



## Meaning and design of nature for the urban built environment

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### **The role of nature in the built environment**

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Over the last decade there was an immense increase in research interest in the ecology of urban areas, mainly due to an increase in population and spatial prominence of these areas. Ecologists need to inform decision makers on issues such as regional planning, conservation and management. It is a general belief that good quality urban open spaces, which are well managed will enhance the amenity of the city and also the quality of life for urban residents. It is against this background that New Zealand is celebrating 2005 as the Year of the Built Environment (YBE2005). One of the aims of YBE2005, namely to improve the understanding of the relationship between the built and natural environment can also be regarded as a major objective of this conference. In this paper I would like to set the scene for a variety of papers that will each address more specific roles of nature from different perspectives. Before this can be done I would like to address the confusion and cross-purpose talking about the terms built environment and urban nature, as well as other related terms. There are so many different views that also differ between natural and social scientists, that I will only touch upon a few approaches where terms such as “urban countryside” or “city green space” are used to describe nature in the built environment. Without entering the complex field of economics of urban trees, parks and open spaces I will emphasize some of the social, economic and environmental benefits of nature in the built environment, against the backdrop of an ecosystem approach. Examples presented of the role of nature will be mainly from South Africa where the focus in the built environment are on sustainable development following the guidelines of Local Agenda 21 which is a global action plan for achieving environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development endorsed by the United Nations.