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The Smell of Sustainability

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Studio d'ARC, "Urban Biophilic Pavilion," Pittsburgh. The ventilation system spreads the scent of orange blossoms throughout the house.

Scent is a potent stimulus. The poet Schiller kept rotting apples in his desk and would whiff on them to overcome writer's block. Yale researchers found that the smell of spiced apples has an exhilarating effect that can even fend off panic attacks. And according to a Dutch study, people tidy up more when there's a hint of citrus in the air.

Aromatherapy has been shown to reduce stress, relieve headaches, relax the muscles, reduce inflammation, improve sleep, aid digestion, improve blood circulation, and strengthen the immune system. The most primal of our senses, smell also is the only one with a direct link to the brain, passing straight from the environment through the nose to the limbic system, triggering the release of endorphins.

Scent is not something designers tend to think about, but it can be a powerful tool. Ancient potentates built whole palaces of cedarwood for its sweet smell of resin and its natural ability to ward off insects. Today, a Pittsburgh rowhouse draws air from its rooftop greenhouse to warm the spaces below, spreading the scent of orange blossoms throughout. Fragrant herbs and flowers can be used as a form of aromatherapy in healing gardens—jasmine bushes are planted outside the windows of the "Quiet Room" at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospice, for example. Aroma gardens for the blind are becoming more popular, as well. Myself, every time I walk past my neighbor's rosemary hedges, they're irresistible to brush my palm across. Few things revive me like a fistful of that scent.

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About the Blogger

Lance Hosey



Contributing editor and author of ARCHITECT's monthly Eco column, Lance Hosey, AIA, LEED AP, Hon. FIGP, is president and CEO of GreenBlue, a nonprofit and consultancy dedicated to environmental innovation and the creative redesign of industry. A registered architect, he is a former director at William McDonough + Partners. With Kira Gould, he is the co-author of *Women in Green: Voices of Sustainable Design* (2007). His forthcoming book, *The Shape of Green: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Design*, studies how form and image can enhance conservation, comfort, and community at every scale of design, from products to cities. See all of Lance Hosey's Posts

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