ALETHEIC ENVIRONMENTS

Aletheia

How total sensory immersion can be a powerful biophilic practice



Biophilia: the human need to be in environments where our senses tell us that we are safe

A good definition of biophilia is the innate need for humanity to connect with, and be a part of, nature.

From an evolutionary point of view, the sense of ease and comfort we get when we are connected with nature can be explained by being in an environment where our senses tell us that we are safe.

Our senses evolved to allow us to survive in a particular environment: open savannah. This environment is characterized by open vistas, undulating terrain, scattered and clustered vegetation and plenty of water. It was quite warm, although there were some seasonal variations. It is the environment in which our species, and our immediate predecessors, have spent over 99% of their existence.

In our ancestral, natural environment, our senses told us about opportunities and threats. However, they need to work in harmony to give us the full picture.

When what we see and hear is reinforced by what we smell, taste and touch, we instinctively know whether we are safe, or if we need to make ourselves safe. When our senses detect harmony in our sensory environment, we know - without having to use too much mental effort - that all is well.

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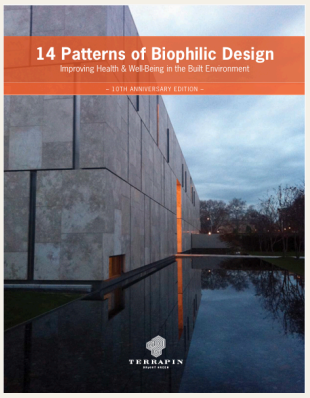
The modern built environment: sensory dissonance



The modern, urban environment, where most of humanity now exists, is quite a long way from those open plains. Building structures from hard materials mean that sounds are reflected off hard surfaces and echo around, so the direction we hear from is not the same as where we see the source. We bombard some of our senses whilst simultaneously dull others.

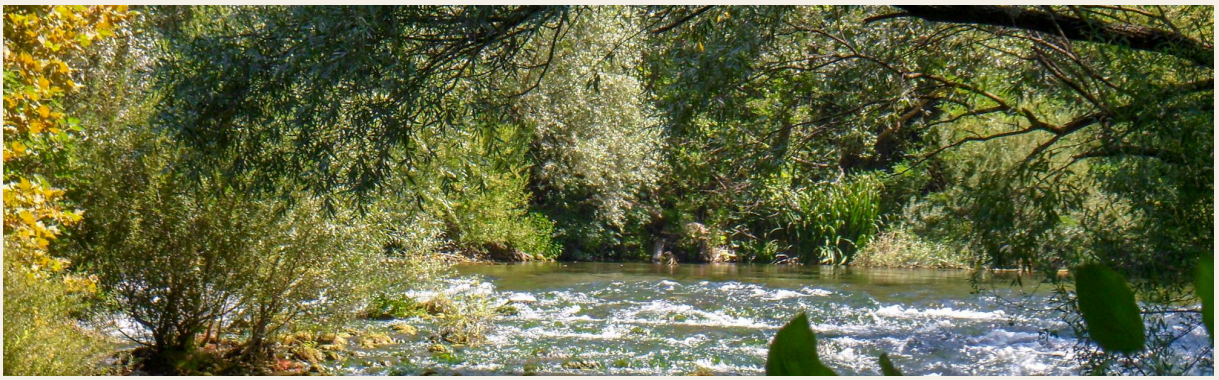
The built environment creates a sensory environment that is discordant. Biophilic designers seek to rebuild the harmony that we need through interventions in the way that buildings are constructed, designed, used and decorated. It is a noble undertaking and can make countless lives happier and healthier. In a commercial setting, happier and healthier people are more productive.

Biophilic design can go further than just the physical space we occupy. It can, and should, extend into how we spend our time and the way we live our whole lives.

Designing biophilic lives, not just biophilic spaces

Biophilic living includes making our homes comfortable and by giving ourselves the time and space to live in a way that enables us to connect with nature whenever, and wherever, possible.

Research carried out over the last few years has consistently demonstrated that time spent in natural environments, encompassing green spaces like forests and blue spaces like beaches, is strongly linked to significant physical and mental health benefits[1]. These benefits include reduced psychological distress, lower blood pressure, improved mood, reduced anxiety and rumination, and diminished levels of the stress hormone cortisol[2]. Even short durations, such as 10 to 20 minutes daily, have been shown to help prevent stress and mental health strain.



There also seems to be a positive relationship between exposure to nature and achieving a positive body image. This linkage is significantly mediated by an increase in the individual's connectedness to nature.[3]

[1] A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on the Effect of Nature Exposure Dose on Adults with Mental Illness - MDPI, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/15/2/153
[2] Time spent in nature can boost physical and mental well-being, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/time-spent-in-nature-can-boost-physical-and-mental-well-being/
[3] Nature exposure and positive body image: (Re-)examining the mediating roles of connectedness to nature and trait mindfulness - PMC - PubMed Central, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7320863/

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Thinking again about sensory stimuli

We are very used to thinking about 'the five senses'. However, we are far more sensory than that. There may be 30 or 40 distinct senses, and our sense organs work together to build a coherent picture of where we are.

Our eyes detect objects, distance, shapes, colour, orientation, brightness, contrast, movement, direction, detail, the time of day, and so on. That's eleven senses already. Our ears help with understanding direction and orientation because they are stereophonic. They detect changes in air pressure and detect vibrations in the air (volume, rhythm and pitch of sound). Furthermore, tiny structures in our inner ear house sensors that tell how fast we are moving, whether we are upright and if we are turning.

Our nose and mouth have incredibly sensitive organs that react to temperature, texture, and chemical properties (taste and smell). Working alongside our eyes, they tell us immediately if a food is safe to eat.

We also have a range of senses housed inside the body. Pain sensors tell us if we have damaged part of the body, pressure sensors tell us if we need to urinate and chemical sensors trigger all sorts of metabolic processes such as digestion (or indigestion).

Being aware of, and understanding our internal senses is called interoception - more of which later.

Our biggest sense organ is, of course, our skin.



More than just a membrane to contain our insides, it can detect textures, the qualities of materials, temperature, air movement, humidity, wetness and even static electricity (think about how the fine hairs on your arms react when you are in contact with some synthetic fabrics or even if a thunderstorm might be on its way).

It is, for the most part - and for most of the time - covered. This means that when clothed, very many of our senses are dulled.

Sensory immersion

When you take a bath or a shower, do you stay in the water just long enough to get clean, or do you enjoy a long, warm soak? If the latter, do you do it wearing clothes? Of course not. The pleasure comes from the full immersion of the body and receiving all of the messages sent by your skin to your brain that confirms all is well.

Recently - certainly since the pandemic - the practice of wild swimming has become incredibly popular. The joy of swimming in wild, natural waters rather than the sterile environments of swimming

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pools, has led to countless books and dozens of column inches in The Guardian newspaper[4]. The benefits of wild swimming include a deep connection with nature as well as a genuine immersion in it. Many wild swimmers - especially in the summer - swim nude[5]. Anyone that has ever 'skinny dipped' (and millions of Britons have) will know that once tried, swimming with a costume never feels the same again.

When *all* of our senses are stimulated, sensory comfort (and sensual pleasure) is amplified. When we immerse ourselves completely in nature, we can experience some very profound physical and emotional responses.

From a biophilic perspective, a lot of this comes from exposure to non-rhythmic stimuli: wind, the noise of leaves rustling in the trees, the sound of water and waves. Non-rhythmic stimuli are one of Terrapin Bright Green's famous patterns of biophilia[6], and a very powerful one at that.

Complete immersion in nature

Removing the barrier of clothing to our skin offers an unparalleled level of total sensory immersion. It intensifies the connections with nature and our environment.[7] The feeling of air, sunlight, bare earth, water and the weather directly on the skin promotes a deeper sense of tranquility, mindful awareness, and interconnectedness. This enhances mental restoration beyond the baseline benefits of nature exposure alone.[8]

I know this from experience.

In the spring of 2020, my life was turned upside down by a series of events that affected my mental health - especially my self esteem and confidence. I was stressed and unhappy and the future looked very uncertain. At the same time, the pandemic hit and the whole world was in trouble. These were tough times for a lot of people.

In many ways, I was lucky. The effects of an early bout of Covid-19 were minor and, at the time, I had the privilege of living in a house in the countryside with a large private garden. With plenty of time to occupy my mind, I started to think a lot more deeply about the science underpinning biophilia and why it is so important to our wellbeing. With time and space being available in abundance, I discovered that naturism, the practice of non-sexual nudity in nature, had a deep and lasting impact on my wellbeing.

It has shown me a powerful truth. The profound benefits of biophilia are amplified when I experience nature in my most authentic, unencumbered state. When the joy of being unclothed is combined with a deep unfiltered connection to our natural surroundings, it creates a unique and powerful state of wellbeing that is both liberating and restorative. It is something that has become precious.

I appreciate that the thought of naturism, even if carried out as a solo pursuit in a private space, can be challenging. It is not for everybody. However, recent surveys carried out suggest that as many as

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[4] Index of articles about swimming in The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/swimming
[5] On skinny dipping: article by Lynne Roper for the Outdoor Swimming Society, https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/on-skinny-dipping/
[6] 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design - Terrapin Bright Green https://www.terrapinbrightgreen.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/14-Patterns-10th-anniv-ed-v2025-05.pdf
[7] The Psychological Benefits of Naturism - AANR West, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://aanrwest.org/information/blog/the-psychological-benefits-of-naturism
[8] Naturism and Mental Health: Exploring the Connection - AANR West, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://aanrwest.org/information/blog/naturism-and-mental-health-exploring-the-connection

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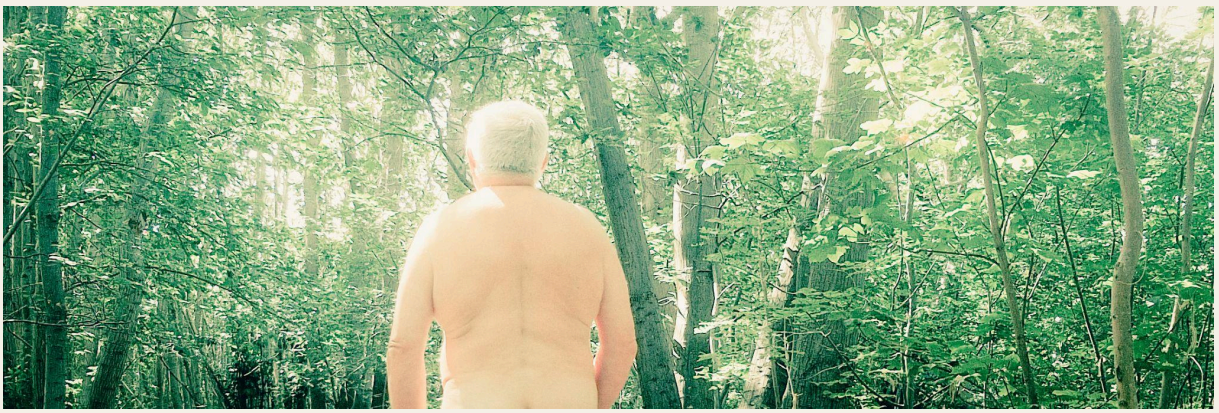
one in seven British adults has taken part in some form of nude leisure activity, even if they wouldn't necessarily define themselves as naturists[9].

Why naturism can be a useful component to biophilic living

Many wellness practitioners extoll the benefits of forest bathing as a powerful way to connect with nature. Being in a forest, surrounded by huge trees and benefitting from the quiet and air enriched with natural chemicals (phytoncides – volatile organic compounds emitted by trees) and pleasant smells can be profoundly calming. The allure of forest bathing lies in its ability to reduce stress and anxiety. The forest environment has been linked to boosting the immune system and improving mood. Furthermore, the soft, earthy hues, the gentle rustling of leaves, and the sounds of bird songs create a serene atmosphere that promotes relaxation and mental clarity.

Allowing the whole person to be immersed in that environment is even more potent. Being naked, alone, in a forest is a truly enriching experience and something I do often.



As well as the physical benefits of nudity in nature (vitamin D synthesis[10], improved thermal regulation and increased physical activity), academic research into the effects of naturism suggests that there are psychological benefits. The most sophisticated psychological benefit arises through something called a serial mediational pathway:

Nature Exposure ➨ Mindful Awareness ➨ Connectedness to Nature ➨ Body Appreciation[11]

Nudity acts as a catalyst, powerfully amplifying the mindful awareness step.

The removal of clothing necessitates a full, immediate presence and sensory feedback. You immediately experience a heightened state of noticing the body's state relative to the environment. By strengthening mindful awareness, the practice accelerates the subsequent connection to nature and, ultimately, body appreciation.

For me, naturism is the ultimate expression of biophilic living.

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[9] 6.75 million Naturists in the UK - IPSOS research carried out in 2022. https://www.bn.org.uk/news/information/about-bn/675-million-naturists-in-the-uk-r1187/

[10] Vitamin D: An Overview of Gene Regulation, Ranging from Metabolism to Genomic Effects, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4425/14/9/1691

[11] Nature exposure and positive body image: (Re-)examining the mediating roles of connectedness to nature and trait mindfulness - PMC - PubMed Central, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7320863/

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The science: Interoceptive Awareness (IA) and embodiment

A powerful mechanism by which naturism enhances psychological resilience is through its impact on Interoceptive Awareness (IA). IA is, basically, what we sense inside the body: the nuanced sensing, encoding, and interpretation of internal bodily cues, such as temperature, heartbeat, and hunger.[12] This is essentially an internal dialogue between the body and brain, and is critical for regulating cognition and emotional states.

Studies comparing naturists to control groups show that naturists demonstrate persistently higher results across all dimensions of a Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA).[13] This suggests that there may be a fundamental difference in how naturists process internal bodily signals. Notably, IA seems to be negatively correlated with self-objectification - the tendency to focus on one's body as a detached object of appearance rather than as an instrument for living.[14]

The high IA and resilience to negative body image observed in naturists supports the idea that the practice shifts the individual's perspective from an *externally* judged entity (vulnerable to Social Physique Anxiety[15] - SPA - and self-objectification) to an *internally* trusted, resilient entity.

In other words, naturists are less affected by the judgement of others about their appearance, and are more able to appreciate themselves.

Low IA is often implicated in a variety of mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. By fostering high IA, particularly those elements that relate to body trust and self-regulation, naturism becomes a potential prophylactic mind-body therapy that may improve overall mental health.

Furthermore, the heightened IA observed in naturists fosters an *embodied earth kinship*.[16] By improving the individual's sense of their own physical state (IA), naturism seems to enhance the experience of connecting to nature, which in turn strengthens the cognitive, affective, and physical benefits of environmental exposure. This embodied perspective grounds the individual's sense of self within the ecosystem. It facilitates deeper psychological restoration and a more comprehensive approach to self care and self respect.

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[12] Interoceptive awareness in a clinical setting: the need to bring interoceptive perspectives into clinical evaluation - Frontiers, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1244701/full

[13] The Effect of Naturism on Body Image and Interoceptive Awareness, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342974143_The_Effect_of_Naturism_on_Body_Image_and_Interoceptive_Awareness

[14] Body Conscious? Interoceptive Awareness, Measured by Heartbeat Perception, Is Negatively Correlated with Self-Objectification - Research journals, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0055568

[15] [PDF] A nudity-based intervention to improve body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/dfb81f76f672394ab324d4f505f5e490f0231dd9

[16] Embodied earth kinship: interoceptive awareness and relational attachment personal factors predict nature connectedness in a structural model of nature connection - PubMed Central, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11391489/

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Mediational model of psychological benefits of naturism

Naturist activity component	Mediating factor	Primary outcome	Supporting mechanism
Participation in communal nudity[17]	Reduced social physique anxiety (SPA)[18]	Increased body appreciation	Exposure to non-idealized bodies (de-sexualization)[19]
Increased frequency/duration[20]	Positive body image	Higher self-esteem	Internalized self-acceptance and positive self-concept
Extended practice[21]	Heightened interoceptive awareness (IA)	Resilience to negative body image	Shift from external (objectified) to internal (trusting) body view[22]
Nakedness in nature[23]	Connectedness to nature and mindfulness	Mental restoration/lower stress[24]	Removal of physical barriers to full sensory immersion[25]

Having said that, there are some psychological risks.

What are the risks?

These are mainly based on fear of judgement and can cause distress, vigilance, self-restriction and even social exclusion due to pervasive societal stigma. Fortunately, *actual* societal judgement appears to be less common than is feared - certainly in liberal democracies. From a personal perspective, no-one that I have discussed naturism with has been anything less than understanding. Most are curious and are usually supportive. Having said that, there are reasons why my identity is not obvious, and the explanation for that can be found here.[26]

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[17] I Feel Better Naked: Communal Naked Activity Increases Body Appreciation by Reducing Social Physique Anxiety - PubMed, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32500740/

[18] [PDF] A nudity-based intervention to improve body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/dfb81f76f672394ab324d4f505f5e490f0231dd9

[19] The naked truth – research finds nudism makes us happier, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/naked-and-unashamed/

[20] (PDF) Naked and Unashamed: Investigations and Applications of the Effects of Naturist Activities on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction - ResearchGate, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312818122_Naked_and_Unashamed_Investigations_and_Applications_of_the_Effects_of_Naturist_Activities_on_Body_Image_Self-Esteem_and_Life_Satisfaction

[21] The Effect of Naturism on Body Image and Interoceptive Awareness, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342974143_The_Effect_of_Naturism_on_Body_Image_and_Interoceptive_Awareness

[22] Body Conscious? Interoceptive Awareness, Measured by Heartbeat Perception, Is Negatively Correlated with Self-Objectification - Research journals, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0055568

[23] Nature exposure and positive body image: (Re-)examining the mediating roles of connectedness to nature and trait mindfulness - PMC - PubMed Central, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7320863/

[24] Associations between Nature Exposure and Health: A Review of the Evidence - PMC, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8125471/

[25] Naturism and Mental Health: Exploring the Connection - AANR West, accessed on October 13, 2025, https://aanrwest.org/information/blog/naturism-and-mental-health-exploring-the-connection

[26] Why I remain anonymous (for now) https://aletheicenvironments.com/2025/09/02/why-i-remain-anonymous-for-now/

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There are also fears that naturism might be illegal and that being caught might have some real world consequences. In the UK, and many European countries, this is not the case.[27]

There are some physical risks to understand too. Sunburn (and skin cancer)[28] must be protected against, and there is no doubt that appropriate footwear might be needed where surfaces are slippery or sharp

Aletheia

Aletheia is a Greek term for truth or unconcealedness. In philosophy, Aletheia is one of the primary Greek words for truth. However, its meaning is distinct from a simple fact or statement. It refers to a state of being revealed or unconcealed.

Truth, in this sense, is not something you make or construct, but rather something that exists and is brought into the open or un-hidden. An aletheic space is a place where you can strip away the artificial and the inessential to reveal a deeper truth - both about the natural world and about ourselves.

Aletheic spaces[29] are where the barriers between the occupant and the natural environment are minimised or eliminated. They are spaces where all of our senses are stimulated to uncover the whole truth about where we are and what we are doing. They can be natural, but where access to nature is limited, they can be designed.

When designed and part of the built environment, they are places for more than just for doing stuff in (or for getting a credit on a checklist), but are places where restoration, sensory coherence and mental clarity can be given every opportunity to occur. It would be a space with an atmosphere of safety, trust and liberation.

Most importantly, an aletheic space would be a place where the occupant themselves feels free to be *uncovered* and *authentic*. It could be a space for meditation and mindfulness, a place where you can experience vulnerability[30] (risk and peril)[31] with the knowledge of safety, and a place to become unconcealed allowing for the deepest possible connection to the environment.

The opportunities for more research

Research so far suggests that naturism represents a valuable but complex behavioral model. It seems to have potential as a useful straightforward and scalable intervention for addressing issues like body image dissatisfaction as well as enabling people to experience the physiological benefits of sensory immersion. Further research is needed, however, to really build on the understanding of the benefits. Unfortunately, such studies are likely to be complex and expensive, and probably not at the top of many academic 'to do' lists. For the time being, anecdotal evidence is likely to be more common. The more there is of that - and the more consistent the reported experience - then the evidence base becomes stronger and more compelling.

You, the reader, of course have the opportunity to add to the canon of anecdotal evidence if you want to.

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[27] Legal Guides - Public Place Naturism: British Naturism
https://www.bn.org.uk/files/file/739-legal-guides-public-place-naturism/
[28] UV Radiation and the Skin - PMC - PubMed Central, accessed on October 13, 2025,
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3709783/
[29] What on Earth is an Aletheic Environment? https://wp.me/pgKalA-t
[30] Safe vulnerability, https://wp.me/pgKalA-7F
[31] 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design - Terrapin Bright Green
https://www.terrapinbrightgreen.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/14-Patterns-10th-anniv-ed-v2025-05.pdf

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About Aletheic Environments

Aletheic Environments is a specialist consultancy providing services and advice to help you create environments that go beyond biophilic design to create spaces that enable biophilic living, using aletheic principles to enhance health and happiness. .

My background is in plant sciences, horticulture and biophilic design, especially where greenery is incorporated in, on and around buildings. I use an evidence-based approach to my work to ensure that any interventions can be justified by data, not just feelings.

I am open to collaboration and aim to develop partnerships with like-minded designers, wellness businesses and naturist organizations to explore innovative ways to promote these concepts.

UK-based, international capability

I am based in the UK, and I work with clients both domestically and internationally. I run my own horticultural and biophilic design consultancy business, offering both face-to-face and remote consultancy and training services. I work with commercial and private clients.

My services

For architects and interior designers

- Advice and consultancy on biophilic design, with an emphasis on creating aletheic spaces based on sensory immersion.
- Advice on horticulture, planting specifications and other biophilic green elements in, on and around buildings.

For private homes and gardens

- Advice on how to create an aletheic environment at home – indoors and outside.

For wellness businesses, naturist clubs, societies and organisations

- Advice and consultancy on biophilic design – especially horticulture – with an aim to help you add value to your space and develop additional revenue.
- Writing for your on-line and printed materials to present a different approach to the benefits of naturism and naked wellness.
- Talks and presentations (live or on-line) to your team and / or members about the evidence-based wellbeing benefits of aletheic environments.

My professional services will be managed through my interior landscaping and biophilic design consultancy business, Purposeful Places.

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