



Forest Park, Portland, OR
Photo Credit: Forest Park Conservancy

The Natureful City: Rediscovering Nature During a Pandemic

By Tim Beatley

As spring returns to much of the Northern Hemisphere, there is renewed joy at the budding trees, emerging flowers, and a sense of the steadying rhythms of nature. The pandemic rages on throughout the world, with deaths surpassing 550,000 in the United States alone. Despite the promise of widespread vaccinations, mental health concerns, such as excessive stress, anxiety, and depression, are the reality for many.

The pandemic has further amplified the importance and essential role nature plays in our lives as a steadying force and source of solace. Whether the efforts in many cities to make nature and outdoors more accessible -- by repurposing streets, creating new pedestrian

spaces and pop-up parks -- will continue remains to be seen. Even as we emerge from this global crisis, there will be much trauma to recover from, and spending time in nature will play an essential role in restoration.

Will the significance of nature during the pandemic shape the planning and policies of cities after the pandemic? I hope so. In places like Singapore, lockdowns have ignited a debate about priorities in public landscaping. There has been a collective epiphany that residents want more wildness, birds, and butterflies rather than rigorously cut and tended grass. In cities like Paris, birdsong and other natural sounds have filled the audible void left by cars. Will residents demand and

policy-makers ensure that these experiences continue?

The embrace of walking and bicycling, and the permanent curtailment of roadways seem like promising signs for the future of biophilic cities. There have been some policy barriers associated with nature during the pandemic. Biophilic Cities champion, Nina-Marie Lister, experienced first-hand the Toronto's Tall Grass and Weeds Bylaw, essentially making her native garden and others like it illegal. Lister has helped to set in motion a conversation within the city and beyond about misguided and antiquated codes and the need to cultivate a new "lawn order" (in the words of a clever Globe and Mail article author).

The continuing pandemic has made many aspects of our work more complex too. We had to cancel a terrific symposium on biophilic design, headlined by Wong Mun Sum of WOHA, which was highlighting an inspiring collection of projects and design work. We were also unable to hold our annual [Biophilic Leadership Summit](#) at Serenbe, outside of Atlanta, something we had enjoyed over the past four years. Hopefully, as the pandemic wanes, we will be able to return to these in-person events, but we will not likely ever fully return to living and working in the same ways we did before the pandemic. The shifting of many meetings and events online has allowed us to participate in ways that would have been difficult before. The extensive travel necessary to attend all of these important events would have been cost-prohibitive and generated a sizeable carbon footprint. Instead, we have made many virtual appearances this year, for instance at the Moscow Urban Forum, and a workshop on sustainable cities organized by the Universidad Científica del Sur in Lima, Peru, among others.

This greater connectivity has also resulted in unexpected conversations with many people that I admire. These discussions have provided hope and many practical ideas about how we might amplify our work. Again, these conversations that occurred via Zoom might not have occurred otherwise. These have included Shubhendu Sharma, founder of [Afforestt](#) (based in Bangalore and New Delhi, India), and Ken Leinbach, director of

the [Urban Ecology Center](#) in Milwaukee, each pioneering a unique biophilic model that our cities can learn from and perhaps replicate. Sharma has now helped create a remarkable number of intensely-planted, mini-forests in communities worldwide, following the tree planting techniques pioneered by Akira Miyawaki. Sharma showed me historical images of the Taj Mahal, with dense forests all around, which is a stark contrast to the anemic vegetation found on the grounds of this iconic architectural gem today. We have forgotten how vital native, biodiverse forested environments have been to us and the birdlife and many other organisms that live with these environments. "We need to bring back these lost forests," he told me. He believes we must begin to apply what he calls "forestscaping," which is the creation of forested public spaces that blend biodiversity, public art and community design.

Ken Leinbach's story is equally instructive. Leinbach is a

former high school science teacher who, after moving his family to Milwaukee, took over and expanded the city's first nascent Urban Ecology Center at Riverside Park. Through his work (and the work of many others in the community he is quick to point out) Leinbach has pioneered a new and compelling model for growing the next generation of nature-connected, environmentally aware citizens. The model involves established relationships with all the schools within a 2-mile radius of the ecology center. Schools transport their students to programs, and the kids often return with their families to visit the ecology center and the park on evenings and weekends. The crime rate in the park went down and the students' academic performance went up.

Leinbach now runs three urban ecology centers in three different neighborhoods, serving about half the city's school kids. His vision, he tells me, is of Milwaukee becoming



Riverside Park branch of the Urban Ecology Center
Photo: Mark F. Heffron

what he calls an “Ecology City,” where “every kid in our city has consistent access to natural lands from an early age and contact with adult mentors.” This fits our vision of Biophilic Cities, helping to advance the idea of a “whole of life” connection with nature.

While our in-person activities have diminished, much of the work around Biophilic Cities has accelerated in other ways. Our messaging has taken the form of national webinars that have reached thousands of viewers. These included a webinar organized by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, where I shared the virtual stage with St. Louis Sustainability Director and founding Biophilic Cities member, Catherine Werner. Another webinar, organized by the National Audubon Society, was live-streamed to more than 14,000 members through the Audubon’s Facebook page. Some of the virtual presentations that we give are also to smaller groups, and these talks sometimes lead to the most engaging discussions and insights about the nature of a city. I recall one presentation to the Garden Club of Pittsburgh, where I learned about the importance of that city’s public steps -- a network of several hundred steps that form a sometimes forgotten pedestrian infrastructure in this hilly city. We have now added public steps to our global [pattern library](#) and are already seeing connections to similar mobility systems in San Francisco and other cities.

Our virtual lives and work have also allowed us to maintain and

deepen connections with other organizations. We presented to the [NATURA](#) project that we are pleased to be part of, which is linking global nature-based networks to facilitate the exchange of knowledge. We have also participated in several other online events including [The Nature of Cities Festival](#), the [SHIFT](#) conference (typically held in Wyoming) that supports the advancement of the connection to nature as a preventive determinant of health, and the [Biophilic Design Virtual Symposium](#). We were also able to participate in the online Sustainability in the City symposium hosted by the William & Mary Environmental Law and Policy Review for which JD Brown and I co-authored an article on Half-Earth Cities focused on exploring the ways cities might expand their biophilic influence outside their borders.

We have also received some new funding, including a grant from the University of Virginia Environmental Resilience Institute, to collect, catalog, and analyze steps and policies being taken in cities during the pandemic. This work has provided important stories and insights about how cities have creatively adapted to the pandemic by expanding access to outdoor spaces and nature. This work has already led to a series of summary posts and a new [resource library](#) on our website.

We also continue to commission and release short films, including two recent films about inspiring biophilic buildings: The Frick Environmental Center and the

Phipps Center for Sustainable Landscapes (CSL) in Pittsburgh (the latter featuring Phipps director, Richard Piacentini).

My latest book, *The Bird-Friendly City* (Island Press, 2020), was published in November and is an effort to show some of the ways that cities can begin to better care for and love the birds that have meant so much to us during the pandemic. From fritted and bird-safe windows, and lights-out campaigns to creative efforts to manage the impacts of feral and domestic cats, there are many things cities (and the planners, birders, and homeowners who live there) can do.

I continue to make the case that the status of birds is a meaningful way to judge the progress of cities. What is beneficial for birds (whether reducing light pollution and pesticide use, or expanding areas of trees and native plants) will also benefit humans. Co-flourishing is an especially needed goal today. I continue to believe that birdsong is a critical metric of a flourishing city. I have been pleased to speak to various local and regional bird groups as a result of the book. It is a chance to expand the conversation about biophilic cities to a group that has heard little about it but is preternaturally inclined to embrace it. It has been eye-opening to see the remarkable number of activists and volunteers working at the grassroots level to defend birds. There is a clear and essential synergy with those cities and staff supporting the vision of biophilic cities, and we must

continue to look for ways to join forces in making our cities more biocentric and natureful.

In November, we also happily welcomed the City of Toronto as our newest partner city. Toronto has been a leader in many areas and an inspiration for cities working to create livable and biodiverse environments. We also have had numerous discussions with cities that we hope will formally join the Network or become potential collaborators and partners in the future. The list is long and geographically diverse, with Medellin, Doha, Lima, Boulder, and Cape Town being just a few of the cities we have been engaging. We continue to develop new international collaborations, such as a new initiative with colleagues at Monterrey Tech in Guadalajara, Mexico. We have now launched the first of our Working Groups, made possible by a new web portal and platform for collaboration (funded by

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation).

The theme of this issue is a significant one for me. We continue to struggle with protecting and sustaining our ocean ecosystems upon which so much of life depends. Cities have great potential to step into and work to protect our oceans and marine environments. For many coastal cities, there is remarkable nearby nature to be rediscovered by residents. This issue of the journal has an impressive set of stories -- with dispatches from Plymouth (UK), Venice, Kazan (Russia), Wellington, and Miami -- providing a cautionary but optimistic view of what is possible. We need to activate as quickly as we can a global movement of biophilic ocean cities that can replicate and advance many of the creative ideas and efforts described in these articles. We are the blue planet and increasingly a planet of cities, so we must

begin to recognize the essential interconnections that exist.

I wish you good reading and hope that you will be as inspired and as filled with a sense of optimism about the (post-pandemic) world as I am!

Resources:

Afforest. <https://www.afforestt.com>.

Biophilic Cities. Value of Nature in the Time of the Pandemic. <https://www.biophiliccities.org/covid19-research>.

Biophilic Cities. Pattern Library. <https://www.biophiliccities.org/pattern-library>.

Biophilic Leadership Summit. <http://biophilicsummit.com>.

NATURA. <https://natura-net.org>.

Urban Ecology Center. <https://urbanecologycenter.org>.



Tufted Titmouse
Photo: Josh Madison