

---

# Review of *Neuroscience for Designing Green Spaces: Contemplative Landscapes*

Ariel Evan Mayse, Stanford University

---

Keywords: *Contemplative Architecture and Landscapes, Design, green spaces, Urban Policy and Planning, built environment, Neuroscience*

Agnieszka Olszewska-Guizzo, *Neuroscience for Designing Green Spaces: Contemplative Landscapes* (New York: Routledge, 2023). Paperback, 219 pages, \$39.95. (978-1032280639) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003295167>.

Homo sapiens is an animal, and we suffer from all the harms and injuries of captivity. It has become commonplace to condemn the monstrosity of urban jungles and cities, seething fortresses that alienate their denizens from one another and estrange them from the landscape itself. “Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain,” declared William Wordsworth, “Of a too busy world! Before me flow, / Thou endless stream of men and moving things!” Diagnosing these manifold ills is easy, and it is somewhat harder to offer viable alternatives for human flourishing in the densely packed metropolis of today—or tomorrow. Agnieszka Olszewska-Guizzo’s new book *Neuroscience for Designing Green Spaces* is thus a welcome addition to our library, an interdisciplinary infusion of fresh air that also affords some brass tacks for urban planners and policymakers. While she does not shy away from commenting on the problems with contemporary architecture and their impact upon our mental wellbeing, the bulk of her work tackles a forward-thinking issue: “how designers can make sure that the landscape we are exposed to is contemplative” (51).

Our work of world-building is recursive and iterative. Anthropogenic transformations of the landscape are a constant and complicated two-way process, one that continues without end. “If environments are forged through the activities of living beings,” claimed the social anthropologist Tim Ingold, “then so long as life goes on, they are continually under construction.”<sup>1</sup> But human health, and that of the many sympatric species who share our lives in cities, is subject to the limitations of myopic cost-benefit analysis and budgetary analysis—the seemingly inexorable logic of capitalism. “The environment that humans shape is in turn shaping us,” writes Olszewska-Guizzo. “And not always in a good way” (2). The author does not, however, lapse into jejune depictions of returning to a romanticized wilderness (a problematic, colonialist approach that has been interrogated by scholars from Roderick Frazier Nash to Kyle Whyte). The fact of urban living is a situation that is unlikely to change for most of us in the decades to come. Given that the pressures and thrum of cities is often quite bad for body and mind, Olszewska-Guizzo seeks to



understand how we might harness the findings of neuroscience to make cities better. She argues that urban green spaces—of which there are many subspecies and different types—can actually induce lower-frequency brain waves (Alpha, Theta). If constructed with intention, our built environments will positively influence our mental and physical conditions.

To better analyze these complicated structures, Olszewska-Guizzo draws upon the Contemplative Landscape Model, a system designed “to allow for the identification and creation of spaces that induce positive psychological outcomes in the observer, such as a contemplative state of mind” (8). She outlines seven compelling core features (including “character of peace and silence,” “color and light,” and “biodiversity”; for a full list, see 61*ff.*) that should not be left to happenstance. Her thesis, then, is that careful decisions in designing these spaces and landscapes, based in quantitative research, can make our environment more effective in sparking this type of reflective consciousness. Contemplation, as Olszewska-Guizzo defines it, is “a state of conscious being while attentively experiencing a certain stimulus (visual, auditory, etc.), or . . . , as an act of intentional, attentive watching, the perceiving of something, or thoughtful observation” (30). Olszewska-Guizzo’s book underscores how attempts to understand the full variety of contemplative experiences, and the prompts or practices that lead to them, must employ a very wide methodological lens. The sophisticated contemplative frameworks developed by religious traditions are adaptations of a more fundamental human capacity—and, perhaps, a need—that is also met through architecture and design.

This book is a significant contribution to the field of Contemplative Studies precisely because it advances our understanding and methods while leaving additional work to be done by others. We encounter a review of earlier models for contemplative design only in chapter 11, and even then, these possibilities are analyzed too briefly. Historians, then, could apply the Contemplative Landscape Model as a framework for thinking about the cities and settlements of the past. We might think here with the work of Robert Pogue Harrison, the distinguished scholar of Literature and Anthropology, especially his *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). The evidence and case studies in Olszewska-Guizzo’s work both confirm and expand the findings of authors and activists like Richard Louv, whose *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005)—though hardly the first of its kind—outlined the spiritual and psychological harm experienced by children who spend too much time indoors or surrounded by concrete. More could, and should, be done in employing the Contemplative Landscape Model for questions of wildlife—Olszewska-Guizzo’s mentions of biodiversity, though excellent, are brief. Finally, ours is an era in which phone apps mediate so much of life. Additional work, beyond outlining “tech-free zones,” is needed to understand how our experiences of urban areas are shaped by the devices in our hands, pockets, and bodies. Strong scholarly books like *Neuroscience for Designing Green Spaces* advance an original argument, building novel pathways of mind while leaving their readers with as-yet unanswered questions, ideas, and conundrums. The unfinished nature of those now-broadened horizons is a feature, not a bug.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2022), 23.