonely plant sitting on a shelf does not equal biophilic design. You need to be able to create the sense of nature in an inside space. You don't have to turn your entire library into the outdoors, but there does need to be enough organic elements to create a feeling of the presence of nature.

- **Do your employees use up a lot of sick time?**

This one is subjective in that there are a lot of reasons why employees might be out sick regularly. However, poor air quality often plays a key role in an unhealthy workspace. Green spaces, and the feeling that nature is present in your building, can increase the health of your staff simply by providing cleaner air and a more natural environment.

If you decide to incorporate living greenery into your library, it will need to be well-maintained and loved. If you can't assign a staff person or volunteer or pay an expert to take care of your greenery, don't start this process. There is nothing sadder than dried-out plants starved for water.

Also, plants can be expensive. They can also die for no apparent reason. Set expectations accordingly so that the occasional plant's failure to thrive is seen as part of the process, not a reason to stop everything.

Be prepared for the possibility that staff members may want to green up their workspaces as much as the public would like plants in the public spaces. You may want to set some parameters about the size and type of plants allowed in staff areas to ensure that if it becomes a jungle, it is still a jungle where people can get their work done.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Nature matters in our lives. Incorporating it into our libraries is a powerful way to make them more attractive and more interesting as spaces where people want to spend time versus being spaces through which our patrons simply pass quickly. And, when people want to spend time in a library, that library immediately becomes more relevant and valuable in their lives.

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.

— JOHN MUIR

IF YOU WANT TO LEARN A BIT MORE

Biophilia by Edward O. Wilson, 1984.

“Biophilic Design Initiative.” International Living Future Institute. <https://living-future.org/biophilic-design/>

“14 Patterns of Biophilic Design.” William Browning, Catherine Ryan, and Joseph Clancy. www.terrapinbrightgreen.com/reports/14-patterns/#the-patterns

“What is biophilic design, and can it really make you happier and healthier?” Katharine Schwab. Fast Company. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90333072/what-is-biophilic-design-and-can-it-really-make-you-happier-and-healthier>