How to forget about urban nature

Dr Russell Hitchings investigates the relationship city workers have with nature.

We know that windows overlooking vegetation seem to speed hospital recoveries. Prisoners whose cells face internal courtyards have also been shown to use health facilities more than those facing fields further beyond. Even watching videos of vegetation can bring benefits similar to those associated with seeing actual trees and plants. What these examples tell us is that, if direct physical experiences with outdoor greenery are to be foregone, people can derive similar benefits through other means. These examples are heartening because western societies seem to be retreating indoors.

Changing work and leisure patterns mean that western people now spend over 90% of their time within buildings and this clearly has implications for the management of parks and gardens as we move forwards from here. One cornerstone to this trend is the assumption that people function most effectively when immediate ambient environments are sufficiently fixed that they can forget about their bodies and get on with their work. The argument here is that people

“Changing work and leisure patterns mean that western people now spend over 90% of their time within buildings”
should feel neither hot nor cold and its widespread embrace by the building community has been fundamental to the spread of air conditioning.

On one level, this makes a lot of sense since the prolonged experience of extreme temperatures is instinctively rather unappealing.

Yet, on another, it leads to a situation where people are accustomed to only tightly controlled ambient conditions and, because they have lost the ability to handle more unpredictability, many will become disinclined to venture outside.

We are talking about some quite prosaic adaptations here. These are things like having an umbrella to hand or carrying an extra layer of clothing. Yet the everyday habits sustaining these trends are clearly significant as we start to see how some quite fragile future humans could be inadvertently engineered.

It was with such ideas in mind that I was recently funded to complete an extended study of professional office workers in London.

One of the aims was to understand the extent to which their habits kept them away from outdoor experiences with greenery and the reasons behind this.

Rather than focusing so fully on the sites where beneficial plant experiences are imagined to occur, the idea was that it could also be worth painting a much broader cultural canvas with regard to the factors that now keep people inside.

These workers were seemingly spearheading the indoor trend as others came to cater to their needs and they generally preferred private forms of indoor leisure over any outdoor equivalents.

The corollary was that a study of their everyday practices might tell us much about the routine experience of being kept indoors along with the changing scope for more green space encounters.

Forgetting about the outdoors...

“Well I think it’s like the National Trust. I’ve never been to a single place but I think somebody should be doing that and we should be preserving these things”

We know downtown workers in San Francisco are rather unadventurous about straying too far during the day.

Studies tell us they generally travel no further than 70 metres from their buildings and a similar reticence was evident in these London offices.

Many respondents would never even leave the building until they went home and the majority spent only brief periods outdoors during the working week. The average total, including travel, was about 30 minutes.

The shortest was around ten as one person described a brief hit of stimulating outdoor experience during the brisk morning walk from bus stop to foyer.

Yet what was especially noteworthy was the lack of previous reflection or initial concern being displayed here.

These office workers had not thought much about this situation, nor did they care a great deal about it. Because they were busy at work, ideas of outdoor experience had eventually fallen out of the frame. In this sense, they had gradually forgotten.

This situation is perhaps unsurprising when the whole experiential system that modern offices workers inhabit is geared towards promoting these kinds of new normalities.

Whilst wider urban morphologies still promote outdoor experience through the provision of parks and plazas, it is important to remember how these sites must battle against several countervailing tendencies with respect to the conditions now provided to our workers.
Much has been made of the standard business suit and how it connotes an idea of appropriate professionalism now means those who want to be perceived as appropriately professional and avoid the unseemly arrival of sweat require the same ambient conditions irrespective of where they are in the world.

This kind of insidious process was also evident in my study as respondents reported how, because of the mechanically cooled bodies of air that generally surrounded them, they often ended up wearing the same clothing throughout the year. In this way, responding to seasons was often about a stylistic sense of connection as much as a practical response to outdoor conditions. Because they were sufficiently insulated, these conditions could only ever make limited impacts.

**Whatever the weather**

These issues are potentially quite important when we know the extent to which people are found in outdoor urban spaces is actually determined by weather as much as design.

My respondents made only limited preparations for the weather. They seldom watched the forecast and they sometimes only noticed the weather as they got to the lobby and then found they needed a raincoat.

In this way, we see how they could easily overlook the possibility of any outdoor park experience because they are seldom aware of the situation outside.

Studies in Sweden have shown how, over the course of the working day, office workers in Stockholm now respond in a minimal way to the changing conditions outside.

Regardless of how pleasantly arranged outdoor spaces might be and how it might be very beneficial to stop and spend some time there, clearly one important task is therefore to make our indoor workers notice them in the first place.

Another relates to the degree to which city people are now able to benefit. Here some academics have used the concept of natural tranquillisers to characterise outdoor green space benefits and there is actually some supporting evidence to this.

Following the idea that looking at vegetation can take minds away from their stresses, some studies suggest that, whilst the presence of plants can render people less productive, they can also make them more relaxed and creative. Yet the question that follows is whether people want to submit themselves to these effects when we also know that work pressured people seem less able to reach the point where they profit from this process.

Similar issues were certainly evident in this study as office workers reported how they sometimes found it hard to escape their purposeful daytime dispositions.

There were things to be getting on with and, when they were in their workplace stride, the relaxing benefits of local parks and gardens could become distracting.

Certainly, when these kinds of spaces were used, this was generally with others as part of a process of catching up. Otherwise they generally walked past. The idea of spending time there alone was therefore a difficult one to embrace because they were used to being more purposeful during the day.

The most arresting example of these processes relates to the quote that starts this section. I was talking with one lawyer about the value of the park immediately behind her workplace. She believed parks were important resources and they should therefore be safeguarded. Yet this was never framed as a resource for her and so I asked about how this squared with the limited amount of experience she personally had with this site.

Eventually she decided it was similar to supporting the National Trust. She would probably never see many of the buildings she would help preserve by doing so, but she wanted to preserve them anyway. And so it was with the park only metres from her workplace.

Wider surveys suggest that city
green spaces are valued as much by those who do not use them as those who do and this response goes some way toward an explanation for this phenomenon. Yet the wider point was about a sense of ambivalence. They had adapted to the perceived norms of their working conditions and so there was only a relatively limited desire for being within these spaces.

...and how to make people remember

When office workers are not provided with windows, studies suggest they often feel the need to hang pictures of natural scenes.

They may be wise to do so when these scenes seemingly combat the angry feelings that office workers are increasingly inclined to harbour.

Yet it might also be sensible because contemporary people can easily find themselves forgetting about the outdoor experiences originally associated with these scenes.

Certainly this kind of fuller encounter can be difficult for many office workers today and the reasons why are worthy of some scrutiny.

By examining these reasons this study suggests some new challenges for those who would encourage people to benefit from green space experience in their daily lives.

On the one hand, it may be worth thinking more expansively about the factors that encourage or discourage people to spend time outdoors. These questions are generally addressed with regard to physical features and design solutions. This is entirely understandable and design is clearly quite important. But, if these spaces can easily be forgotten, then creative thinking could also help in terms of identifying events and triggers that might make people contemplate the very idea in the first place.

On the other, we might decide not to provide nearby nature at all. If workers find it difficult to fully benefit from this at this time, it could make more sense to ensure that home environments are better stocked with vegetation, because people are more amenable to these benefits when they are there. Yet the question we need to ask here is whether we want to drift towards the indoor existences linked with this policy where societies only benefit from these nature experiences on evenings and weekends?

In either case it is worth considering the wider routines and behaviours within which parks and gardens get caught and this means thinking about air conditioners and routine as much as benches and litter.

The idea of indoor societies that this project sought to explore initially seems quite fanciful. Yet the wider trends sustaining this idea are set to make significant impacts.

In cities like Singapore, where the movement inside has been more fully effected than here, we know that many people remain happy to look out onto green spaces, but no longer like to touch.

With this situation in mind, questions of how best to disrupt and direct the habitual behaviours that are otherwise spreading through our cities may actually be key to safeguarding the fullest future enjoyment of the various green spaces we still find there.

“Many people remain happy to look out onto green spaces, but no longer like to touch”