

# The Study Fern Workbook: A Practical Guide to Biophilic Design in Theological Libraries

*This tool accompanies the chapter “Stephanie and the Study Fern: Designing Restorative Library Spaces with Biophilia, Attention Restoration Theory, and Stress Reduction Theory” in Theological Library Services, The Theological Librarian’s Handbook, vol. 6.*

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My initial step when I first began exploring biophilic design was simple: I introduced a single potted plant – a maidenhair fern. One afternoon, noticing it wasn’t getting enough light, I reached to move it when a student looked up in alarm:

*“Not Chucky! He’s my study fern!”*

And just like that, the little plant had a name, a role, and a quiet presence in someone’s learning experience. We negotiated a small shift in position – just a little closer to the sun – and then all returned to our work, Chucky included.

Designing with biophilia is not about grand gestures. It’s about noticing what brings comfort, focus, and delight. As theological librarians, we are stewards of more than books—we are stewards of people, of possibility, and of peace. Even a fern can be part of that formation.

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Are you ready to view your library space through new eyes?

This assessment will help you recognize the natural connections that already exist in your library, and imagine small, achievable ways to make it an even more restorative and inspiring place for your patrons and staff.

### **How to Use This Guide:**

1. **Take a Walk:** Grab a pen and take a stroll through your library. Imagine you're a first-time visitor.
2. **Observe & Reflect:** For each pattern, read the description and guiding questions.
3. **Simple Rating:** Give your library a quick score (1-3) for each pattern. This isn't a pass/fail test; it's just a snapshot of your current standing.
  - o **1 - Emerging:** "We're just starting to explore this, or it's not very present."
  - o **2 - Developing:** "We have some elements of this, but there's room to grow."
  - o **3 - Thriving:** "This is a strength in our library!"
4. **Jot Down Notes:** What do you notice? What sparks an idea? Even small observations are valuable.
5. **Dream Big (or Small!):** The "Ideas for Improvement" section is for brainstorming. Don't censor yourself: no idea is too small or too grand at this stage.

Remember, every library, no matter its age or budget, has the potential to become more biophilic. This assessment is your first step on that exciting journey.

### **Part 1: Nature in the Space (Direct Experience of Nature)**

### *1. Visual Connection with Nature*

What it means: Can you see plants, water, or other natural elements from inside the library?

Guiding Questions:

- o Do windows offer views of trees, gardens, or the sky?
- o Are there indoor plants (real or high-quality artificial)?
- o Are there images or artwork featuring natural landscapes?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Main reading room has a nice window view of trees," "Need more plants in the circulation area," "Could add a nature photo above the printer.")

### *2. Non-Visual Connection with Nature*

What it means: Can you hear natural sounds, feel a natural breeze, or smell natural scents?

Guiding Questions:

- o Do you hear sounds of rain, birds, or water (e.g., from an outdoor fountain)?
- o Can you open windows to let in fresh air?
- o Are there natural scents (e.g., from plants, wood furniture) or do you use subtle essential oils (diffusers)?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Library is very quiet, no natural sounds," "Could try a small indoor water feature," "Maybe open windows on lovely days.")

### *3. Non-Rhythmic Sensory Stimuli*

What it means: The subtle, unpredictable movements of nature, like dappled light or rustling leaves.

Guiding Questions:

- o Does sunlight create shifting patterns of light and shadow?
- o Do you have curtains or blinds that allow for soft, changing light?
- o Are there any elements that provide gentle, natural movement (e.g., a mobile, light filtering through leaves)?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "The afternoon sun creates nice shadows on the wall," "Windows are often fully covered," "Could add sheer curtains.")

#### *4. Thermal & Airflow Variability*

What it means: Subtle, natural changes in temperature and air movement.

Guiding Questions:

- o Does your air conditioning system allow for gentle variations, or is it very static?
- o Can patrons feel a subtle natural breeze (e.g., near an open window)?
- o Are there naturally occurring warmer/cooler zones in the library?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "AC is always set to one temp, feels a bit stuffy," "Near the big windows, it's slightly warmer in the sun," "Could use floor fans for gentle air movement in some spots.")

#### *5. Presence of Water*

What it means: Seeing, hearing, or touching water.

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there any water features (fountains, aquariums, water coolers)?
- o Can patrons see rain falling or a nearby body of water?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "No water features at all," "Could consider a small tabletop fountain for the quiet study area," "The coffee machine provides some water sounds!")

### *6. Dynamic & Diffuse Light*

What it means: Light that changes throughout the day, mimicking natural light.

Guiding Questions:

- o Does natural light fill the space and change with the time of day?
- o Are there areas with different light levels – bright, ambient, and softer, more intimate spots?
- o Do artificial lights avoid being harsh or overly uniform?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Fluorescent lights are very flat," "Some areas by windows are lovely and bright," "Could use desk lamps to create softer light in study carrels.")

### *7. Connection with Natural Systems*

What it means: Awareness of natural cycles and processes.

Guiding Questions:

- o Can you observe the changing seasons from inside (e.g., leaves changing, snow falling)?
- o Are there any elements that show the passage of time or natural wear (e.g., visible wood grain aging)?
- o Do you acknowledge natural events (e.g., displaying seasonal plants, a weather station)?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "We have a big clock, but nothing for seasons," "Could put a bird feeder outside a window," "Maybe some seasonal decorations using natural materials.")

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## **Part 2: Natural Analogues (Indirect Experience of Nature)**

### *8. Biomorphic Forms & Patterns*

What it means: Using shapes, patterns, and textures inspired by nature.

Guiding Questions:

- o Does your furniture have curved or organic shapes, rather than just straight lines?
- o Are there patterns in textiles, artwork, or flooring that remind you of nature (e.g., fractals, leaf patterns, waves)?
- o Are there natural textures, such as wood grain or stone?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Lots of rectangular tables," "Our carpet has a subtle wave pattern," "Could add cushions with botanical prints.")

### *9. Material Connection with Nature*

What it means: Using natural materials in their authentic state.

Guiding Questions:

- o Is there visible natural wood, stone, cork, or other natural materials in furniture, flooring, or decor?
- o Are these materials minimally processed, showing their natural beauty?
- o Do materials feel good to touch?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Most furniture is laminate," "We have some nice old wooden chairs," "Could add a wooden tray for books on display.")

### *10. Complexity & Order*

What it means: Rich, detailed sensory information that is organized, like a forest.

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there areas with varied textures and details that invite closer inspection?
- o Does the space feel layered, with different zones and elements?
- o Is there a sense of organized variety rather than visual clutter?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Shelves are very uniform," "The display cases are a bit sparse," "Could create a themed display with varied objects and textures.")

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## **Part 3: Nature of the Space (Experience of Space and Place)**

### *11. Prospect*

What it means: An unimpeded view over a distance, feeling a sense of openness and security.

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there areas where you can see across a large part of the library or out a window?
- o Do any seating areas offer a clear view of an entrance or main activity area?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "The main reading room has a good long view," "Some study carrels feel a bit claustrophobic," "Could clear some clutter from windowsills.")

### *12. Refuge*

What it means: A place for quiet retreat, where you feel protected and enclosed.

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there cozy nooks, alcoves, or study carrels where one can feel sheltered?
- o Are there seating options that offer a sense of privacy or enclosure (e.g., high-backed chairs, booths)?
- o Do these spaces feel safe and inviting for focused work or quiet contemplation?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Our carrels are great for this," "Could add more soft seating in corners," "Maybe some decorative screens to create smaller zones.")

### *13. Mystery*

What it means: The promise of more information, achieved through partially obscured views or winding paths, inviting exploration.

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there paths or views that entice you to explore further into the library?
- o Are there areas that are slightly hidden or revealed gradually?
- o Does the layout encourage gentle movement and discovery?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Library is a bit of a grid, easy to see everything at once," "The children's section is tucked away a bit," "Could use shelving or plants to create a 'path' to a special collection.")

### *14. Risk/Peril*

What it means: A sense of an identifiable threat coupled with a reliable safeguard, creating a feeling of controlled excitement. (This one is often harder to apply in libraries and may not be relevant to all spaces.)

Guiding Questions:

- o Are there elevated areas (such as balconies or mezzanines) with safe railings that offer a sense of height?
- o Are there any elements that create a sense of intrigue or gentle challenge without being unsafe (e.g., a glass floor over a small display)?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Our library is all on one level, no obvious 'peril'," "Maybe a spiral staircase, if we had one," "Could curate a display that evokes a sense of journey or discovery.")

### *15. Awe*

What it means: Stimuli that defy expectations and lead to transformative experiences, often involving vastness, grandeur, or powerful natural elements.

Guiding Questions:

- o Does any part of the library evoke a sense of wonder, vastness, or profound beauty?
- o Are there elements that create a feeling of openness, height, or connection to something larger?
- o Does the architecture or specific features inspire a feeling of spiritual connection or reverence?

Your Rating: 1 | 2 | 3

Observations & Ideas: (e.g., "Our high ceilings are quite impressive," "Could highlight the architecture more with lighting," "Perhaps a rotating display of sacred art or texts that inspire contemplation.")

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### **Reflecting on Your Assessment**

Now that you've walked through your library with biophilic eyes, take a moment to reflect:

Which patterns are already strengths in your library?

Which patterns offer the most exciting opportunities for small, impactful changes?

What is one small idea that you could implement relatively easily this week or month?

What's one bigger, more ambitious idea that you might want to explore in the future?

Remember: you're already doing great work by thinking about the well-being of your patrons.