

# Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection

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Interaction with nature is critically important to human well-being and development, but sadly has become compromised and diminished in modern times. Through deliberate design, this connection can be repaired and restored. Unfortunately, contemporary society has become confused about the role of the natural environment in people's physical and mental lives. Many believe that the progress of civilization depends on subjugating and converting, if not conquering, the natural world. Indeed, many see this progression as the essence of civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Why should they presume this to be so? First, most people recognize that the production of huge food surpluses by a tiny fraction of the population permits others to obtain their basic needs at a relatively low cost and to exercise an extraordinary degree of mobility. Producing such surpluses has until now relied on the wholesale conversion of natural habitats into vast monocultures used to grow a small number of crops or raise a few species

of livestock at massive industrial scales. Second, modern society has made a range of manufactured products available far beyond what even the richest would have thought possible a millennium ago. The variety of goods available at a typical mall today dwarfs what the most privileged nobility would have experienced in the past. This contemporary level of consumption has depended until now on massively extracting, fabricating from, and then disposing of huge quantities of natural resources. Third, most people today anticipate relatively good health and long lives, which they attribute primarily to the miracles of modern medicine, whose "conquest of disease" has largely relied on suppressing other life forms through championing anti-septic conditions.

All these trends of subjugating and eliminating wild nature have been supported, at least until recently, by the conventional design and development of the human-built, principally urban environment. It is sobering to realize that only two centuries ago, Great Britain was the first nation to have a majority of its population residing in an urban area, now arguably the most common feature of modern life.<sup>2</sup> Today some two-thirds of the developed world lives within the shadow of a metropolitan area. And the greatest migration in

human history is happening now, as hundreds of millions of people migrate from the countryside to the cities in China, India, and elsewhere.

Urbanization historically has relied on converting natural diversity into largely homogenous landscapes of impervious surface, consuming enormous amounts of resources and materials, and generating huge quantities of waste and pollutants. Consequently, the modern urban environment now consumes some 40 percent of energy resources, 30 percent of natural resources, and 25 percent of freshwater resources while generating one-third of air and water pollutants and 25 percent of solid wastes.<sup>3</sup> This prevailing paradigm of urban development is neither necessary nor sustainable and constitutes more a design deficiency than an intrinsic and inevitable flaw of modern life. Still, these tendencies collectively have encouraged many to believe that the benefits of contemporary society depend on massively exploiting, if not conquering, the natural world. For many, progress and civilization have been equated with humanity's distance from and subjugation of nature.

Nonetheless, most people continue to insist that the health and diversity of the environment are related fundamentally to their own physical, mental, and even spiritual well-

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# Building For Life Designing And Understanding The Humannature Connection

**Ying Liu**



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