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With living walls, nature-inspired form, real sunlight, and the ability to enhance humankind's relationship with our environment, biophilic design isn't just a fad for trendy hotels – it's an eco-conscious movement that could change the future of hospitality

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From the Outside In

According to Stephen Kellert – a philosopher of science, known for his work as a social ecologist and research scholar for forestry and environmental studies – there are six key elements of biophilic design. The first is the incorporation of environmental features in the design – that is to say, design that replicates elements of the natural world. The second is natural shapes and forms – the mimicry of motifs found in nature – and the third is restorative patterns and processes, helping to give back to the surrounds with new growth. Light and space is a fourth imperative: there should be as much natural daylight as possible, and the space should reflect the same sense of diversity, serenity, and sensorial openness that one might find in nature. The last two elements – place-based relationships, and evolved human-nature relationships – signify the importance of helping dwellers develop an emotional connection with their environment, to remind us that we do not exist only within our environment, but rather, as part of it.

One prime example of biophilic design is the living wall. A vertical structure intentionally covered with vegetation, they typically include an element that can support a growth medium such as soil and hydration, which in turn feeds the life cycle of the plants upon them. They're also beautiful, offering a lush, leafy element that can be a foil to the starkness of an otherwise urban environment.

At Treehouse London – a hotel in Marylebone in the UK's capital, a living wall has become one of the property's greatest attractions. Despite being in one of the most buzzworthy neighbourhoods in one of the world's busiest cities, the hotel feels at once cosy and fresh, with its lush foliage adding to its nostalgic, rustic feel. Upon stepping into the reception, you'll be welcomed by plants that grow up alongside bird boxes, and custom-made panelling made of reclaimed wood. The hotel's rooftop level, meanwhile, boasts a vertical garden that has turned it into an oasis

– as well as one of the most Instagram-worthy spots in London for those who love urban green spaces. The wall is a key element in the hotel's efforts to achieve Green Key accreditation, since it also provides a “feeding banquet” for bees, and creates a pollinator pathway across the city.

A seven-hour flight away, in the middle of a desert metropolis, the Hyatt Regency Dubai Creek Heights has also embraced the appeal of a living wall: here, guests are greeted with more than 3,200 sq ft of flowers and greenery the moment they step into the lobby. The plant wall is illuminated by natural sunlight that seeps in through its large windows, and combined with its soothing water features, it offers a refreshing respite from the often-searing heat outside.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Natural Wellness Centre at Kisawa Sanctuary in Mozambique

BELOW: The infinity pool at the Oasia Hotel Downtown Singapore, by Far East Hospitality

BOTTOM: A wall made of reclaimed wood panelling with bird boxes at the Treehouse London



A centuries-old philosophy

It is hard to say when the idea of biophilic design was first conceived. Although the term emerged in more recent history, the concept has been around since the ancient world. Many ancient Romans and Greeks opted for an open-air courtyard in the centre of their homes, while The Hanging Gardens of Babylon aren't just a wonder of the ancient world – they were also a marvel of early biophilic design.

Countless studies have been done on nature's ability to impact everything from our state of mind to our physical well-being. Spending time in a green space has been found to improve both physical and cognitive health, reducing blood pressure and muscle tension, decreasing stress, improving brain activity, and calming the nervous system. For the stressed modern executive, being in places that bring the outside in can feel like a route to instant calm. As a result, an increasing number of hotels have been capitalising on the trend.

There are certain challenges to biophilic design – to start with, it needs to be incorporated at the ideation stage. While there are some cases where elements can be added at a later date, most properties successfully managing to “bring the outside in” have built the idea into their ethos from the moment they were conceived.

One great example is Kisawa Sanctuary. This gorgeous resort in Mozambique is situated upon a 5km stretch of pristine tropical coastline within 300 hectares of coastal forest. It's within the Bazaruto Archipelago, which is part of a National Marine Park – and was declared a Hope Spot by Dr Sylvia Earle from UN's Mission Blue NGO. But it's not just its nature-rich location that makes it so special – it's also its dedication to maintaining that location. The entire property was carefully constructed with the environment in mind. Biophilic mimicry is firmly embedded within its design ethos, from the shape of its exteriors to its colour palette.

“When building Kisawa, we were directly informed by our

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IMAGES: ELSA YOUNG FOR KISAWA SANCTUARY; OASIA HOTEL DOWNTOWN SINGAPORE BY FAR EAST HOSPITALITY; TREEHOUSE LONDON



TOP: An aerial view of the Heritance Kandalama in Sri Lanka, which was built flush against a natural cliffside

BOTTOM: Kisawa Sanctuary's hut-shaped Natural Wellness Center's treatment rooms

FACING PAGE: The Oasia Hotel Downtown Singapore by Far East Hospitality

BOTTOM RIGHT: A turtle-shaped treehouse at JOALI Being in the Maldives



environment. Design decisions were led by nature and the materials readily available around us. Giving value to local materials was inspirational as well as logical," says Nina Flohr, Kisawa's original owner, founder, and creative director. Flohr, who is also the brains and heart behind the multi-disciplinary design studio NJF, adds: "We ultimately used 'biomimicry': the process of looking at nature in order to imitate it to provide solutions to visual impairment as well as wind protection. Today, when you arrive at the property, you don't notice the structures until you are very close to the shoreline. We did this by taking inspiration from the 150m high sand dunes surrounding Kisawa, using their form and shape to design the roofs across the entire property so that the view from the ocean blends the building into the landscape, since we wanted Kisawa to be integrated into the land as much as possible, and of course protected from tropical weather."

Prior to the hotel's grand opening in 2021, the area was already home to the Bazaruto Center for Scientific Studies (BCSS) – a platform hosting the first permanent ocean observatory focused on multi-ecosystem, time series research in Africa. The data it gathers supports environmental management on a local level, as well as helping to answer global questions on the impacts of climate change, ocean acidification, carbon transfer, plastic impact on marine ecosystems, and large-scale changes in marine population dynamics. Kisawa collaborates with BCSS through its

"Resort to Research" initiative, not only supporting its work but also inviting its guests to actively partake in BCSS research by joining the science team to monitor marine life, gather data, explore the seabed, and go on scientific diving expeditions.

The hotel has 14 bungalows, and invites each guest to "discover their own rhythm". It also boasts a standalone wellness offering, where guests can enjoy integrative holistic healing, such as sound healing, acupressure, infrared Iyashi Dome Therapy, and more. Like the rest of the resort, the National Wellness Center aims to help people find more ease in life with a healthy balance – an ethos delightfully exhibited through the presence of a in-house Pizza

Tuk-Tuk. For the rest of its culinary offerings, Kisawa uses fresh, natural produce from farmers and local fishermen from within the Inhambane province wherever possible.

Farm-to-table - and forest-to-room

Over in another famous archipelago, the utilisation of locally-grown produce is something that a growing number of resorts in the Maldives has been embracing for years. With many of them based on naturally lush islands that have plenty of room for small farms, both globally-branded chain hotels and boutique resorts are growing as many of their own ingredients as possible. One such property is JOALI Being. As a brand, JOALI prides itself on its

commitment to ethical consumption, and not only does it follow a line of responsible sourcing – with ethically-sourced tea, coffee, and wood products, for instance – its gardens are also 100 per cent organic, and employ sustainable techniques.

JOALI Being, known for its ultra-luxe take on well-being, invites its guests to return home with a new sense of "weightlessness". Thanks to its design ethos, this levity isn't just nourished by wellness, but also from a clear conscience: Although one does have to take a seaplane to get there, the property was built with a biophilic philosophy. The architects and the interior designers behind it, Autoban and Atolye 4N respectively, kept the island's wild forest fully intact, and conceptualised its architecture to flow with nature. Their aim? To preserve as much of the natural beauty as possible, while also eliminating negative vibrations and enhancing energy flow.

In Sri Lanka's Central Province, The Heritance Kandalama – located near the wondrous Sigiriya Rock and the Dambulla cave temple – was equally committed to leaving its natural surrounds as untouched as possible. To say it blends in would be an understatement: the hotel is quite literally built into the cliffside. Designed by renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, it was one of the earliest adopters of the biophilic design concept. The hotel opened in 1994, and was ahead of its time by incorporating eco-friendliness within its inception. Many people didn't understand it at first – but seven years

later, it became the first hotel in the world, and the first building outside the USA, to receive a LEED Bronze award.

The hotel aims to not just sit on the landscape but naturally be a part of it, and many parts of the hotel are actually embedded into the cool open rock face. This refuge in the jungle is between two UNESCO world heritage sites (and near three more), and looks over the serene Kandalama Lake. It has incorporated as many natural materials as possible into its build, harvests its rainwater for re-use, recycles its waste, opts for eco-friendly cleaning products, and utilises solar panels. The open-plan design of many of its rooms has reduced the need for air conditioning, and the property has planted thousands of trees nearby, to help protect the many different species



BIOPHILIC LUXURY

The 1 Hotel West Hollywood is one of the world's most famous biophilic hotels, located on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles

living within its forest and wetlands.

When it comes to forward-thinking innovation, Singapore has also long been a pioneer. In 2023, Changi Airport unveiled a revamped Terminal 2, featuring a "Garden City" with biophilic framework. Designed by BOIFFILS Architecture, it spans over three floors and 120,000 sqm, offering travellers the chance to immerse themselves in a serene, nature-infused, multi-sensory environment rich with lush vegetation, reflections of water, and organic elements.

Within the city, The Oasia Hotel Downtown Singapore, by Far East Hospitality, is another jaw-dropping ode to nature: the hotel's façade is best described as a living tower, rising like a vertical garden in the middle of an urban jungle. The hotel is in the heart of the Central Business District, and although it manages to fit 314 rooms into this bustling area, it won't feel crowded or stuffy. Rather, guests will feel cocooned in nature, with a goal to leave people feeling refreshed, recharged, and refuelled.

Inside, guests will find organic-themed interiors envisioned by designer Patricia Urquiola. Incorporating natural elements like copper and wood, the lush, plant-filled décor blends seamlessly with the exterior – the work of award-winning Singaporean architectural design firm WOHA.

The lobby, an open-air space on its 12th floor, helps to keep the environment cool. The red aluminum mesh woven into its construction has 21 different species of creepers woven into it, helping to remove urban heat islands – and in doing so, reducing the carbon footprint by decreasing electricity and cooling needs. The hotel has been described by some as being able to help "clean the air" – meaning that the surrounding environment benefits too.

As our need for a greater drive for sustainability grows alongside a desire to reconnect with nature, biophilic design appears to be more than an antidote to industrialised urban environments – it could be the answer to a genuinely greener future. **BT**

