

Urban / Digital – Contamination or Distillation?



By Lizzi Larbalestier

We talked about nature benefits and nature disconnect in article one of this series, highlighting some impacts of nature deficit disorder that included higher rates of emotional challenges such as attention difficulties, aggression, depression, anxiety, and a lower sense of self-worth, plus a range of physical illnesses. It is clear that beyond **want**, we **need** access to nature.

I'd like to draw out 'attention difficulties' specifically within this article, since as NLP professionals we champion the value of paying attention, and as coaches it helps if our clients can think clearly.

We have all (I would imagine) experienced our busy clients arriving at their coaching session looking distracted and highly strung, and this can go with the territory of high-performance exec

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coaching. I am sure as NLP professionals we each elegantly pace and lead them into a space of reflective practice. This said, it can help to learn a little more about the many ways we can ensure our environment and technology aids the coaching process.

In the interest of parity, first let's ensure we sing the praises of urban settlements and technology.

- Urbanisation has some benefits, which can include simplified trade

and commerce, exposure to culture, access to education, advances in science and improvements in social services. Urbanisation is often thought to correlate to the advancement of civilization and improved quality of life – although the latter is highly subjective.

- Technology can bridge geographical gaps and for many of us Zoom and similar platforms have been powerful in maintaining personal and professional connections. Digital software can process massive amounts of information in many ways, simplifying our lives and freeing our mental capacity to focus elsewhere. Devices and apps provide the ability to inform, measure and monitor everything from our geographical location to our stocks and shares, even our heart rate variability, pretty much instantaneously



– fast-paced data for fast-paced living.

It's evident that urban and natural landscapes impact our ability to think in a variety of ways, and that digital and analogue experiences resonate differently when it comes to our attention and concentration.

Let's explore how and where, as coaches, we can make choices to redial the mix and adjust the contrast when it comes to nature and the synthetic world.

I guess good 'towards' and 'away from' questions to ask are:

- 1 How can we design the urban environment and technology to actively incorporate or mimic nature in order to orchestrate similar health benefits?
- 2 How can we avoid the urban environment and technology actively contaminating nature benefits?

Not everyone is lucky enough to work at the coast like I do, and many cannot work outdoors, but we can all seek out locations that enable a softening of the fabricated world and, therefore, a clarity of mind.

There are three ways we can connect with nature in built environments, categorised by Stephen R Kellert and Elizabeth Calabrese. These form a great way for us to 'chunk' how we can ensure nature features as much as possible in our work location. Some are obvious, but, as with so many things, the beauty and magic lies within acknowledging the more subtle and nuanced aspects.

Direct connection

Many of us as coaches introduce or seek out plants, water features, even log-burning stoves in our chosen work locations.

We value windows leading to views of, for instance, landscapes and thriving gardens without consciously acknowledging that what we are viewing is more than simply visually attractive. Awareness of a healthy ecosystem is an indicator of self-sustaining life interconnected.

Acknowledging changes in the weather is something we all do unconsciously in the natural world and paying attention to light and shade shifting moment to moment is primal in origin. An environment that blocks out temporal awareness can feel stagnant and claustrophobic.

The same goes for variable temperature and airflow – we are wired to respond to the elements... and, importantly, the **dynamic changes** within these. A quality of the natural world is that it shifts over time.

Opening windows can invite in so many aspects of nature in a very simple way, creating variable light and airflow, natural soundscapes and even the subtle awareness of other life sharing our space – for example, through hearing bird song. Enabling this sense of being part of a living and complex planet can be grounding for our clients.

All of these are direct experiences of nature. Of course, taking our clients


out into nature is a more immersive experience. Outdoor locations where nature supports privacy and reflection can be found in even the busiest of cities. For example, a waterfall in a park can block out the background noise of traffic, enabling a sense of retreat and respite from chaos.

If we take our coaching outdoors it can be helpful to encourage our clients to leave their phone behind, or at least put it on silent. Keeping tech out of nature as much as possible is a good rule of thumb when coaching outdoors and this even includes smart watches. Our addiction with biofeedback and being available for instantaneous notifications can block our ability to free ourselves to fully engage with the coaching process. Use of smart devices in nature has been shown (unsurprisingly) to greatly diminish the benefits of nature connection... Not so smart after all!

Indirect experiences of nature

In addition to images of nature – perhaps artwork on walls, screensavers or even Zoom backgrounds – we can of course positively utilise technology and design to replicate aspects of nature when working indoors.

Biophilic soundscapes such as ocean waves and rainforest sounds can offer a gently nature-connecting alternative to music. As coaches, if we control our environment this is easy to implement.

Questioning how our office soundscape is 

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▶ aiding or inhibiting the general milieu can lead to subtle changes with huge impact. We can even give our clients activities to utilise apps that offer biophilic sound to see how this impacts their day-to-day work patterns.

Depending upon your work location, processed air creating variations in airflow, temperature, humidity and barometric pressure can simulate qualities of natural ventilation – but beware of a background hum.

Lighting can be designed to mimic the spectral and dynamic qualities of light and shade – or simply move location to find better light. Being ‘daylight aware’ is something relevant through all seasons and yet is often only something we consciously register during the shorter winter days.

Materials that weather and develop patina reveal an ability to adapt to changing conditions; their aging offers a sense of growth, learning, stability and experiences past and future. Tactile materials such as stone, wool, cotton, wood and leather, for instance, have an organic feel. These finishes and fabrics have a response to the stresses of time and connect us with a sense of life in flux. They offer a reassuring reminder of natural order of life, something a clinical environment lacks.

Geometry, shape and form can provide a hint of the natural world – less explicit than, for example, floral print facsimiles,

yet none the less creating the feel of an emergent space, whilst natural colour palettes like earthy complementary hues can relax our minds.

Review your workspaces to notice the direct and indirect ways your clients can connect with nature and note down three things you can adjust.

Experience of space and place

Cosy spaces with access to the outdoors or another interior space give us a prospect of refuge – we feel safe but likewise know we have the ability to exit should we choose to. As coaches, even thinking about how we position ourselves in relation to our client comes into play here in its most simplistic form. We are programmed to seek safety from danger, whilst ensuring we can sense opportunity beyond.

Transitional spaces, easy mobility and wayfinding create a sense of connection and can offer a representation of the natural world... and of course provide a great metaphor for the coaching process.

Organised complexity also replicates the natural world. Not too much and not without some structure, but we like to sense there is something to hold our interest without confusing our minds. A rich but ordered bookshelf is a great example of this.

Integration of parts and wholes matters too; something we as NLP professionals are very aware of. Ask: does the space

you are coaching in make sense? Open plan is all great so long as the gestalt is healthy. Settings with disparate zones can disorientate, whereas discernible boundaries, succession between zones, a focal point and a clear theme can offer a richness to the coaching location and unconsciously facilitate order.

Cultural and ecological attachment to place is another consideration and one I have talked about in previous articles. Think about your clients and how your choice of coaching location enables a sense of nature connection that matters to them. What are their cultural references when it comes to nature?

So where does this leave us? I guess the secret lies in balance. In asking: how can we reduce the ways that technology and poor design can contaminate nature when coaching outdoors?... and... how can we actively bring nature into our built spaces?

We can certainly apply technology and design to addressing this challenge. It seems, as coaches, the more nature-smart we become the better, so I will leave you with a great quote from Richard Louv:

“The future will belong to the nature-smart – those individuals, families, businesses, and political leaders who develop a deeper understanding of the transformative power of the natural world and who balance the virtual with the real. The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need.” ■

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