WAITING TO EXHALE

Over the past decade, research has shown that bodily experience of the natural world regulates the electrical circuitry of our brain function, blood flow, and the mechanical tension of our muscles. These findings reveal what we already intuitively know: The dappled light through the forest canopy, the cooling mist from a stream, and the rhythms of the ocean tides are like a rejuvenating tonic to our stressed bodies and minds. In the process of design, landscape architects engage our external senses to return balance to our inner well-being. Our most beloved urban spaces bring healing by provoking our natural responses within the metaphors of the city; they can even bring joy by awakening our sense of whimsy and offering tangible impressions of sound, touch, and sight that transform into internal comfort, diverting from the hustle of urban surroundings.

This inner restoration can be experienced at Paley Park, designed by Robert Zion of Zion and Breen, in midtown Manhattan. Despite the challenging site conditions, wedged between high-rise towers with a dearth of natural light, the park provides the feeling of an oasis. This urban space offers a calm intimacy, contrasting with the cacophony of traffic and intense pedestrian movement that frames this pocket park. The tactile and sonic sensations of this microclimate—with its simple but effective water wall and grove of trees—acoustically transforms this dark space into a copse nestled in a concrete jungle. During the heat of summer, echoes of the sound of moving water, the cool mist on the face, and compact boundaries of the location combine to evoke a feeling of sanctuary.

In an analogous way, Tanner Fountain, located adjacent to Harvard Yard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and designed by Peter Walker, encourages the remembrance of childhood play along a stream embankment. Natural stone outcroppings are arranged in Walker’s concentric circles that visually and haptically stimulate the sense of rhythm and movement. The sensation of action becomes more intense as children are in perpetual motion in the center, where misting water both sprays and cools the skin, providing a refreshing tactile experience. All this occurs as life moves around and beneath this plaza, with intense pedestrian activity adjacent to the fountain and vehicular traffic in the tunnel below: The sounds of the children and the fountain merge with the urban sounds of community. By using complex sensual feelings in effective ways, the design recalls youthful engagement with intimate moments in the natural world, rejuvenating the urbanite.

From gentle playfulness to frank wonder: In 2004, Jaume Plensa, a Catalan artist, envisioned the Crown Fountain in Chicago’s Millennium Park as a landscape experience that evokes the emotions of surprise and amazement. Faces of Chicago residents emerge from LED screens that are housed within a pair of glass block towers. These digital towers frame a central reflection pool that invites bodily engagement. As these expressive facial images transform, their lips occasionally purse and emit a fountain like a digital gargoyle. Activity scatters to the periphery of this plaza as children and adults alike scamper and dart from one side to the other, chasing these fountains as they reveal themselves. The project displays an uncanny ability to use contemporary technology while providing a multisensory engagement that mesmerizes its audience. Like Tanner Fountain, the project immerses the senses and allows people to free their bodies from the standardized movement of the city, providing a moment to exhale.

Within the small confines of the urban realm, these visionaries have improved the physical and emotional health of city dwellers by simulating and abstracting natural effects on all our senses. Their designs incorporate a sophisticated understanding of the physical response to complex patterns, choreographing a unique experience that engages the senses of touch, sound, and sight in a way that effectively restores the natural balance of the human mind and body. Paley Park evokes the feeling of sanctuary in the forest; Tanner Fountain invokes the sentiment of play at an eddy along a stream; the Crown Fountain kindles the reactions of surprise and playful-ness similar to a natural geyser. However different the emotions that these designers attempt to awaken, they address us as complex multisensory beings, while alloying restorative processes and bringing rejuvenation and whimsy to our experience of the urban landscape.

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