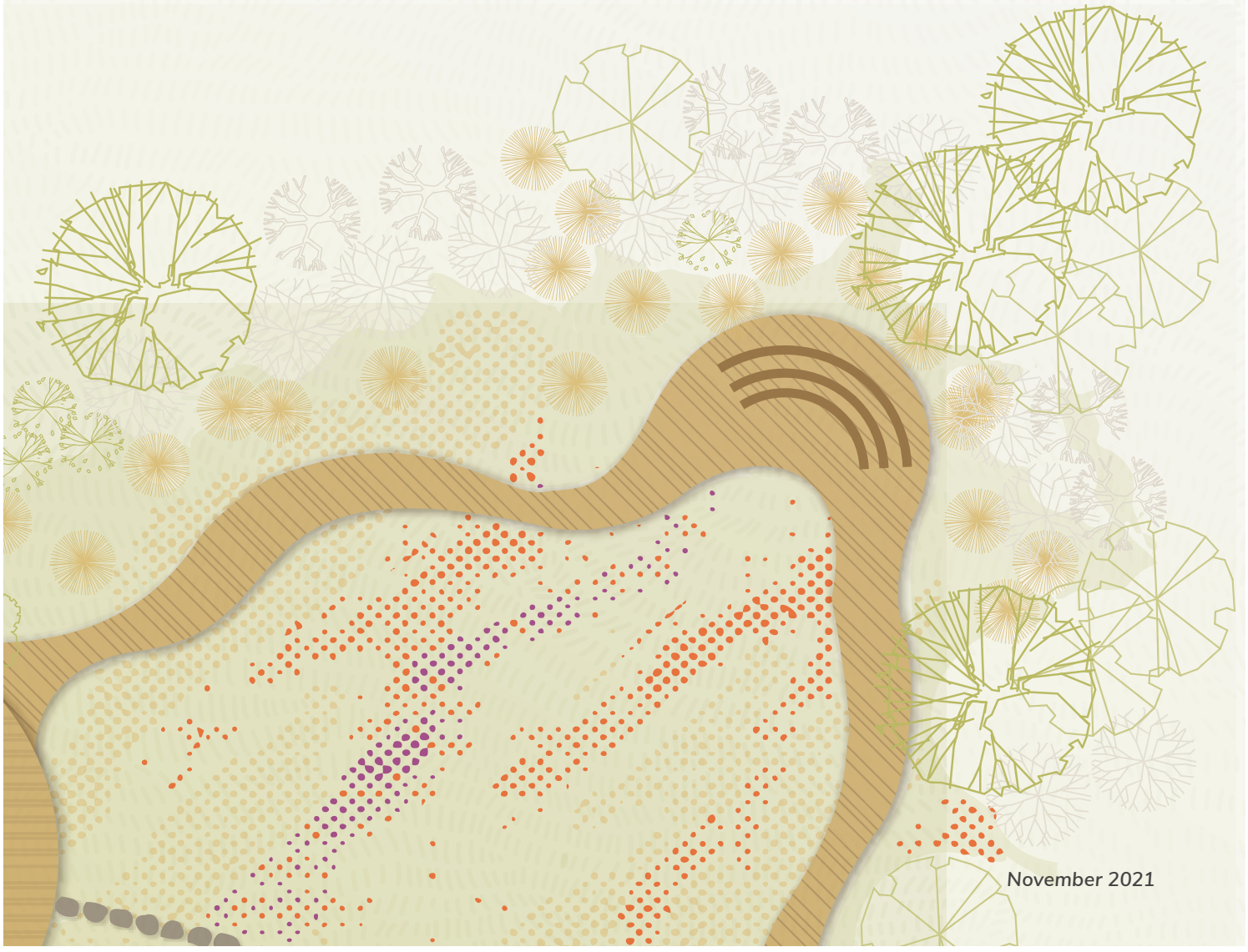
Nature Sacred

The Power of Sacred Places

25 Years of Science and Evidence-based Design of Healing Green Spaces: A Landscape Architect's Guide



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I was a lucky kid. I grew up in the 1970s and 80s in rural northeastern Connecticut, an area known as the "Quiet Corner." Home was a big old house on about an acre of land that felt much larger because no one in our neighborhood had fences. Our immediate neighbors never seemed to mind that I regularly walked across their property to reach the best part of our village: the Fenton River and the Nipmuck Trail that followed alongside.

Stretching 18 miles long, winding through just a few towns, that river kept me company (and I like to think I kept it company, too) on hundreds, maybe thousands of walks — by myself, with family and with friends. Sometimes, I waded in the river's shallow waters, and I even occasionally fished for trout. Mostly, though, the Fenton was for being in the presence of: for gazing upon, for listening to, for breathing in the scent of its rich soil and riparian vegetation.

An only child, I was sometimes lonely and hewed toward the melancholy. The Holocaust looms large on my father's side of the family; depression runs on both sides and through me. But the Fenton River and Nipmuck Trail kept loneliness and boredom at bay and gifted me an ever-changing world of wonder, beauty and delight. It is possible that I would have ended up where and who I am without the Fenton and the Nipmuck, but that somehow feels unlikely. The nature in that place, the nature of that place, became part of me.

It is with the backdrop of these experiences that I've approached landscape architecture, understanding the profound role designers can have in helping to facilitate the kind of connections between people and the natural world that were foundational in my own life. When we're in its presence, nature sustains us, fortifies us, heals us. We know this intuitively, and science continues to illuminate the depth and scope of the impact.

Reintroducing nature to people and places where it has been exchanged for concrete, steel, asphalt and brick is often our charge. Nature is restorative, full stop. Yet we also know, and I have witnessed, that it matters how we go about reintroducing nature into places where it is absent. As a Design Advisor with Nature Sacred, which develops contemplative nature spaces following a specific set of design elements and community-rooted processes, I have seen this time and again.

With this report, we seek to gently remind you of the real human impact of your work, and to share with you some science, insights and inspiration as you take on new projects that involve infusing nature into

communities where there has previously been a dearth of it. In neighborhoods where there is no Fenton River or Nipmuck Trail, we can collaboratively design nature spaces grounded in evidence-based design that engender health and healing for current and future generations.

Naomi A. Sachs, PhD, MLA, EDAC
Assistant Professor, University of Maryland
Design Advisor, Nature Sacred

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Introduction

Landscape architects and designers have a unique ability to create healthier, more beautiful, and more resilient built environments. Meanwhile, a large body of research exists on both the benefits of nature as healing space and the methodology of how to design green spaces to maximize healing benefits. Here, we build on Nature Sacred's first Healing Power of Nature report, bridging the documented health advantages of nature with the ways in which landscape architects and designers can incorporate this research into their work to create healthier spaces.

Often, what we think of as "nature" is a large, distant entity, like a national park or wild forest. This type of nature is crucial, but it is also a resource that few people can access regularly. In this report, we focus on nearby nature: nature spaces that, even if small, are close by, easily accessible and can become part of our daily lives. Nearby nature is therefore critical for accessing nature's capacity to heal. By working with communities to design nearby nature in ways that maximize public health, community building and ecological sensitivity, landscape architects and designers can have an outsized impact on our clients and their communities.

Research Overview

Exposure to nature has a plethora of benefits for humans. We have grouped them into four categories, each covering a different metric: individual health, community health, economic health and ecological health. Design interventions to create public green spaces have the capacity to make a positive impact on health outcomes in all of these areas, often simultaneously.

Individual Health

Spending time in nature affects us profoundly as individuals. Research has documented nature's effects on physical health.[1,2]

These health conditions disproportionately affect people in low-income areas and communities of color, a result of the intersecting problems of disinvestment in those communities' physical environment and systemic inequity in access to healthcare and treatment.

In individuals, we now know nature can improve:

- outcomes of acute conditions[3,4]
- immune function[5,6]
- risk of chronic conditions such as heart disease[7] and diabetes[8]
- likelihood of exercising[9,10]
- overall mortality[11]
- birth weight[12]

We are also becoming increasingly aware that mental health issues, which affect people of all backgrounds, must be viewed and treated with the same gravity and urgency as physical health challenges. The potential for nature to help improve our mental health is very clear, and particularly so for people in urban settings,[13] which induce significantly higher rates of negative responses than natural environments.[14]

Nature exposure — even just a view of it — leads to:

- reduced anxiety and ruminative thoughts[15]
- quicker and more complete recovery from chronic stress[16,17,18]
- dropped levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, by 21% within 20-30 minutes[19]
- heightened cognitive performance, including ability to focus and pay attention[20]
- better memory and concentration in children, including children with ADHD[21,22,23]
- reduced absenteeism and nine fewer hours of sick leave per year[24]
- slowed cognitive decline and signs of dementia in older people[25,26]
- improved self-esteem and mood[27,28]
- reduced or prevented cases of depression by 27% with five hours or more of nature exposure[29,30]

And yet it is a direct dose of nature that is most beneficial. While indoor plants and static nature scenes do help, *people respond better to the multisensory experience of being outdoors.*[31,32,33] Being outdoors and interacting with nature enhances our resilience and ability to cope with negative emotions and life circumstances.[34] And whether or not we enjoy ourselves, people still physiologically benefit from it.

An additional barrier for many folks living in urban environments, whose connection to nature has atrophied through a systemic lack of investment in greening their communities and exclusion from other green spaces, is that nature may evoke feelings of discomfort, dislike or trepidation. Fortunately, those feelings don't have to be permanent: As nature becomes more familiar, and as we design spaces that take community history into consideration, attitudes toward it can become more positive.[35]

Community Health

The good that comes with quality green space in communities is not limited to individuals. *As we begin to care for our own health through interactions with nature, we open up our capacity to care for and connect with others.*

Here, we start to see that the design and programming of these spaces also determines their effectiveness.[46,47] *Green spaces that actively encourage use, and improvements that target barriers to use expressed by the community, lead to better usage and better health outcomes.*[48] These green spaces are also better cared for in the long term. Such localized care practices present plentiful opportunities for broader engagement of communities in ecological education and stewardship.[49]

The fact that nature impacts individual health outcomes differently is particularly important because the people who benefit most from exposure to nature are the people who are most in need of it.[50] Thus, comparatively low-cost interventions like greening and tree plantings are sound ways to improve health and health equity in communities with limited financial resources. And because historic patterns of segregation have resulted in enduring social and environmental inequalities today,[51,52] interventions such as tree planting and greening could also have an even

Easy access to shared green space and tree canopy in particular can influence:

- drops in acts of aggression, violence and crime by 40-50%[36,37] especially in public spaces, where trees are 40% more effective at reducing crime than trees on private property[38]
- a reduction by 58% of people's fear of going outside due to safety concerns[39]
- an increase of 76% in a community's use of outdoor spaces when renovated[40]
- increased acts of generosity and kindness[41]
- an increase by 22% of a neighborhood's social capital[42] — the extent to which communities can find solutions to problems, access resources and hold trust through social networks — which cycles back to improve individual health[43]
- social participation and the fostering of social bonds[44,45]

larger impact if they are proactively interlinked to initiatives like affordable housing, job creation, food access and neighborhood walkability.[53]

Economic Health

Another way to quantify the value of nearby nature is to calculate its economic impact, making nearby nature and its green infrastructure easier to compare to other forms of infrastructure. Researchers have measured several economic advantages of nearby nature; and it acts, essentially, as a public good.[54]

The economic effects of green space include:

- improvements in health perception comparable to a $10,000 increase in annual income with the addition of just 10 trees[55]
- 10-20% increases in residential property values with the presence of green space[56,57]
- quicker time to sell wood lots than unwooded lots, enabling builders to recover the costs of preserving trees,[58] though developers must be careful not to price their homes out of the market in lower-income neighborhoods[59]
- increased willingness of shoppers to travel farther and longer in order to enjoy shopping areas with increased tree canopy and diversity of plantings[60]
- increased willingness of shoppers to spend $1-5 more on convenience items in areas with increased tree canopy, a differential which increases to $14-23 more for shopping items[61]
- recovery of the 4% of revenue lost to absenteeism or productivity loss in workplaces
- savings of $300,000 for each percentage point of nurse turnover in hospitals,[62] where nature can be used to keep employee satisfaction high and reduce burnout
- increased school attendance by three days per year and 20-26% accelerated learning rate just by adding daylight to schools, thus saving taxpayers $100,000[63]

Stewarding the economic health of cities — especially neighborhoods facing high levels of poverty — is one way to improve residents' access to upward social mobility. Raising property values by regreening neighborhoods allows residents to accumulate and pass down wealth, a cycle that has long been denied to people of color in particular. Similarly, regreening retail areas may help revitalize interest and investment, bringing opportunities for new jobs and economic growth.

Ecological Health

Underlying individual, community and economic health outcomes are the issues of climate change and preservation of our natural ecosystems. The ecosystem services that healthy natural spaces provide are invaluable: carbon sequestration, filtration of air and water pollutants, reduced load on drainage systems, and decreased intensity of the urban heat island effect, to name just a few. On top of this, climate change poses health risks associated with increased flooding and drought, more extreme weather, higher frequency of infectious diseases, and more.

It is the most vulnerable people and communities who will face the worst consequences. Low-income communities and communities

Employing design strategies that prioritize both ecological and human needs offers:

- multiple simultaneous improvements including 80 pounds of pollution removed for each acre of tree cover,[64] up to 13°F in temperature reductions,[65,66] 40 tons of carbon sequestered for each acre of tree cover,[67] and more[68] — all while continuing to provide deep, meaningful experiences
- significant financial impact through ecosystem services that would be prohibitively expensive to achieve by other means[69,70]
- enhanced community resilience, as these types of landscapes are better equipped to endure and ameliorate the effects of climate change
- increased landscape functionality, reduced vulnerability to diseases, and attractiveness through a diverse plant mix[71]
- stress relief through rich foliage, flowers, nature sounds and visible wildlife[72]

of color bear a disproportionate share of the devastating environmental outcomes of industrial and other practices, leading in part to some of the chronic health problems detailed previously. *To achieve the highest and most equitable benefits, it is critical to prioritize these communities for climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies through landscape design.*

In Sum: Nature Brings Joy

Nature is critical to our health, but the advantages go far deeper. Our existence depends on our relationship with the natural world, wrote Edward Wilson in his stunning 1984 book *Biophilia*. "Our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents."[73] A concept that encapsulates how much we as humans thrive on nature, biophilia's importance continues to ascend as we accumulate research — and personal experience — on this connection. Biophilic design emphasizes a need to work with our environments to create special places, to consider our built landscapes not in isolation but as part of one cohesive fabric.

Because fundamentally, nature brings us joy. It gives us more satisfaction, positive emotions and vitality.[74,75] Though we might not always notice it, or underestimate its impact on us when we do, *we flourish when we connect with nature.*[76] *And when we flourish, we become better able to take care of not only ourselves, but our communities and our planet.*

Design Methodology

Now that we've established the myriad, far-ranging health benefits nature can provide, the next step is to design landscapes that maximize these positive outcomes. Here, we have grouped specific design suggestions into three outcome categories: making people feel welcomed, encouraging them to explore and play, and giving a site a specific purpose or two. The strategies and considerations presented here are applicable to most landscape projects; in the next section, we'll discuss Nature Sacred's specific approach to Sacred Place creation.

Feelings of Comfort

First of all, people need to feel safe and comfortable in a site in order to fully enjoy being in nature. Offering people protection — whether through trees, plantings or walls — helps with this. Visibility is key to the perception of safety. While the degree of visibility needed into and out of the site varies culturally based on attitudes toward nature, people generally need to have clear sight lines in a landscape, especially in urban environments. Clear visibility enables people to monitor for danger and keep exits in view.[77] Therefore, plantings often need to be either well below or well above eye level so as not to impede sight lines.[78] Lighting, where appropriate, can be placed along pathways or as bollards to also block vehicular traffic. The lighting's temperature should be welcoming and its intensity not overwhelming for the space. Trash receptacles should be placed in convenient locations to permit easier cleanup.

The design should also have a clear, cohesive aesthetic and hierarchy of visual elements, drawing the eye to the most important elements first, and therefore making a vista easier to process. This could happen, for example, by repeating a certain plant species or shape, or by incorporating larger focal elements. Visitors also need to know how to move through the space, and where its boundaries are — especially if the space blurs the line between public and private. Paths or signage for wayfinding should be easy to understand. The level of complexity in a space should be proportional to its scale: larger spaces can house more complexity than smaller ones.[79]

We also have to ensure that people can physically get into and around the space. Accessibility is a key factor. It is helpful to go beyond the letter of accessibility (ADA) law and instead design for what makes a space easily usable, giving an experience of equal value to all people regardless of age, ability or other factors. Following universal design guidelines is a good place to start. In addition, ensuring the landscape engages all five senses enriches the experience for neurodivergent people. After that, *incorporating elements that are familiar to a community or reflective of its culture go a long way* toward helping nearby residents see themselves represented in a space.

Enticing Exploration

Once we have made a space feel comfortable, we then need to entice people to explore and discover what it has to offer. We can do this by providing them an open vista, allowing them to survey what lies before them, either through an unobstructed view or by framing a focal view with a "window." Or we can offer just the opposite: a sneak peek at only part of the design, which beckons them further into the landscape. A hallmark of this is a path whose end is obscured.

Landscapes offering very little visual stimuli don't hold attention. *We can add an appropriate degree of complexity by varying textures, adding pops of color, increasing the biodiversity of plantings and incorporating different heights of vertical structure.*[80] Increased diversity will also increase the richness of the surrounding soundscape by attracting wildlife — another way to grow interest.

Offering a Destination

Without a specific purpose in a green space, some visitors may be less likely to spend time there. We can solve this by embedding things not just to see, but also to do, in our designs. This could be an art feature, a play structure, areas for exercise, a fountain or splash pad, a stage, or even a fairy garden.

The most successful public spaces also offer space for both individuals and groups to gather. Appropriate furnishings are critical: When a space has seating options, people can linger longer or take breaks, and the probability for a chance encounter with someone else is higher. People enjoy flexible seating: not just movable chairs, but also the choice of sitting on grass, ledges, walls and stairs. Even a crowded space can seem peaceful when it has various seating options.[81]

Stewardship and Maintenance

Although it is rarely as glamorous as the ribbon-cutting, ongoing maintenance is a crucial component of successful design. When landscapes are maintained, they look better; when they look better, people feel more comfortable using them. Clear signs of a positive human presence in a site encourage use and foster a cycle of stewardship. Just as a vacant lot with overgrown vegetation and litter signals disrepair and a lack of care, that same lot with a few clean edges, ornamental plantings, trash receptacles and decorative elements signals that somebody is caring for of the site and that it is safe for use.[82,83] Such symbols of stewardship also affect perceptions of the neighborhood more broadly.[84] But maintenance can be a high burden, especially among individual residents who assume the responsibility of primary care provider to a landscape not their own, and this is especially true in communities experiencing additional stressors such as poverty and crime.[85] To ease this burden, we can meaningfully structure both landscapes and their maintenance programs to provide opportunities for social bonding and network building. Similarly, where needed, costs — materials, installation and maintenance — should be tailored to the resources available to the community. *We can also alleviate the onus of maintenance by providing designs that do not need to remain stagnant but instead are intended to grow, settle and change over time.*

Nature Sacred's Design Approach

Nature Sacred was founded in 1996 (originally as the TKF Foundation). Over our first 25 years, through the creation of more than 100 Sacred Places nationally, we have refined our approach to designing landscapes to involve four guiding principles, four design elements and one signature fixture. These ensure that our Sacred Places are optimally suited to meet the needs of the people they serve.

The Four Guiding Principles

We have discussed the need for high-quality nature spaces to be available to all, and this is exactly what Nature Sacred's guiding principles aim to achieve. First, we strive to make each Sacred Place **open and welcoming** to everyone in the community it serves to expand access to this resource. A key component is our second principle: that a Sacred Place be **nearby** where people live, work, play and heal. Only when green space is conveniently reachable can it become an integral part of people's everyday lives. Furthermore, beyond its being nearby, the creation of the Sacred Place is **community-led** — deeply rooting it within the spirit, and therefore stewardship, of the community. And only when all three of these elements are in place can we achieve the fourth: that the space is **sacred** to its community, a place that deepens ties, restores a connection to nature, and offers solace and rejuvenation.

The Four Design Elements

Responding to humans' overarching need for a cohesive structure in landscape, we design all Sacred Places to have a clear flow of circulation. We begin by placing a ***portal*** at the entry to the site. This indicates intentionality: an awareness that one is stepping into a deliberately created space. That awareness alone can already start to quiet the mind and prepare visitors for a calming experience. Adding to that intentionality is a ***sense of surround.*** This provides the sensation of being embraced and sheltered within the space — a feeling of refuge and safety. Within the portal (and sometimes outside it), visitors find themselves on a ***path.*** This path is a guide, slowly leading visitors deeper into the space and giving them a journey to follow. Of course, any path must lead to a destination. Our fourth design element gives that journey a specific purpose. Sometimes, that ***destination*** can be as simple as ***Nature Sacred's signature bench,*** which is the only standard fixture in all of our Sacred Places. Handmade from reclaimed wood, its ample proportions and soft curvature make it an excellent spot for solitude and a prime gathering place. Underneath every bench lives a journal. Visitors to a space can write down their thoughts and reflections here, making this a critical restorative element of every Sacred Place.

It is important to note that there are as many interpretations of these elements as there are Sacred Places, as the examples in the next section demonstrate. Tailored to fit a community's vision, that adaptiveness is our way of showcasing a community's unique character through the physicality of a site. Nature Sacred's community-led visioning process includes a site inventory, survey and charrettes. These steps allow us to engage directly with the people who will be the end users and stewards of the Sacred Place.

Nature Sacred's Design Advisors, our team of landscape architects and designers who design the Sacred Places, are critical to achieving the full potential benefits of these spaces. They are responsible for melding their ecological understanding, a site's parameters, and a community's vision to create a design that brings beauty, value and joy to that community while remaining within their budget and ability to care for it.

Snapshots of Sacred Places

Every Sacred Place interprets Nature Sacred's four design elements differently: in a way that serves its community best. The following examples highlight the multitude of ways to define a Sacred Place.

The Nature Sacred Bench

Since the inception of the idea of Sacred Places, the Nature Sacred bench has been a signature element of each site. Its presence is a marker of Nature Sacred's commitment to creating spaces with intentionality and meaning. The benches are manufactured by hand from reclaimed wood — originally pickle barrel, then wood from deconstructed Baltimore row homes — by inmates at the Western Correctional Institute, itself a home to a treasured Sacred Place. Each bench, with the journal underneath it, serves as a reminder of the impact of systems thinking as a way to address the complex issue of green space access, and a much-needed opportunity for visitors to breathe, rest and reflect.

Portal

Whimsical metal portals are engraved with the thoughts and wishes of the children who helped vision the Madison & Whitelock Park in Baltimore, Md.

Peace poles decorated in many languages represent the diverse immigrant community around St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Falls Church, Va., welcoming people of all faiths or none.

Brick posts signal a more formal gateway into the garden at Marian House in Baltimore, Md., a shelter and rehabilitation center for women.

At the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Inspiration Point in Annapolis, Md., a sign is all that is needed to mark the entrance to the Sacred Place.

Path

This forest oasis at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., was designed to aid veterans on their road to recovery.

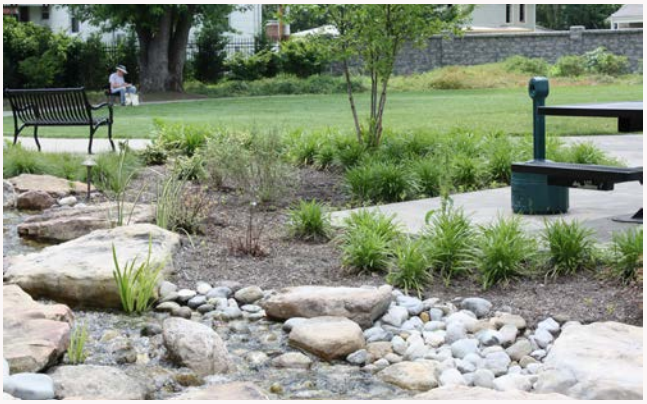
At the Kernan Rehabilitation Center in Baltimore, Md., the path incorporates different paving materials in order to assist those working to regain mobility.

A boardwalk suspended over the ground, interlaced with large square stepping stones, helps the Sacred Place at the Naval Cemetery Landscape in Brooklyn, N.Y., have less environmental disturbance and honors those formerly buried there.

A labyrinth serves as a path for Thanksgiving Place in Baltimore, Md., which helps residents at GEDCO's senior living community reflect and contemplate.

Destination

In the place of the homes destroyed by a tornado in Joplin, Mo., now stands a butterfly garden and park, with space frames marking their former footprint.



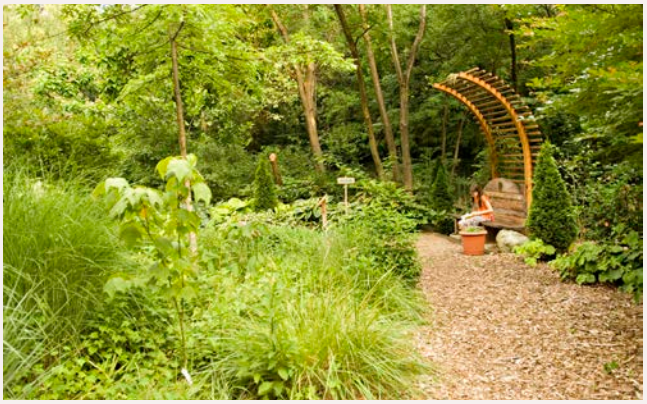
A babbling brook runs through the Sacred Place at the League for People with Disabilities in Baltimore, Md., lending an important multisensory design feature to the garden.

At this much-needed oasis at the Western Correctional Institute in Cumberland, Md., a Well of Unspoken Truths sits to one side of the garden, a repository for the private thoughts of inmates.

Horseshoe pits are a cornerstone of the community culture at Kirby Lane Park in Baltimore, Md., making it essential that they be represented in their Sacred Place.

Surround

The tall, thick hedge surrounding the labyrinth at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore, Md., makes visitors feel distant from the traffic noise just outside.



The signature Nature Sacred bench, framed by arborvitae and a pergola, is tucked amidst looser groupings of plants at the Mt. Washington Arboretum in Baltimore, Md.

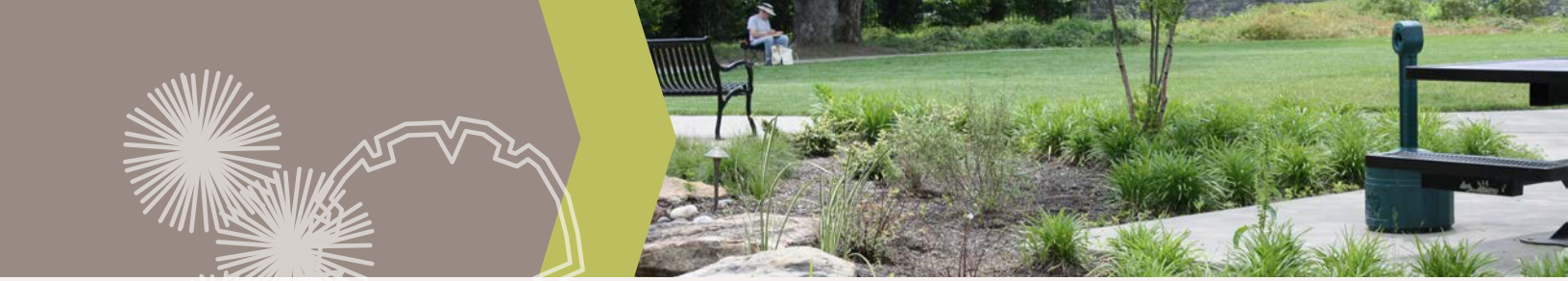
At the Lighthouse Shelter in Annapolis, Md., decorated screens provide a sense of security and shield the Sacred Place from the adjacent road while adding an artistic focal point.

The Sacred Place at the Baltimore Washington Medical Center in Glen Burnie, Md., utilizes the natural slope of the site to make the site feel cozy and sheltered.

Conclusion

As advocates for nature, the planet and people, landscape architects and designers are in an ideal position to communicate to clients and partners the crucial need to value and prioritize green space in our built environments. This report is intended to be a practical resource, one that makes the overwhelming evidence for nature's power to heal easily accessible to professionals in this field. By applying this research and design methodology detailed here to the spaces we create, we can have an authentic, enduring impact on the landscapes and communities we work with.

Over the past 25 years, Nature Sacred has been dedicated to providing safe, restorative spaces for reflection and reconnection to nature in the areas that need them most. That need to connect with nature, and to make it available in places where it is currently lacking, remains just as strong today — if not stronger — than when the idea for creating Sacred Places was first conceived. We remain committed not only to continuing to guide communities in the creation of Sacred Places, and also to inspiring others to do the same. We hope to see our network of sites take on an even stronger nationwide presence to serve even more communities, with the help of a growing team of landscape architects and designers who share our vision of ecologically vibrant, equitably distributed, and healing landscapes for all.



Understanding the real-life experience of a community in a landscape after its installation is a critical component that supplements the theoretical — the research and information — shared in this paper. These letters by two community leaders — whom we call Nature Sacred Firesouls — share learnings from their Sacred Places which embody the elements laid out in this paper and serve diverse communities in the City of Baltimore.

It was the early 2000s when the idea to create a therapeutic garden at The League for People with Disabilities first surfaced. A $6 million renovation was about to begin, and most everyone's focus was on addressing the significant deficits in programming space within our expansive 45,000-square foot facility. At that point, many of the buildings' hallways and doorways were too narrow for wheelchairs to pass through; likewise, bathrooms weren't accessible.

In light of the dire construction needs, most of the staff couldn't see prioritizing a therapeutic garden. But the CEO at the time, my predecessor, felt strongly that nature was also essential. Ultimately, with the support of Nature Sacred (then the TKF Foundation), the therapeutic garden was designed and installed. Any opposition melted once staff saw how the people we serve responded to the space. Now, more than 15 years later, our Sacred Place is integral to the League.

Within the garden, you'll find shade trees and a lot of foliage and flowers, two water features that provide a soothing cloak of sound, and a circular paved path that rings a level grass-covered area that serves as a gathering ground and site of programming, including yoga. The paved paths are essential and mean that those who use wheelchairs can independently explore and spend time in nature. Because our garden was co-designed with individuals with disabilities, accessibility was central to the design. This is evident throughout the space — in the raised garden beds and in the way space is allotted, accommodating people with and without mobility issues to mingle and talk.

The garden is just off two very busy thoroughfares, yet through exceptional planning and design, it feels like you have been transported into a park deep in the wilderness. This is particularly meaningful as many of the individuals served by the League have been born and raised in Baltimore City and have not had the experience of benefiting from the healing powers of nature.

Making outdoor space accessible for people of all abilities is important for equity and inclusion. By designing space for everyone from the start, you will be able to accommodate and include everyone now and into the future.

David Greenberg, RN, MBA

Executive Director, The League for People with Disabilities

Firesoul, Sacred Place at The League for People with Disabilities

DEI Advisory Committee Member, Nature Sacred

Today, at the entrance of what was once Memorial Stadium, host to countless screaming Baltimore Colts, Ravens and Orioles fans over several decades, is a peaceful place of reflection. Thanksgiving Place is the realized vision of my mentor and founder of Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation (GEDCO), a much-needed provider of affordable housing with support services for Baltimore residents in need.

Rev. Jack Sharp wanted to create a space that would serve as a symbol of GEDCO's ecumenical roots; a space that provided a welcoming green space reflective of the organization's values and commitment to a just society. To us, that means respect for the dignity and worth of all people, valuing diversity, upholding community, encouraging community participation and fostering growth toward personal independence. Rev. Sharp understood the role of nature in this work. When I took over as CEO of GEDCO, this resonated deeply due to my own background in landscape architecture, and reflected my own nature ideology.

The result was a Sacred Place, Thanksgiving Place: a peaceful oasis in the middle of the city; a thoughtfully landscaped park consisting of flowering shrubs and trees that provide beauty throughout the year. Pergolas and brick pathways create the boundaries of Thanksgiving Place which incorporates both passive and active zones with a lawn, labyrinth and benches placed along the paths. At the northern corner of the site is a bell tower and carillon.

Stadium Place is a unique intergenerational community that includes the Y of Central Maryland, a community playground and a Head Start program, and housing and supportive services for older adults. It is the only community of its kind in Baltimore City. Like Stadium Place itself, Thanksgiving Place is intergenerational. It is used by yogis, football players, mothers and their children; the Y's summer camp students, older adults; community walking back and forth to the bus stop and high school students stopping by on the way home from school. Stadium Place staff use it as a place to spend their breaks, catch up with co-workers, or to conduct meetings.

During the 2015 social unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, Thanksgiving Place served as a refuge; a gathering ground and unofficial therapist for the community. This is documented in the many entries left during those weeks in a public journal that's stored under our Nature Sacred bench in the garden.

When you're in Thanksgiving Place, you feel in many ways like you are in a separate room even though there are no walls enclosing the space. Feelings of gratitude come unbidden when sitting on the benches surrounded by the blooms of the cherry trees and the wisteria.

Thanksgiving Place is an example of why I chose to study landscape architecture: To have the ability to create a functional and aesthetically pleasing outdoor room that can impact a person's mood immediately is profound. Beautifully landscaped spaces, designed with the community they serve, can serve as connectors not only functionally, but visually and emotionally.

Nichole Battle, BLA, MCRP, MBA

Chief Executive Officer, GEDCO (Govans Ecumenical Development Corporation)

Firesoul, Thanksgiving Place

Board Member, Nature Sacred

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Authors and Contributors

Primary Author

Neha Srinivasan

Sacred Place Project Manager, Nature Sacred; MLA

Neha's training in landscape architecture and environmental science combine with her talent for art and writing to make her a versatile thinker who can creatively solve complex problems. Whether she's designing a small space or planning for a larger region, her aspiration is always to create resilient, sustainable urban spaces that honor the communities she works with, both human and natural. As the Sacred Place Project Manager, she leverages the entirety of her diverse skill set on projects that foster enduring positive environmental, social, economic and aesthetic change.

Editor

Naomi Sachs

Assistant Professor, University of Maryland; PhD, MLA, EDAC

Co-author of Therapeutic Landscapes: An Evidence-Based Approach to Designing Healing Gardens and Restorative Outdoor Spaces, founder of the Therapeutic Landscapes Network and Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland, Dr. Naomi Sachs has influenced the Nature Sacred design ethos and processes. Naomi's primary areas of interest are restorative and therapeutic landscapes, evidence-based design, healthcare design and salutogenic (health-promoting) design. She has published and presented nationally and internationally on the positive role of nature in human health.

Contributing Writers and Editors

David Greenberg, CEO, The League for People with Disabilities; RN, MBA

Nichole Battle, CEO, GEDCO; BLA, MCRP, MBA

Lauren Marshall, Legislative Affairs Specialist, US Forest Service; PLA, ISA Certified Arborist

The Nature Sacred Design Advisory Committee

Joan Floura, PLA, ASLA, LEED AP, DBIA

Jay Graham, FASLA

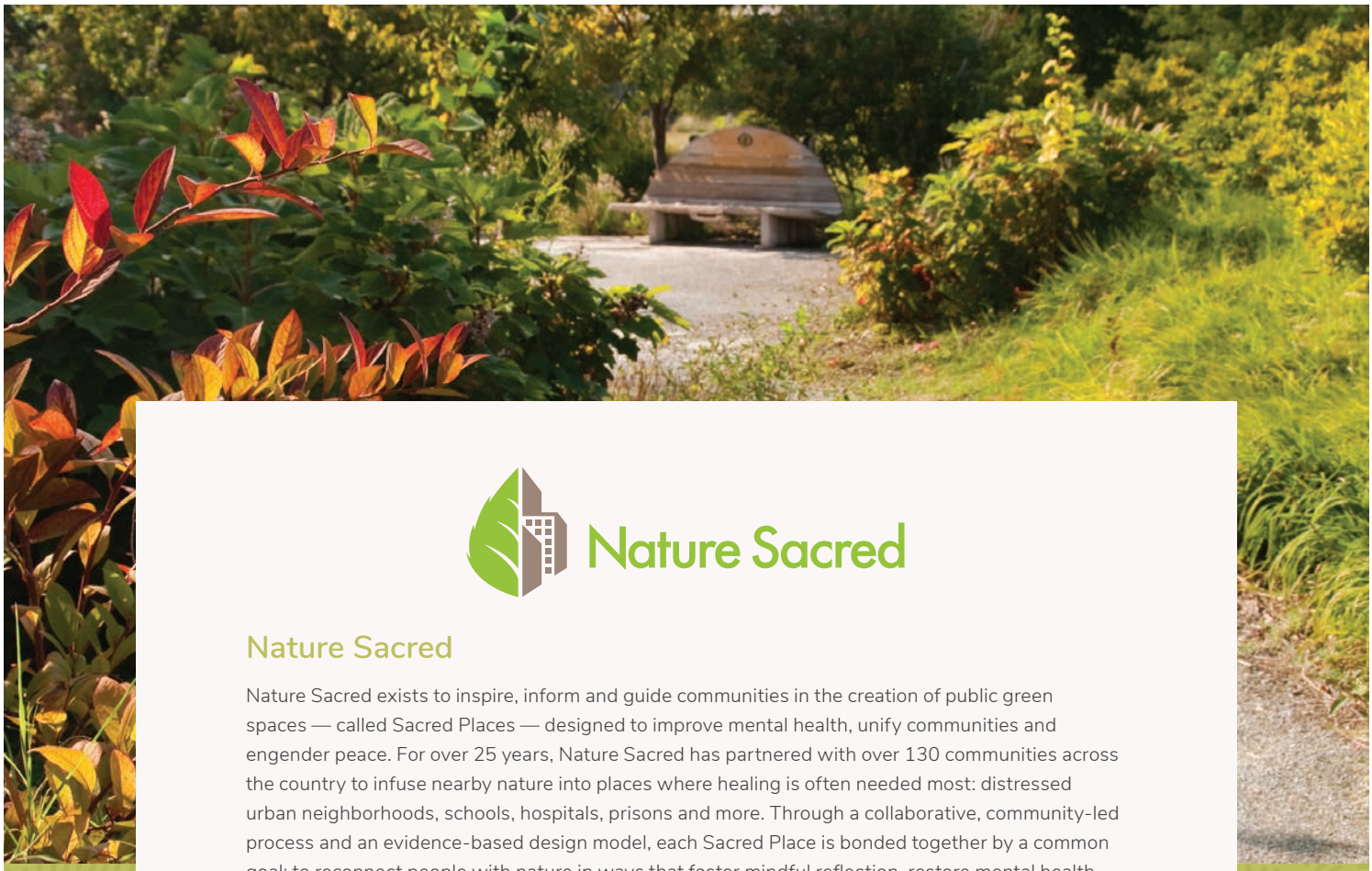
Vernon Hustead, PLA, ASLA

Lanshing Hwang, MSc, MLA, RLA, ASLA

Naudy Martinez, BLA

Naomi Sachs, PhD, MLA, EDAC

Jack Sullivan, RLA, FASLA



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Nature Sacred exists to inspire, inform and guide communities in the creation of public green spaces — called Sacred Places — designed to improve mental health, unify communities and engender peace. For over 25 years, Nature Sacred has partnered with over 130 communities across the country to infuse nearby nature into places where healing is often needed most: distressed urban neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, prisons and more. Through a collaborative, community-led process and an evidence-based design model, each Sacred Place is bonded together by a common goal: to reconnect people with nature in ways that foster mindful reflection, restore mental health and strengthen communities. As each community imagines its own space, the design becomes a unique reflection of the community's culture, story and place — making it inherently sacred to them. Learn about our model, our approach and our Sacred Places: naturesacred.org

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