

Leveraging Outdoor Space To Support Organizational Goals



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By Kirt Martin

Parents tell kids to go outside and play. Thanks to growing knowledge about the physical, emotional, and psychological benefits of being outdoors and technology that connects us wherever we are, they might just as well say go outside and work, learn, or heal.

The evidence is in. Being outdoors is important to human experience. Mounting research shows that time spent outdoors has significant benefits for human physical, emotional, and mental health. Studies by healthcare providers report that even access to views of green space can aid in healing. (For a primer on the subject, see Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative*.) Meanwhile, outdoor space within business, educational, and institutional facilities is often underutilized and overlooked. In many cases, we pass through outdoor spaces on the way from one building to another, missing valuable opportunities along the way.



Photo: Landscape Forms

Facilities executives have long been charged with protecting an organization's capital investment in real estate, helping turn cost items into added value. Today, as facility management assumes a greater level of strategic importance within organizations, it has the larger responsibility to contribute to overall business success and competitive advantage. This is also at a time when we rely on facilities to respond to transformative changes in the way we work, learn, and deliver healthcare. An integrated approach to facilities that considers exterior as well as interior space can better leverage all assets to support core business. As facilities executives work to wring the most value out of every square foot and maximize returns on

every investment in building structure, furniture, and equipment, valuable real estate just outside the door may be left underestimated and underused. You're paying for it. Why not use it?

Outdoor spaces provide multiple benefits that can effectively support the organization and the people it employs and serves. Access to natural light, fresh air, and nature fulfills a basic human need and fosters well-being and satisfaction that can aid in recruiting and retaining employees and students. Landscape features such as pedestrian and bike paths and running trails encourage physical exercise that maintains mental/physical balance and can improve health outcomes. Quiet places enable people to de-stress, restore, and recharge. Social settings for meeting and eating encourage the connections and interactions that build organizational culture. Work settings with embedded technology help integrate interior and exterior activities to foster seamless productivity and creativity. Courtyards and gardens at healthcare facilities provide patients, families, and caregivers with essential respite and connection to nature's healing powers.

Outdoor space offers branding opportunities that enable organizations to express identity and relationship to the community. Ecologically responsible development of outdoor space demonstrates an organization's commitment to the environment and can help earn LEED credits.

While outdoor space harbors hidden value, investment in it is typically much less costly than interior space. A high-design conference table can cost \$20,000, for instance. Several strategically placed high-quality outdoor benches can activate dead space, serve many people over the course of a day, and be purchased for less.

Forward-looking organizations are using outdoor space in a variety of ways to advance business objectives. Google has adopted an approach to its Mountain View, CA campus based on biophilic design, which seeks to reconnect people with the natural environment in an effort to reduce stress, improve cognitive performance, increase creativity, and provide a positive emotional experience through heightened awareness of nature. The company has created native and resilient habitats, numerous casual spaces with informal furnishings, and provided 1,500 bicycles for use by employees anywhere on campus. Color-coded bike lanes and walkways lined with benches and energy saving, low maintenance LED lighting weave through the site. Raised plant beds house common gardens tended by employees, while food trucks parked alongside picnic tables serve up a range of foods and software engineers play volleyball on a sand court.

In the southeast, a new outdoor classroom at the Georgia Southern University Biological Sciences Building takes an integrated approach to learning, inside and out with a LEED certified space that brings new functionality and excitement to the campus. And at The University of Missouri Healthcare Healing Garden Courtyard, the space includes native vegetation and a soothing water feature that provides visitors and patients with a sense of intimacy and peace, and a variety of benches, chairs and tables that allow the space to be used for other purposes, from small private meetings to group therapy sessions.

Identifying Outdoor Space Types

The specific space types implemented by an organization are based on desired outcomes. But in the end, it's all about people. Here are some common space types that are broadly applicable across the spectrum.



Image: Landscape Forms

Social Hub: A large central meeting place for organization-wide gatherings, ceremonial occasions, and special events. Frequently bordered by low seating walls.

Oasis: A small sheltered space for individual rest and retreat. May include benches or informal chairs and peripheral plantings to create soft boundaries.

Social Space: A setting in which people come together for informal conversations and small gatherings. Furnished with a variety of seating types, tables, and planters to define semi-private niches.

Touchdown: A small space for brief periods of work. Simply outfitted with benches or chairs and tables for laptops.

Meeting Space: A larger workspace for teams to discuss, present, and collaborate. Activities supported by tables with benches or stools to encourage face-to-face interaction, outdoor charging stations, planters, trellises or canopies for shade and a sense of enclosure, and on campuses, bike racks.

Workshop: A setting for active collaborative work that supports “continuous learning” throughout the facility. This may be furnished with standing or seated height worksurfaces that include integrated technology, stools or chairs, canopies and trellises, and planters.



Image: Landscape Forms

Dining Area: A plaza or patio typically located near the organization's food service facility, furnished with long tables and benches or round tables and chairs, shade structures and ample litter and recycling receptacles.

Caring Space: A garden or courtyard for patients and caregivers with places to sit and plantings that create small private enclaves.

Outdoor space is a 24/7 public declaration of an organization's vision and values and a potentially productive arena waiting to be leveraged in its service. It's a matter of putting valuable outdoor assets smartly and effectively to work.



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