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In the Region/Long Island; At a Time of Stress, Office Buildings Add Gardens

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OWNERS of corporate office buildings have been adding or modifying gardens at their properties in recent months, responding, they say, to the growing number of employees who feel the need for a place for quiet reflection, especially since the events of Sept. 11.

These specially designed gardens, the owners say, are in areas that would typically be used for profitable business space or inexpensively landscaped for some functional use.

"We were upgrading the security system at our newest building and more people were speaking about what had transpired," said Ted Weiss, a principal at the T. Weiss Realty Corporation of Melville, which is building a 4,000-square-foot "meditation garden" at its newly renovated office building in Melville.

"People were uptight."

"We had to decide if we wanted to capture the space for the interior, where it would have been more profitable, but we decided to take a holistic approach to allow our employees to have the ability to mellow out," he said.

Since the Sept. 11 attack, "there has been a definite call for these types of gardens," said the landscape architect Jack Carman, owner of Design For Generations in Medford, N.J., which specializes in therapeutic, or meditative, gardens.

Proof that gardens are therapeutic was seen when on Sept. 12, 2001, "people lined up at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens," Mr. Carman said. "There is something reliable in nature. It is considered a positive distraction. It doesn't ask you any questions, and you can lose where you are."

The design elements for a meditation garden, he said, include quiet areas; plants that attract birds and butterflies; wind chimes; comfortable seating, "preferably wood, which is warm"; and a walking path.

"The No. 1 element is water," Mr. Carman said. "It is really the sound that is important, and I suppose that is attributed to being in the womb."

Plants that are sensory -- like lamb's ear, which is soft, or lavender, whose fragrance has a calming effect -- are also used, he said. Spices, too. Plants like basil and thyme "create the smells of a pleasant meal at home." The paths should be winding, not straight, to encourage wandering, he said.

"These gardens are a wonderful opportunity for people who are having a bad day," he said. "More schools, senior residences and health-care facilities are creating them. It would be wonderful if more of the corporate world comes around to it."

The decision to create a meditation garden at Melville Corporate Center Two, a newly renovated Class A office building just off the Long Island Expressway, was made after the World Trade Center attacks, Mr. Weiss said. The 85,000-square-foot building, which is 30 percent leased, is expected to open next month. Rents will be \$26 a square foot. The interior space cost \$20 a square foot to finish, and the meditation garden cost \$240,000, Mr. Weiss said.

The garden will have glass walls on three sides. The western wall will be connected by a doorway to the building's 4,000-square-foot atrium, which serves as a main entrance to the building and has waterfalls and 12 skylights. Throughout the garden will be walkways surrounded by native Long Island grasses and shrubs.

Off the main path will be six eight-by-six-foot recessed areas, each with a bench partly surrounded by shrubs for privacy. Four carp pools will be interspersed among these nooks.

A common area in the center of the garden will have five benches set in a circle and backed by specimen trees. A waterfall will tumble from seven-foot stones in the center of the circle and the water will be piped beneath the ground to the carp ponds.

A 16-foot trellised ceiling will create a sense of security, Mr. Weiss said.

"There is the concept of feng shui there to create a peaceful garden," he said, referring to the ancient Oriental art of achieving harmony through the careful placement of objects.

On Sept. 11 this year, Roger Tilles, a principal with his brother, Peter, in the Tilles Company, planted a ginkgo tree in a \$25,000 memorial garden that was created in August at their 25-building office park called Nassau Crossway International Plaza, on Jericho Turnpike in Woodbury.

"People wanted some place to think about what had happened and how to go on with things," Roger Tilles said. The familiar plants, like hydrangea and hosta, in the 1,000-foot garden were chosen by Peter Tilles, president of the Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay.

ABOUT 15 miles west, in Garden City, the TreeLine Companies is creating an exterior 20-by-30-foot courtyard with landscaping and benches between two of its newly renovated 100,000-square-foot, five-story office buildings at Garden City Plaza.

In redoing the exterior, TreeLine chose to "go with a more gentle format, rather than the typical formal landscaping," said Frances Schor, a principal.

This meant planting flower beds in front of bushes for the softness of color, adding wooden benches and placing low reflective lighting within the landscaping rather than using lampposts.

The need for employees to congregate became more evident in the past year, she said. "The area had not been designed for that use -- it was simply a walk-through," Ms. Schor said. "But we have noticed that at any given time between noon and 6:30 there are 25 to 50 people out there."

The decision to create the gardenlike courtyard came after the success of a similar one created for two 100,000-square-foot TreeLine office buildings in a Westchester County office park in Harrison, Ms. Schor said. "We found it was being used constantly," she added.

"A lot of it has to do with interacting," she said. "People have a greater need to interact with their colleagues now than ever before. The events of last year have made people want to know their neighbors and co-workers. It makes them comfortable."

IN comparison, a few years ago TreeLine created a 30-square-foot outdoor area of plantings and benches for its employees at its Huntington office building, but it was rarely used, Ms. Schor said.

"Now things are totally different," she said. "People are very anxious and need a place to sit down and relax. It is very important that it be contiguous to the building and part of the organizational sense of the building. They like to know they are within the security parameters of the company's campus."

In Lake Success, the Jericho-based We're Group is putting atriums in the center of three of its medical office buildings "for sunlight and a soothing atmosphere" for patients, said Andrew D. Newman, a principal. Two of the buildings are 60,000 square feet, and one is 115,000 square feet.

Most of the company's buildings, including two 360,000-square-foot office buildings at the Huntington Quadrangle in Melville, have landscaping and benches around the perimeters, away from traffic "for quiet spaces," he said.

In Suffolk, officials of Islandia-based Computer Associates say they felt a need for serene areas for their employees even before Sept. 11.

When the company's 775,000-square-foot building was planned in the early 1990's, "we wanted areas that would relieve the stress of our employees because they worked hard and for long hours," said Lisa Mars, a senior vice president.

There are two flower gardens, totaling 13,000 square feet, at the north and south sides of the building, which include paths and benches for the 2,500 employees. The 2,100-square-foot central outdoor courtyard has seats and a fish pond and can be seen from indoors, Ms. Mars said.

A 13,000-square-foot outdoor bamboo garden with tables and a water fountain adjoins the building's cafeteria.

"It is somewhat costly to put in these gardens," Ms. Mars said. "But in the scope of things it is worth the tradeoff."

Photos: A 4,000-square-foot meditation garden is planned at the newly renovated Melville Corporate Center Two. (T. Weiss Realty); (Maxine Hicks for The New York Times)