Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19081051

Opinion Piece

Invisible Threads: When the View Looks Back

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Abstract: Urban design affects mental health by shaping everyday settings for attention, stress regulation, safety and meaning. This paper makes the case that the "invisible threads" of borrowed landscape can be designed into placemaking as a practical support for mental wellbeing. Here, borrowed landscape is understood not only as scenery beyond the site boundary, but as borrowed time, story and emotional memory carried through horizon lines, weather, sound, ecology and cultural cues.

The paper responds to the uncertainties explored in this volume, particularly the relationship between evidence and implementation. It values empirical research while recognising that many design decisions are taken with incomplete data, shifting contexts and forms of experience that resist simple measurement. Using *shakkei* as a framing concept and drawing on urban design traditions of legibility and sequence, the paper concludes with a set of practitioner rules for framing and layering borrowed landscape cues in everyday places.

Implications: The paper offers eight practical rules for urban designers and place makers to combine evidence, felt experience, memory, soundscape and long-term stewardship. It provides a language for designing places that are not only legible and restorative in the present, but also durable enough to gather attachment, ritual and meaning over time.

Keywords: borrowed landscape; shakkei; urban design; mental health; memorability; soundscape; place attachment; stewardship

1. Introduction

"To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance..."
(Ingold, 1993, p. 153) [1].

Starting from Ingold's reminder that perceiving landscape is an act of remembrance, this paper considers borrowed landscape as a practical resource for urban design that supports mental wellbeing. It treats uncertainty as part of practice, and closes with eight rules that help designers use borrowed landscape with care, and with clarity about what is known, what is assumed, and what requires further validation.

Figure 1. Shoreline at the south end of Loch Ness, near Fort Augustus, Highland, Scotland. Photograph: Andrew Tryon (Geograph Britain and Ireland, photo 5961492), CC BY-SA 2.0.

I start with a moment from my own life, because it shows how a place can steady or unsettle the mind before we can properly explain why. Those shifts in attention, mood and meaning are the same ones urban design can amplify or soften at scale.

On our honeymoon in 2017, my wife, Susie, our one-year-old daughter and I stayed in a cottage above Loch Ness, looking down over Urquhart Castle. It was a calm, unhurried week, held by the landscape and its wildlife. Yet on several evenings, each of us, separately, heard a low murmur of voices in the garden, as if a conversation were unfolding just beyond the window. No one was there.

At the time, we kept those unexplained experiences to ourselves. It was only on the drive home that we spoke about it. The relief of saying it aloud came with a deeper jolt: we had both been hearing the same thing, night after night.

Later I learned more about the location itself. The cottage had formed part of the Seafield (Mackenzie) estate and, after the war, passed to tenants; local memory recalls a lone crofter, Jessie Mackintosh - Jessie na Cnoc ("Jessie of the hillock") - who ran the holding herself [2]. During a three-year restoration in 2016-17 the house was taken back to stone, dormers opened the view, and small traces of earlier lives emerged - a card photograph of a young former owner and a Gaelic book - the sort of finds that lend the place a sense of history [3]. Cutting the lower steps exposed what looked like an old cart track towards the castle, and among the rubble lay well-dressed stones with fixing holes, suggestive of reused defensive fabric [2]. Farther down the slope sits an overgrown masonry feature; at the time, Historic Scotland (now Historic Environment Scotland) indicated they would carry out a formal assessment, "possibly a small guard post," as the owner put it [2].

Figure 2. Urquhart Castle, view south-southwestwards over Loch Ness, Highland, Scotland. Photograph: Rob Farrow (Geograph Britain and Ireland, image 6078830), CC BY-SA 2.0.

What matters here is not whether the voices can be verified. It is that the experience had an effect: it changed how we attended to the place, and how the place attended back. In the context of designing for mental well-being, some landscape qualities can be measured and compared; others arrive as lived residues - the way a setting guides attention and feeling, how sound, view, and history shift the body before the mind has language for it.

This essay treats such uncertainty as a prompt for careful observation and triangulation: pairing what can be assessed with what can be felt, without collapsing one into the other.

Upon learning this, my imagination leapt: perhaps the muffled voices were echoes - two guards on a night watch, moonlight glistening on Loch Ness, Urquhart Castle faint against the dark - speaking in hushed tones as they kept vigil - invisible threads of time, an echo of a long-lost moment. To this day, we are not quite sure what it was.

So, the identification stays unconfirmed, yet something clearer remains: landscapes hold layers of attention, and that memory can be felt before it is named.

That is where this essay begins: with the sense that landscapes are not just seen - they can feel as if they remember us. In Japanese shakkei (借景, "borrowed scenery"), a view beyond the wall becomes part of the composition [4-5]. I want to stretch that idea: borrowed landscape is not only the view we frame, but the meanings we inherit and the emotions we re-awaken. Sometimes two places - one past, one present - feel lightly entangled; touch one, and the other stirs. When the work is good, the view looks back.

This thought piece does not try to banish uncertainty; it treats it as a form of evidence. Some signals can be measured (heart-rate recovery, imageability scores, CLM ratings). Others arrive as felt residues, what Nairn called memorability, what I have called the view looking back. Nairn's memorability names the way urban character and distinctiveness lodge in the mind; the view looking back extends this toward a felt reciprocity, where environmental cues, personal history, and bodily state combine to make a place seem actively present to us.

The question is not whether we should design with both measurable indicators and lived, uncertain signals, but how to use them together to identify, test and amplify the landscape qualities that most restore attention and emotional balance, for the people who use the place in everyday life and in moments of heightened meaning such as grief, transition, or return.

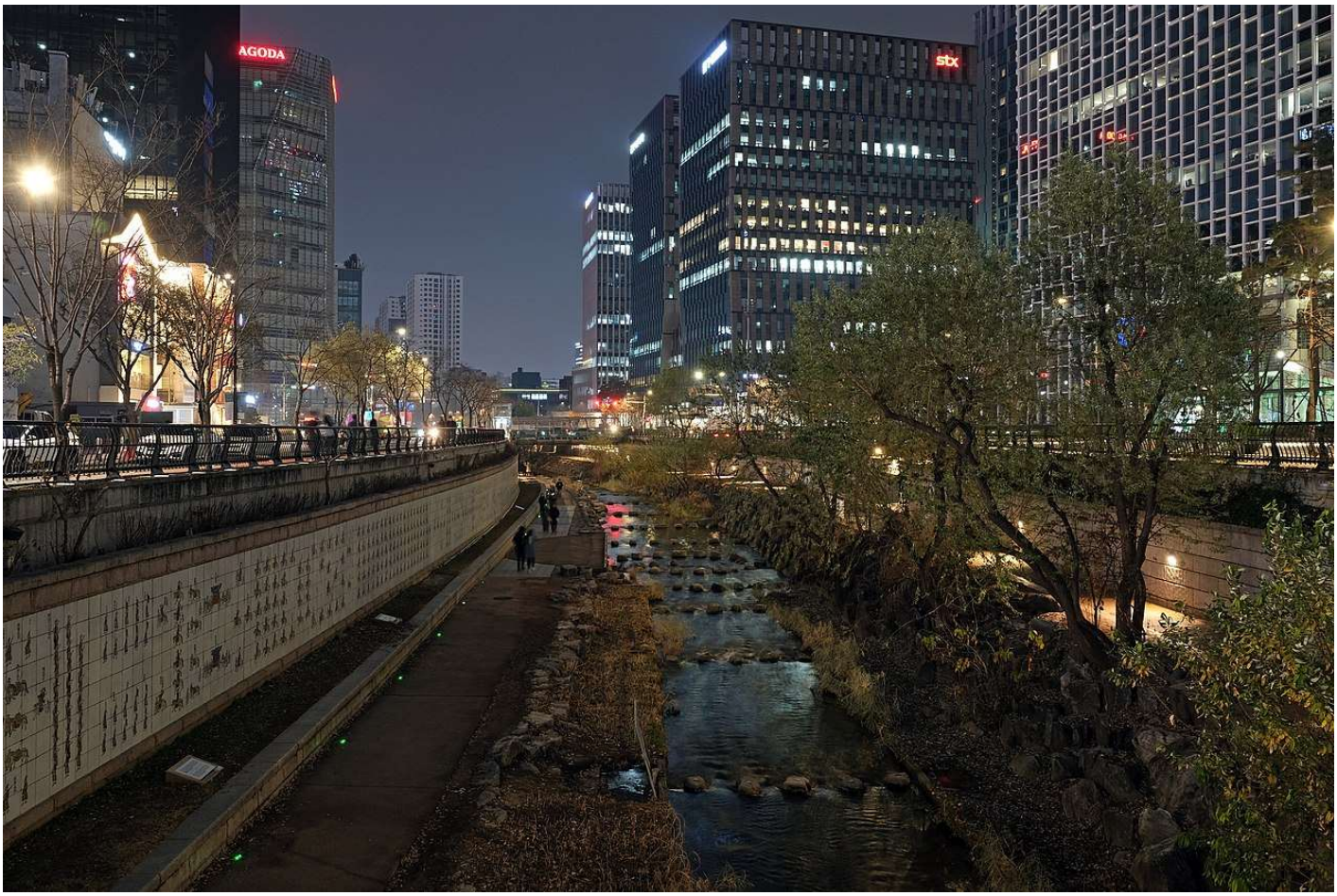

Figure 3. Cheonggyecheon stream corridor, Seoul, South Korea (3 December 2022). A layered urban landscape of water, promenade, tree canopy and surrounding city fabric, illustrating how restorative foreground cues can be framed against the broader urban backdrop. Photograph: kallerna (Wikimedia Commons, Cheonggyecheon Seoul 5.jpg), CC BY-SA 4.0.

2. Beyond the wall: a working definition

Traditionally, shakkei is visual: treetops over the fence, a hill held at distance [4-5]. Yet even in its origins it implies inclusion and invitation. In practice, we borrow more than sightlines - we borrow time, story, feeling. A street corner can carry a farewell; a field can hold the energy of a childhood sports day. Return, and it is not only nostalgia that meets you; it is the landscape remembering you back.

Here remembering is a metaphor for how place-cues (views, sounds, textures, routes) reactivate embodied memory and emotion. It is also material and social: traces of earlier lives, repeated ritual, and shared stories accumulate and shape how a place is perceived over time.

3. What the brain knows (often before we do)

Agnieszka Olszewska-Guizzo's Revised Contemplative Landscape Model shows how coherence, legibility and symbolism can be scored and linked to mental-health outcomes [6].

Environmental psychology points the same way: Attention Restoration Theory (ART: restorative settings replenish depleted directed attention through soft fascination) and Stress Recovery Theory (SRT: natural scenes can reduce physiological arousal and support recovery from stress) show that nature down-shifts physiological arousal [7-8]. Add prospect-refuge (a preference for settings that combine shelter with outlook) and you have a practical brief for calm without monotony [9].

Numerous studies also associate access to blue and green spaces with improved mental health and restorative behaviours [10-13].

So, if restoration flows from coherence + shelter + prospect, design can borrow those conditions across settings - street, shoreline, memorial - without imitation.

4. Memorability in the city: a practical lens (Nairn-Lynch-Cullen)

Ian Nairn (1930-1983) wrote as if streets could bruise or lift the heart. His critique of Subtopia (the spread of placeless, standardised development that erodes local distinctiveness) was, at heart, about feeling and memory: sameness erodes distinctiveness - and with it, attachment [14-15].

What Nairn offered was more than a planning critique; it was a method: pay attention to what a place does to you, and fight anything that flattens that response. His later Nairn's London is essentially a map of felt intensities - a guidebook only in the sense that it lists what moved him and where [16].

Figure 4. Bull Ring Shopping Centre and a market area under the ring road, Birmingham, UK (1964). Photograph: John Ball (Wikimedia Commons, John Ball - Bull Ring, Birmingham - 1960s - 12), CC BY-SA 4.0.

Kevin Lynch's imageability (the ease with which a place forms a vivid, organised mental image) gives Nairn's method of felt intensities structure: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks [17].

Gordon Cullen's serial vision (how movement reveals a place in sequences of views) adds choreography [18], and Norberg-Schulz reminds us that material, form and setting must fit the genius loci (the distinctive character that emerges from setting, material, form and lived use) [19]. If soundscape is treated as part of place quality rather than a by-product, memorability becomes multi-sensory [21-22]. Real-time studies suggest that brief urban nature contact (trees, birdsong) can lift mood for a period afterwards [23].

So, to borrow well in the city is to compose for memory: shape routes that read at a glance (Lynch), stage sequences that breathe (Cullen), protect the local character - visual and auditory - and keep enough interest that people can attach to something real (Scannell & Gifford). Nairn's standard still works: does this place move you - and will it be remembered? When it does, the view looks back.

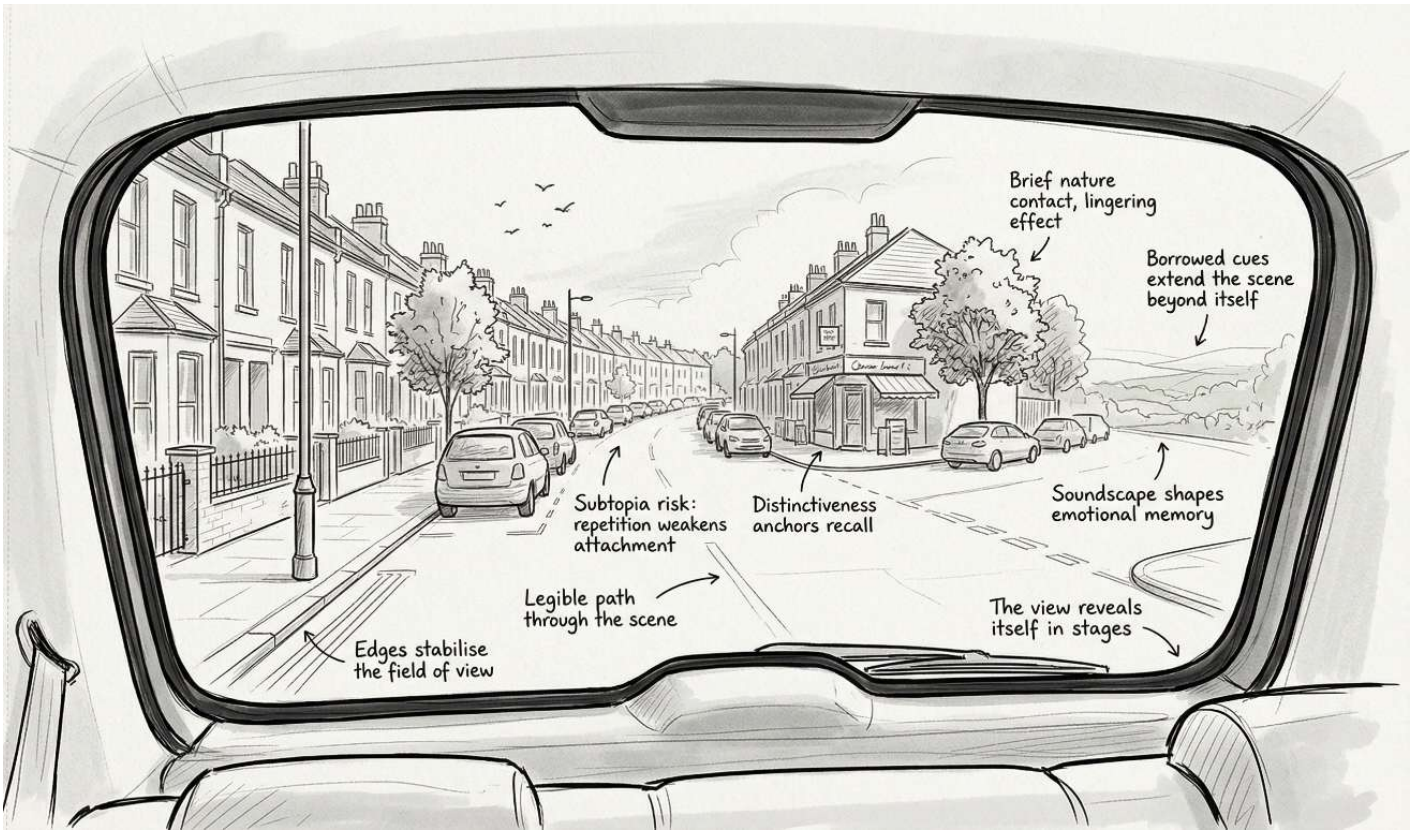

Figure 5. The view looks back. Conceptual rear-window illustration exploring memorability, movement, soundscape and borrowed cues in an ordinary urban street. Generated using Google Gemini Flow 2 from an author-written prompt and curated by the author.

Two UK examples show how this lens works at different scales.

5. Borrowing well: design as emotional cartography

If places hold memory, designers shape legibility, sequence and landscape character so people can understand a place and respond to it emotionally. These attributes act as memory scaffolds: they organise perception, make meaning retrievable, and give the body reliable cues for settling and orienting [21].

Figure 6. National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire - aerial view. The site reads as an organised landscape of routes, groves and thresholds (high legibility), supporting movement and sequence across memorials. Photo: West Midlands Police (Flickr), CC BY-SA 2.0.

National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire. A living atlas of remembrance - 25,000+ trees and 400+ memorials - arranged as routes, groves and thresholds. It reads clearly (imageability), unfolds well in movement (serial vision). It also anchors meaning through the Revised Contemplative Landscape Model lens of coherence, legibility and symbolism [24, 17-19, 6]. Enclosure and views vary along processional paths; cues for pause and outlook support attention restoration and stress recovery [7-9].

Figure 7. Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Dumfries and Galloway - landform and water as narrative sequence. The garden uses sculpted topography and framed reveals to translate abstract ideas of time and scale into legible experience. Photo: Caroline Legg (Flickr), CC BY 2.0.

Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Dumfries. Designed by Charles Jencks with Maggie Keswick, the garden uses landform, water and metaphor to stage a walk about time and scale. Spirals, waves and fractal ridges reference cosmology, physics and biology - black holes, quarks and DNA are translated into graspable forms and terraces [25-26]. Strong landmarks and paced reveals create memorable sequences (Lynch/Cullen), turning abstract ideas into legible form [17-18]. Alternating compression and release provide clear frames of focus, supporting calm attention [6-9].

In practice, borrowing well means staging coherence, shelter/outlook and a local character - visually and sonically - so memory has something to attach to: a legible route, a repeated threshold, a stable cue [17-19, 21]. The same logic holds at a cemetery scale; the next section turns to time and future memory.

6. A future memory, made on purpose

Early in my career - one of my first site roles - I served as Landscape Clerk of Works for a new hillside cemetery near Callander in Scotland. It demanded a different design timescale: gradients and water, winter light and quiet access, the kind of care that thinks in decades. It is rare to work on a landscape I can say, with some confidence, will outlive me - a place not fated to be turned over for flats, but kept for ritual, remembrance and return.

We were not merely building a place; we were designing a future memory.

Designing such ground is an act of thinking ahead: standing in a bare, newly planted place and imagining how it will mature - trees thickening, paths settling, stone taking on lichen and loss. The same cognitive machinery that recalls the past also constructs scenes of the future, recombining fragments to simulate what might be [27-29].

I remember, early on, standing at the road entrance, where a 20-30-year-old oak was marked for removal because it fell within the visibility splay. I argued its case - speaking with the road engineer and contractor - so it stayed. I could see it hundreds of years from now, a broad crown set against the cemetery boundary wall, a quiet asset for people not yet born.

Figure 8. Early works at the new Balvalachlan cemetery near Callander, Scotland. The young oak near the centre of the image was initially marked for removal but retained during construction, becoming part of the site's future memory and long-term character. Photograph by the author, 31 July 2018.

Time is part of the brief. As Lynch urged, treat time as a dimension of form - how places age, accrete, remember [30]. The yew (Taxus baccata), commonly found in graveyards, makes that horizon tangible: an evergreen with lifespans in centuries, sometimes millennia. The Fortingall Yew, often estimated at 2,000-5,000 years old, is our measure for that possibility [31-32]. Stone does its own work: inscriptions soften, edges chamfer, and lichens pace the years [33].

These are not only metaphors. Churchyards and cemeteries function as biodiversity refuges, their continuity of care harbouring thousands of recorded species, many on Red Lists (lists that classify UK species at risk of decline or extinction) [34-35]. They also hold a social compact about how the living meet the dead - form, policy and custom shaping attachment and conduct over time [36].

Design advice: plant with a yew horizon mindset; choose stone that weathers legibly; keep edges for slow species; cut paths that read now and when the canopy closes.

Looking ahead is not prophecy; it is disciplined imagination guided by evidence - how minds build futures [27-29], how trees and stones age [30-33], and how burial grounds harbour life [34-35]. If we do it well, someone will stand here in a hundred years and feel what we intended: a place that remembers through ritual, return and material change.

That early lesson reframed scale and time for me. Wes Jackson, founder of The Land Institute, puts it bluntly:

"If your life's work can be accomplished in your lifetime, you're not thinking big enough." - Wes Jackson [37]

His provocation is a useful test in landscape practice. Much of what matters - rewilding, ecological restoration, neuro-landscapes (places designed for cognitive restoration) and mentoring the next generation - will mature beyond our own careers.

That is not a failure of delivery; it is the brief. The work is to begin well, to plant both literal and metaphorical oaks in whose shade we may never sit.

7. Borrowing well: eight design rules (for practitioners)

7.1. At a glance

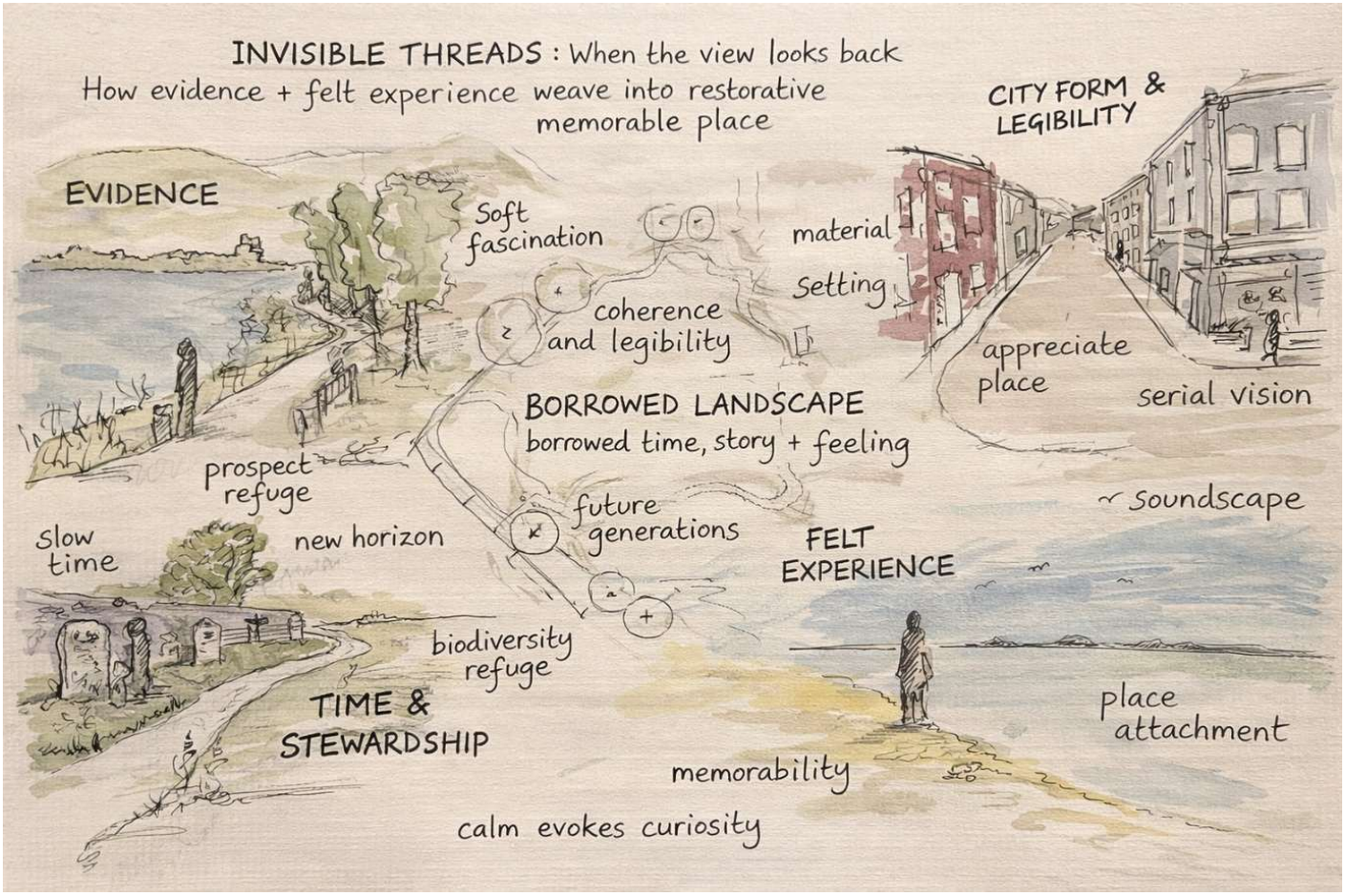

Figure 9. Invisible Threads: When the view looks back - framework diagram. The four linking themes connect evidence, city form and legibility, felt experience, and time and stewardship to borrowed landscape and the eight practitioner rules. Image: Author (2026).

These rules are not a style; they are a set of practical checks for designing places that can hold meaning over time. They translate the essay's core claim - that restorative experience is partly measurable and partly lived - into decisions about legibility, sequence, sensory cues, continuity and long-term care.

Used together, they help designers borrow well without imitation: composing coherent settings that people can understand, feel and return to.

7.2. In practice

Rule 1: **Stage refuge and look ahead** (shelter with outlook)

Figure 10. Refuge and prospect. Author sketch illustrating a sheltered place that still offers outlook and prospect.

What it means: Create moments of enclosure that still offer prospect; this supports safety without confinement.

Example: A sheltered bench backed by planting or a wall with a long view over water or meadow; a path that briefly narrows before opening to a vista.

Rule 2: **Tune complexity to calm** (richness within coherence)

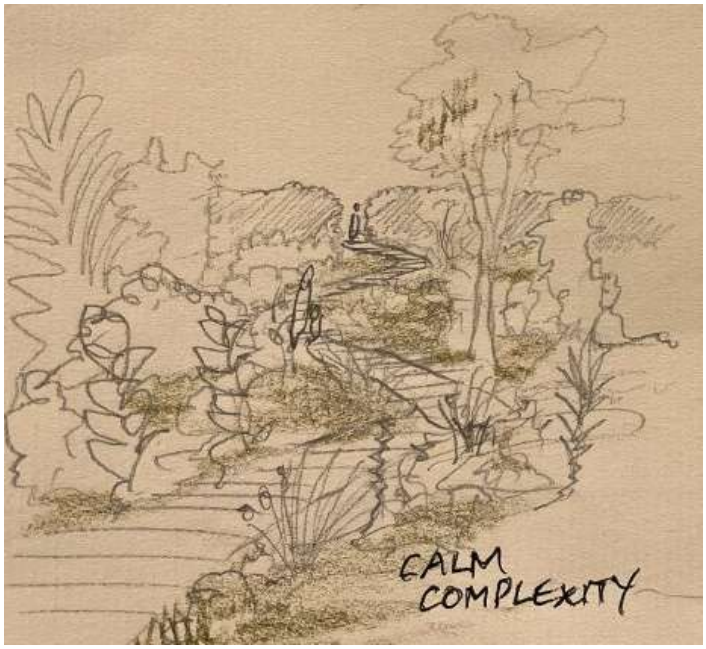

Figure 11. Calm complexity. Author sketch illustrating layered richness held within a coherent spatial structure.

What it means: Offer variety, but within a legible structure so the mind can rest.

Example: A simple primary route with layered planting rooms; one dominant landform gesture with finer textures at the edges.

Rule 3: **Keep an honest trace**

Figure 12. Keep a trace. Author sketch illustrating retained remnants as narrative anchors in the landscape.

What it means: Retain a truthful remnant of what stood before to anchor continuity.

Example: Reuse a boundary stone, a felled tree, or a short retained wall as a narrative hinge rather than erasing history.

Rule 4: Invite the senses (including sound)

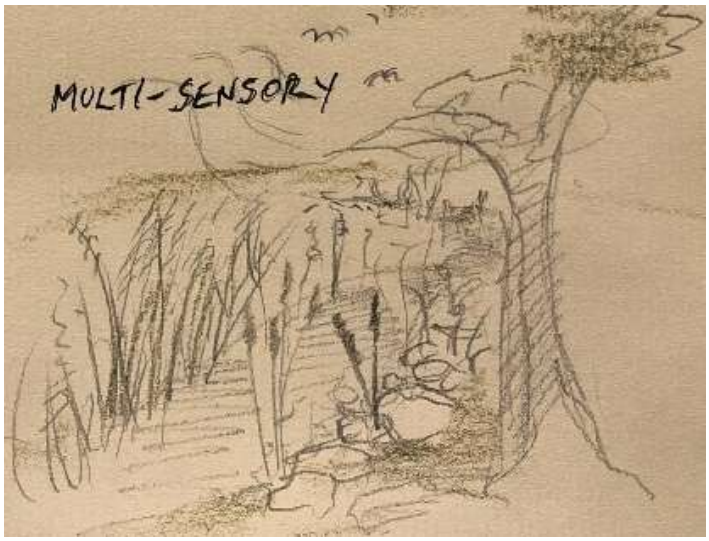

Figure 13. Multi-sensory. Author sketch illustrating sound, movement, texture and planted atmosphere beyond sight alone.

What it means: Design with sound, scent, shade, texture and microclimate.

Example: Planting that creates seasonal scent cues; surfaces that slow walking; water or wind-play in grasses to shape soundscape.

Rule 5: Let paths tell time

Figure 14. Paths and time. Author sketch illustrating route choreography, pause and gradual reveal.

What it means: Use alignment, curvature, thresholds and pauses to choreograph experience.

Example: A curve that slows approach to a memorial; a straight that resolves at a landmark; a sequence of smaller chapters rather than one long corridor.

Rule 6: Plant for memory and succession

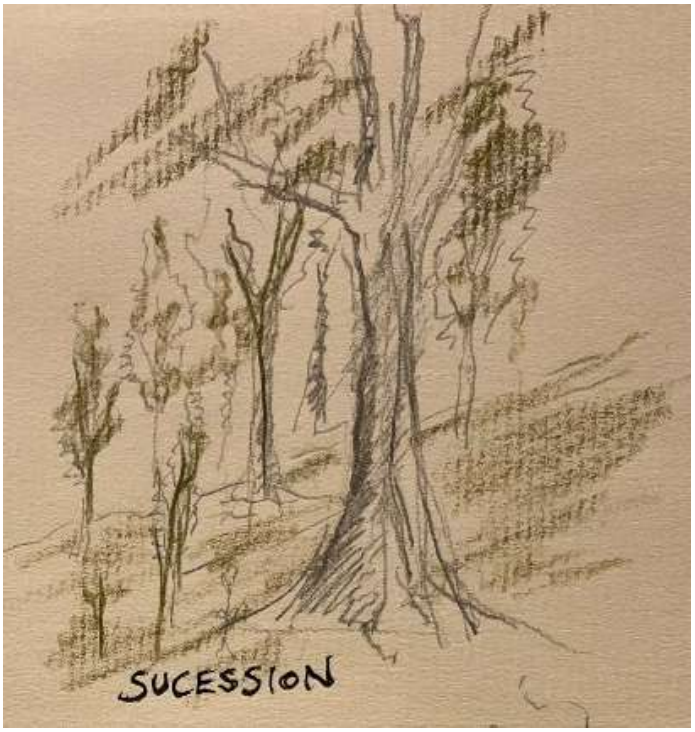

Figure 15. Succession. Author sketch illustrating growth, replacement and changing landscape structure through time.

What it means: Use species and management plans that anticipate ageing, loss and replacement.

Example: A succession plan for key trees; seasonal punctuation (spring blossom, autumn colour) that becomes a personal calendar.

Rule 7: Invite a future ritual - and name the intended feeling

Figure 16. Future ritual. Author sketch illustrating repeated use, gathering and return.

What it means: Create conditions for repeated, adaptive use rather than prescribing behaviour.

Example: A threshold stone, a shared table, or a quiet overlooking step that people can use in their own ways; a short inscription describing the intended feeling (calm, gratitude, continuity).

Rule 8: Think beyond your lifetime

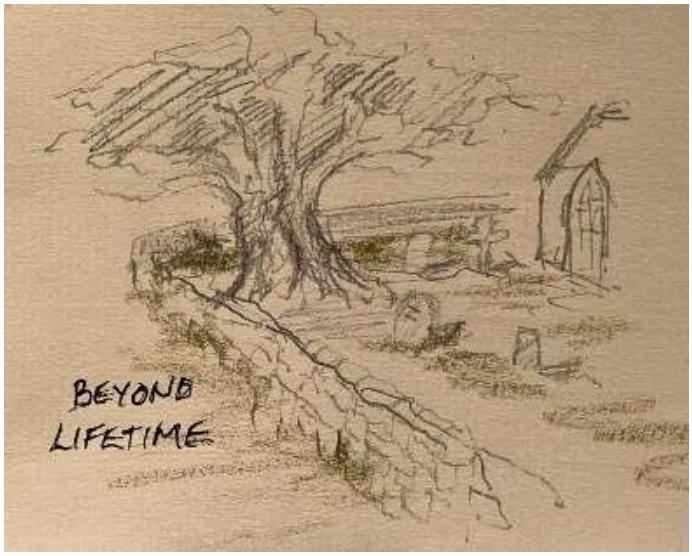

Figure 17. Beyond lifetime. Author sketch illustrating long-term endurance and stewardship beyond a single career or generation.

What it means: Set 50-100-year intent with stewardship, monitoring and governance so the work can mature.

Example: A maintenance covenant, adaptive management triggers, and a simple long-term narrative that survives staff turnover.

8. Final thought: when the view looks back

Some threads are visual. Some are auditory. Some are in muscle and breath.

The strongest landscapes weave them into something durable: a place that steadies you in the moment and stores a little of you for later. If shakkei once taught us to frame a view, perhaps the task now is gentler and deeper: to frame a relationship. Not simply a landscape we borrow, but one that, in time, borrows us.

"We do not remember days, we remember moments." - Cesare Pavese [38]

And the best places, quietly, remember us - through the ways we return, notice and add our own layers of meaning.

Figure 18. When the view looks back. Author closing sketch exploring threshold, return and borrowed landscape as a final poetic image for the essay.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks the journal reviewers for their constructive comments, which helped sharpen the article's urban design and mental health framing, improve the visual material, and align the manuscript with the journal template.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new datasets were generated or analysed for this article. Publicly available sources are cited in the reference list. Author-held site notes cited as personal communication are not publicly available.

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Appendix A. Strone Castle Cottage (site notes)

Estate and tenancy context: Formerly part of the Seafield (Mackenzie) estate; later tenanted. Local memory of a lone crofter, Jessie Mackintosh (Jessie na Cnoc). Source: owner's recollections (personal communication, [2]).

Restoration (2016-2017): House taken back to stone; dormers introduced; finds included a card photograph (young former owner) and a Gaelic book. Source: Hunter (2017) [3]; owner's notes [2].

Ground works evidence: Lower steps exposed a possible old cart track running towards Urquhart Castle; well-dressed stones with fixing holes - suggestive of re-used defensive fabric. Source: [2].

Overgrown masonry feature: Located farther downslope; Historic Scotland (now Historic Environment Scotland) indicated intent to assess; owner's working hypothesis "a small guard post." Source: [2].