

Put nature back in our downtown

*Don't it always seem to go
You don't know what you've got till it's
gone.*

*They paved paradise and put up a parking
lot.*

— Joni Mitchell

Cultivate your garden.

— Voltaire

Whoever said that urban areas should be composed of hardscape and rural areas of softscape? Indeed, the most enchanting cities around the globe are abundant with parks, tree-lined streets, rivers, and other natural features.

Downtown Phoenix, however, betrays little of its majestic natural setting.

This was not always the case. Documents dating from more than a century ago, when Phoenix numbered 8,500 people, state, "The town is embowered in shade trees and shrubbery, has streams of living water through every street, is surrounded by orchards, gardens, and vineyards, and is one of the handsomest in the West."

Unfortunately, such remnants of nature have been banished from our central city over the years.

It is time to bring them back. Integrating nature into the city improves air quality, cools people and buildings in the summer,

reduces heating loads in the winter, offers recreational opportunities for fun and fitness and bestows the priceless gifts of beauty and gratitude.

In addition, numerous studies demonstrate the important physical and mental health benefits of "greening" urban areas, including significant reductions in incidences of obesity, diabetes, anxiety, depression and ADHD.

Greater Phoenix is nationally recognized for diligently setting aside large swaths of preserve land over the years. Ambitious regional trail systems are connecting trails with canals, parks, and flood-control land, while creating miles of new trails. The Rio Salado Habitat Restoration project along with the Rio Oeste extension offers exem-

plary instances of reinserting nature and linear parks into the city. Some of the region's new communities, such as the Parks at Silverleaf in DC Ranch and Verado, feature well-designed networks of parks connected by paths.

We need to translate these efforts into the urban core. Bringing nature into a city is more challenging than preserving it, restoring it, or dedicating a place for it in new communities. It is, however, one of the most important strategies toward successful downtown Phoenix revitalization.

Last year, consultants to the city of Phoenix recommended viewing "downtown's many small parks, plazas, public open spaces, and fountain areas as a series of oases that could be linked to achieve greater synergy and connectivity."

Downtown Voices, a coalition of community groups, similarly suggested we "create an Urban Oasis, through the cultivation of nature and art projects, that knit together empty, unimproved spaces throughout downtown Phoenix" to generate "public places [that] reflect different characteristics suited to community needs." The Urban Trails Committee proposed an urban pathway system punctuated by "rest stops."

And the city's Strategic Vision and Blueprint for the Future heeded this profusion of advice, calling for reorienting the city around "a set of pathways connecting a series of both green and public spaces that can serve as 'oases' in the downtown."

Before it is too late, this open-space network should be designated and treated as sacred, assuring the preservation of quality public places.

Once established, pieces of the network can take on a range of qualities, becoming urban plazas, serene retreats, playgrounds, skate parks, dog parks, community gardens, outdoor galleries, amphitheaters, basketball courts and more.

The entire network could offer abundant natural features as well as shade, seating, and small kiosks plying refreshments and periodicals.

Some areas could be dedicated for street performers and programmed events such as



Jack Kurtz/The Arizona Republic

A successful downtown must incorporate more than high-rise offices and concrete. Nature must be given a role.

lunchtime and evening concerts, dance performances and outdoor cinema.

Woven through the city, these public spaces would attract sidewalk cafes and other retail activities, next to which would be offices with housing above, serving as catalysts in the creation of vibrant urban hubs and streets.

Several initiatives are under way. The city Planning Department has begun developing guidelines for the public-space network outlined in the vision. A Coalition for Downtown Public Spaces is also in the works.

In addition, a Downtown Phoenix Conservancy recently formed to advocate for and oversee the integration of nature into the city through a variety of means, including extensive tree-planting campaigns, reclaiming swatches of desert in the city, converting landbanked parcels into temporary agricultural uses, creating community gardens and linear recreational parks, landscaping rights of way, replacing asphalt with pervious surfaces and more.

We should not need to escape the city to enjoy a gentle breeze through the leaves of a sweet acacia, our early spring blossoms or the musty scent of creosote after a summer rain. To distinguish our desert city, and to enhance the pleasure and comfort it bestows for generations to come, we should lovingly carve out a place for nature in the city, nurture it. Then watch it, and us, flourish.

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Nan
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My Turn



We should not need to escape the city to enjoy a breeze in the acacia leaves.