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## Press Release

### Earth Day Can Be Every Day as Cities Promote Well-being by Incorporating Bits of Nature into Public and Private Spaces

**ANN ARBOR, MI, April 12, 2007--***The creation of "urban oases" of greenery can provide city dwellers with opportunities to "get away," contemplate and explore, even in high-density areas, researchers say.*

Earth Day comes only once a year, but city planners can promote grassroots greenery year-round by incorporating bits of nature into high-density urban areas, say researchers from the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment.

In their new study, "[Nearby Nature in the City: Preserving and Enhancing Livability](#)," professors Rachel Kaplan and Raymond De Young and co-author J. Eric Ivancich discuss the many benefits derived by residents from seeing, experiencing and exploring natural places, and suggest ways to integrate more gardens and greenery into the mosaic of city spaces. These psychological and social benefits have been demonstrated repeatedly by research carried out at the University of Michigan and elsewhere, both in the United States and around the world.

"Lots of things about the environment and the Earth are not exactly uplifting these days," says Kaplan. "The nearby, everyday natural environment serves as a wholesome contrast. Just noticing nature and the contexts it creates can be engaging and therapeutic. Becoming involved in ensuring its existence and sustaining its care can add further benefits."

Cities can gain a great deal by utilizing green-space design and development, which help to maintain the vitality and livability of urban neighborhoods while enhancing the pleasure and safety of residents. Ann Arbor, which served as the focal point of the Nearby Nature study, is now using the research document as a resource in framing recommendations for future mixed-use downtown redevelopment.

"Communities have a natural tendency to react against the suburban model of development, with its sprawl and concrete paving, by adopting a new urban model that calls for a compact central core with green fringes around the edge," says Wendy Rampson, systems planner for the City of Ann Arbor. "However, residents still want greenery in that compacted area. We need to remember that the urban environment must incorporate nature or it will be as unlivable as the suburbs."

Ann Arbor has maintained its long-standing reputation as the "Tree Town" by setting aside more than 2,000 acres for 140 individual parks. However, intense pressures for new and in-fill development to meet burgeoning growth, combined with a shortage of available vacant land inside the city limits, have put strains on Ann Arbor master planners who must balance community values with the push of development.

Kaplan, De Young and Ivancich insist that achieving that balance is not an either-or proposition, however. "Vibrant, livable urban places can be compact and green," they say. "Density need not preclude open spaces. And nature settings can be located in many spaces that need not compete with development."

Through the use of illustrative photos, many taken in and around Ann Arbor, they outline three principal ways in which communities can incorporate nature into dense urban areas. These include using trees, hedges or gardens at the edge of sidewalks, parking lots and other transitional spaces; as links to nature in courtyards and outdoor seating areas; and in window boxes, roof gardens and other elevated, or even subterranean, spaces.

Naturally, advance planning, adequate funding, strong community commitment and regular maintenance are all required to ensure the success of any green-spaces strategy.

"Our findings make it clear that having nature nearby is far more than an amenity or an attractive quality for those who can afford it," the researchers conclude. "Each of us benefits individually and communally from living in a setting that enhances considerateness and well-being. The contribution of nature to our health demands that we all have frequent and ready access to it."



(Left to right) Examples of urban landscaping in downtown Ann Arbor: Downtown Home & Garden, First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor and the Ann Arbor Public Library.

*By Claudia Capos*

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