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Literature Review of Interaction with Nature and It Being a Distraction in a Healing Garden

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ABSTRACT

Background: Throughout history, interaction with nature has been viewed as being beneficial for health and well-being everywhere in the world. It is seen as a part of healing when medicine and chemical treatment cannot do the trick. For a patient, visitor or member of staff especially, spending long hours in a hospital can be a stressful experience. Nearby access to natural landscapes or a garden can enhance people's ability to deal with stress and thus potentially improve health outcomes. **Objectives:** This paper attempts to lay out some theories and case studies on the interaction with nature and how it is being used as a distraction. A small study was done in Ampang Hospital, Malaysia to find out. **Results:** It is revealed that most respondents want to have animals in a healing garden. The sound of birds chirping and cats meowing calmed them down and they do not feel lonely. Another element that is preferred is water features as it cools them down being in this hot and humid weather and the flowing water sooth them. **Conclusion:** Respondents want more shading, sounds of animals and water features in a healing garden.

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INTRODUCTION

When we talk about hospitals, we tend to think about the patient being treated in there. But we never seem to consider the fact that there are other kinds of people in a hospital setting. Caretakers, being one of all kinds of people found in a hospital surrounding, other than nurses, doctors and other hospital staff, have long been there for patients but somehow their needs are neglected because we are focusing too much on the patients.

By finding out what preference these caretakers want a healing garden, we can use these results to stimulate and trigger the five senses of human beings to an advantage, by means of distracting them from emotions such as being bored, fatigue, stress, emotional pains and so much more. The area outside of the hospital can be used to help caretakers cope with having these feelings of depress. Not only does this help caretakers, they also help patients by sending positive energy from the caretakers to the patients.

Literature Review:

Interaction with Nature:

Nature scenes tend to reduce stress, whereas settings in the built environment tend to hinder recovery from stress [1, 2]. It is a normal state of human mind whenever they encounter natural setting, they feel most calm and peaceful compare to being in a building with no greens to be see, taste, hear, smell or feel.

Contact with nature is a basic human need and a valuable visual environment plays an important role in this interaction [3, 4, 5]. This is why nature is still important to humans as we evolved in nature and nature is being good to us and we tend to respond positively. After a stressful event, images of nature very quickly produce a calming effect. Nature is fundamentally linked our human spiritually. We feel connected beyond ourselves [6] and this is how healing garden basically work.

Nature as a Distraction:

Being caretaker who is close to the cancer patient, both parties feel the depression from the disease. But in the situation of the caretaker, they have a lot to think about. Being in a hospital with a gloomy atmosphere surrounding them, with death waiting around the corner, the fear of losing their beloved relatives or friends to the terminal illnesses any time soon traumatize them inside but they are unable to show it for fear the cancer patient would give up and give in to the cancer. So these caretakers have to be strong for the sake of the cancer patients.

“Nature as a distraction” falls under one of Dr. Roger Ulrich’s theory of restorative garden [7], which is designed based on theory and research in the behavioral sciences and health-related fields. His theory proposes that gardens in healthcare situations are important stress mitigating resources for patients and staff because they foster social support, sense of control, physical movement and exercise and access to nature and other positive distractions [8].

Positive distractions, such as those found in nature, may block or reduce worrisome thoughts, and foster beneficial changes in physiological systems such as lowered blood pressure and stress hormones [7].

Nature can engage a patient’s interest (thereby distracting from pain, stress or feelings of sickness), without requiring energy input [9]. Nature not only can distract patient’s attention from their pain, but also to their caretakers of their worries and fear of losing that special someone.

Case Study: The Comfort Garden

The Comfort Garden is a small, well-used outdoor space in the sprawling campus of San Francisco General Hospital, most of whose buildings date to 1915 – 1920. The garden is located next to buildings that house a variety of clinics, including those for TB, HIV, methadone maintenance, family health and child abuse.

The feeling of this garden area is of a residential-scale, green and colourful retreat. When asked to describe the garden, some users referred to it as “an oasis”. It is suspected that this image is evoked by two things: the lush and colourful planting, and the relatively enclosed feeling of the garden. This is clearly a garden that has been created – and is maintained – with love and care. There are no weeds, nor is there any litter, yet the garden has a casual rather than a manicured appearance.

Typical users of the garden were staff members who came out alone or in pairs, on a break or to enjoy lunch, and visitors or patients who sat for a while or lay dozing on the lawn. On the weekends, when the clinics are closed, neighboring families were observed to come and picnic and playball on the lawn. Fifty people who were spending time in the garden were interviewed. For most, the garden facilitated a change in mood that was positive.

They left after a medical appointment, or returned to work in the hospital feeling less stressed, refreshed, more content. It also served as a gathering place for support groups from the clinic, and was also used casually by the patients.

(Excerpted from Clare Cooper Marcus and Marni Barnes, *Healing Gardens, Therapeutics Benefits and Design Recommendations*

(New York: Wiley, 1999), 174) [10]

Case Study In Ampang Hospital:

A small and simple study was done in Ampang Hospital to find out caretaker’s preferences in a healing garden that could be beneficial for them in terms of distracting them from negative feelings such as stress, fatigue, emotional pains and so much more.



Fig. 1: It is almost impossible to find a parking space near the hospital due to overcrowding so a lot of cars are parked along the roads.



Fig. 2: The hospital is surrounded by residency and business units. Even street vendors find this a strategic location to sell their products.



Fig. 3: The hospital provided some parking areas within the hospital area but it still does not cater to the amount of people coming in there.



Fig. 4: Parking areas in the hospital are usually shaded.



Fig. 5: More parking lots within the hospital area.



Fig. 6: The front of the auditorium with some vegetation.



Fig. 7: Parking lots within the hospital.



Fig. 8: An area between nurse's hostel and the hospital.



Fig. 9: A small park between nurse's hostels and the hospital



Fig. 10: Parking lot for staff.



Fig. 11: A small garden between parking building and the hospital, going to a restaurant.



Fig. 12: More of the garden.



Fig. 13: View from the garden to the restaurant.



Fig. 14: A playground is also provided in this garden.



Fig. 15: The main lobby in the hospital where most people sits if not going into the wards.



Fig. 16: Facilities provided for customers.

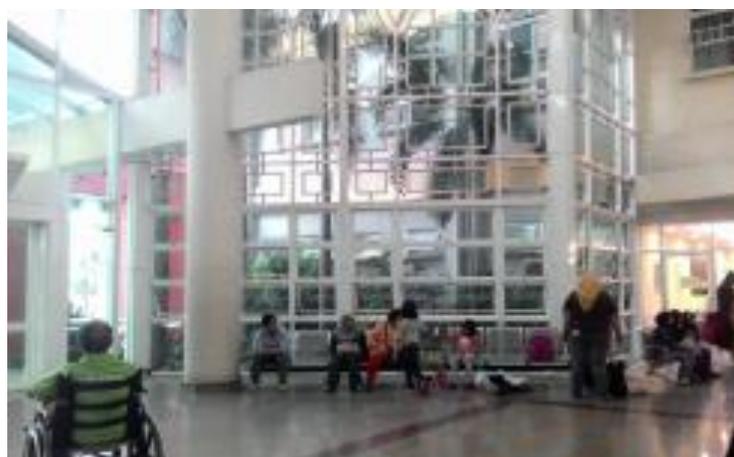


Fig. 17: A small outside of the main lobby.

Results:

It is revealed that most respondents want to have animals in a healing garden. It seems the sound of birds chirping and cats meowing calmed them down and they do not feel lonely. Another element that the respondents want to have in a landscape setting is water features as it cools them down being in this hot and humid weather and the flowing water sooth them.

Discussion:

Natural Elements:

Suprisingly, animals are also a part of a natural element in a landscape setting and respondent seem to want to have animals in them. This is true to the nature as distraction theory where Ulrich [7] notes that positive distractions such as those found in nature, may block or reduce worrisome thoughts, and foster beneficial changes in physiological systems. Respondents seem to like to look at the birds flying and chirping outside and butterflies fluttering with its colourful wings as it appeals to their visual and hearing sense.

From the analysis, it seems that respondents seem to want shadings from the trees and less sun, maybe due to the fact that Malaysian weather is a tropical one and shadings are preferred compare to other countries.

Built Elements:

Seeing how the respondents are in a tropic country, it is not a surprise why all of them preferred to have a water feature in a landscape setting. This is due to the fact of having hot and humid weather all year round but it provides some sort of a distraction from stress and also creates a fascination just from viewing the water flowing [9].

The presence of water features as restoration can be physiological or physical [9] and the water features may provide opportunities for effortless attention in the form of 'soft fascination' [3].

Water features also creates a sort of a cooling effect to respondent's eyes. They do not feel it with their skin, but it seemed cooler when there are water features around due to their brain thinking the surrounding is much cooler than it normally is.

Respondent's Feelings towards Aspects of a Landscape Settings

So what are the landscape elements that caretakers of Hospital Ampang, Malaysia prefer to see in a restorative garden? From the results it is concluded that respondents seem to want animals and water features the most due to their distraction factor that takes away their fear, stress and other negative feelings just by looking at these elements and turn those emotions into a positive energy

And which aspect of landscape elements in a restorative garden that affects caretakers emotionally? Respondents seem to agree that colourful elements such as flowers, shrubs and gazebos are interesting and appealing to their eyes. Different flower shapes and shrubs size seem to help too. They love the smell of flower as they calm them down and they seem to love to hear animal sounds such as bees buzzing and birds chirping. They also love a simple designed gazebo to be in a landscape setting and a lawn with a variety of landscape elements.

And of course, they mostly preferred to have water feature as the main focus of a garden in a hospital for both its distracting and calming factor.

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