-To Come To Come

Words by Helen Francis Photography by Gayle Souter-Brown

I ids need nature. That's common sense to those of us who grew up making forts, playing imaginary games outside, getting dirty and sustaining a few scratches, collecting lizards, insects and snails, and making all sorts of discoveries about local flora and fauna.

We all need contact with nature to be fully-functioning adults with intact physical and mental health says landscape architect Gayle Souter-Brown, author of Landscape and Urban Design for Health and Well-Being. Children need access to nature so they may develop, through unstructured play, capacities for problem solving, creativity, imagination, manual dexterity, social skills and more.

However, many countries including New Zealand aren't providing equitable access for all children to those sorts of experiences says Souter-Brown, who has worked around the world for 20 years with her landscape and urban design consultancy, Greenstone Design UK. Design projects she has worked on include social housing, health and aged care, and natural play and inclusive-design projects for special education.

"The people who most need [access to nature] don't have street trees, can't afford cars to drive, or even the cost of a bus fare to access these places. We have marginalized whole rafts of communities by saying 'green space is a luxury' – but it's not, it's fundamental. You can tell the nice leafy suburbs where people live and they enjoy mental and physical health and can enjoy those places for free. From a landscape architect's point view that's the opportunity – to redress the balance. We are a fundamental part of every development scheme of every community and we need to up-skill to meet that challenge."

People's disconnection from nature has been called "nature deficit disorder" by journalist Richard Louv. Keynote speaker, along with Souter-Brown (a panelist) at "A Place to Live, for the Life worth Having" conference, Whanganui November 2014, Louv has authored eight books about the connections between family, nature and community. Researchers in many disciplines (education, health, environmental science, pediatrics, neurology) have variously linked nature deficit with obesity, stress, depression, lower cognitive functioning, some diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder, and other problems.

Souter-Brown says if we give children natural spaces "where they interact with nature, watch the birds feed the birds, pick the flowers, play in the trees up close and personal we can improve their memory, improve their cognitive functioning, we can decrease stress, improve mood and reduce risk of







01-02: Placemaking activation strategies in Auckland's Wynyard Quarter, including outdoor film screenings and weekly markets, were designed to incite a sense of place for the local community and visitors in the newly redesigned waterfront space. Images: van Est Photography





lifestyle related conditions such as obesity, depression and social isolation."

She says necessary design elements are a variety of trees and birds – avoid the fashionable, hedge monocultures such as griselinia that support little by way of life, and include "less of the manicured." Trees that change with the seasons, such as fruit trees, are more enticing than those that don't. A New Zealand Steiner school is surrounded by bush and lots of green, but "the kids aren't valuing it. We need more visible connections with the seasons."

When designing for children we need to let them get a little bit messy and public space needs to allow for that.

"You're not going to have mud wallow downtown, but you need to have spaces where kids are going to be allowed to get a bit dirty, where they're allowed to go to the park and dig. If they're living in apartments – and we are looking at increased densification of all our urban areas up and down the countryside – then not everybody will have gardens."

Human-scale design that has the end-user and mental health impact in mind is crucial. The softer a landscape is, physically underfoot and

acoustically, the more accessible it becomes.

"When we talk about accessible design we are not talking about ramps and handrails, we are talking about a place that is not intimidating."

"When we talk about accessible design in this sense, we are not talking about ramps and handrails; we are talking about a place that is not intimidating. Depression is the second-largest cause of disability. We have got to be mindful of creating supportive places to help get these people out of their homes and back into the community to once again make them productive members in the workforce and in their families."

A Learning Through Landscapes study (www.ltl.org.uk) of 700 schools found that improved landscape design enhanced pupil behavior, reduced bullying, improved attitudes towards learning, improved social interaction and increased community/parental involvement. Louv quotes studies of US schools (over one million and half children) that found sudents attending facilities with a school garden, nature in the classroom and programmes that took students into nature to learn, scored higher on standardized tests.

Many teachers have said almost the same thing to Souter-Brown. "The troublemaker in class becomes the leader when I take the class outside in nature. They become different kids."

Landscape architects have an answer to some of the ills that afflict modern society Souter-Brown says. But manufactured environments that prescribe the ways people use them "become another ballet class or football class. You don't get to figure it out for yourself. If you've just got a hill and some trees and a rope swing you figure it out."

Pragmatically, an aging population needs our children to be healthy. "The landscape profession is really well poised. We have been marginalized as a profession for so many years – an absolute after thought, "there to