

## Article

# Designing Healing Destinations: A Practical Guide for Eco-Conscious Tourism Development

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**Abstract:** The design and sustainable development of tourist destinations in sensitive environments must follow an environmentally conscious approach that meets the resource and service needs of present and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them. The aim of this paper is to develop an eco-conscious design framework for tourist destinations in sensitive natural areas, as these are becoming increasingly attractive and popular in the tourism sector. This paper gives an overview of relevant fields of impact at the destination, which are drawn from holistic and nature-based approaches. The outcome is a three-dimensional design guidance, which creates a unique destination that focuses on creating a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature in which health is achievable for both. The approach was exemplified in a “Yoga house on a Cliff” architectural competition that took place in Serra da Estrela Natural Park in Portugal. The landscape was analysed with the Strolling method and the 3-dimensional design framework was used to design an authentic place in the protected mountain. Permaculture and nature-based solutions were used to structure the design and its elements with a focus on environmental sustainability and the improvement of human health. This study provides evidence that an eco-conscious design has the potential to overcome incompatibilities and provide health-driven ecotourism in protected areas.

**Keywords:** built environment; regenerative design; biophilic design; permaculture design methods; ecotourism



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## 1. Introduction

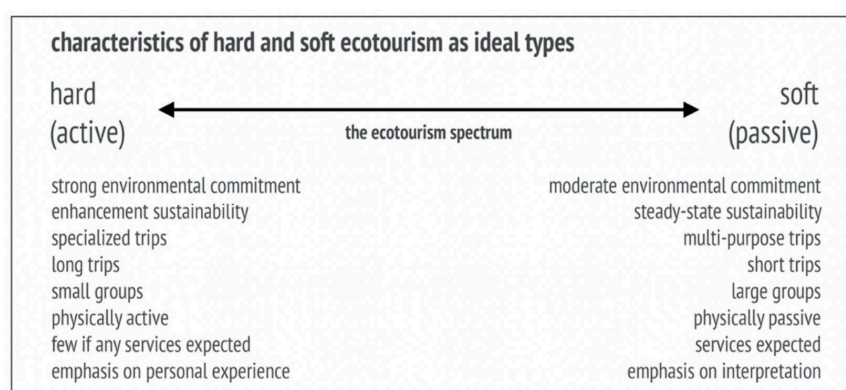
The health of the earth and humanity enter into a symbiosis in which the latter is highly dependent on the former. Consequently, sustainable conservation and restoration of nature are essential and indispensable to improving human health. Health-driven tourism in natural environments has become a way of healing the body and mind, which demonstrates a profound relationship between place and health [1]. This relation refers to one’s integration into a specific social, natural, and physical environment [2].

Such integration works best in authentic, qualitative environments, which transmit the sense or spirit of place (Latin: *genius loci*) [2]. Besides the authenticity of the design [2], several studies [3,4] refer to the effects of biophilic design, which may lead to reduced stress perception, enhanced cognitive function, greater creativity and clarity of thought, improved well-being, and thus, accelerated healing [5]. Interventions that mirror patterns of nature are of importance since feelings of isolation, depression, and stress increase are exacerbated by continuing urbanization [6]. According to the World Health Organization, over 300 million people suffer from depression and anxiety, equivalent to 4.4% of the world’s population [7]. It has been found that the risk of developing mental disorders is 20% higher in urban dwellers than in those who live outside the city [8], due to various socio-economic and environmental factors; there is a correlation of mental health concerns and the increasing disconnection from nature in cities [5]. As a result of increasing mental disorders, activities

that enhance human well-being as a means of healing the body and mind are gaining in popularity [9]. Among others, many use travel as a way to reconcile body and mind [9]. In search of healing, tourists have started exploring remote and sensitive environments. Acting as therapeutic landscapes, some of these sensitive areas are also environmentally at risk, as they constitute the last habitat for endangered species [9].

While tourism has positive effects on human mental health [10], and represents a considerable stimulus to the economy, it also has a lasting impact on the local environment [11].

In theory, ecotourism aims to represent a direct link between conservation and economic development [12]. However, inherent to ecotourism is the paradox of resorting to unspoiled environments, causing the inevitable loss of their most important characteristic: their pristine purity [9]. Weaver argues that instead of being the opposite of mass tourism, ecotourism can rather be conceived as a form of it due to current trends in the tourism sector [13]. The distinction between hard and soft ecotourism explains the large discrepancies reported regarding the size of the ecotourism sector (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Characteristics of hard and soft ecotourism as ideal types (Source: compiled by the author based on [13]).

Even though empirical evidence states the binary opposition between touristic development and nature protection [14–16], studies [17,18] have shown that ecotourism has the potential to overcome discrepancies and provide health-driven tourism in sensitive environments. Gaps in the literature and practice refer to the lack of guidance in landscape design solutions between development and conservation [15]. This study aims to overcome this conflict and offer eco-conscious design guidance for healing destinations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” [19]. According to the UNWTO, health-driven tourism has, at its primary motivation, the contribution to physical, mental, and/or spiritual health through medical and wellness-based activities [20].

Studies have found that besides healing activities, place plays an essential role in addressing the issue of health, and the vital links between place and health have been increasingly recognized. Particular attention has been given to describing and theorizing the role of local context in influencing health in terms of contextual and compositional effects. Following this assumption, therapeutic landscape theory [21] and the relevance of authentic places in relation to health are discussed. With a focus on design and planning, Weidinger dimensions [22] are introduced and the role of design principles and methods found in nature are described.

### *Recent Theories and Design Approaches in Health and Place*

The effect of place on healing can be associated with cultural geography, therapeutic landscapes, and a sense of place [23]. Cultural geography emerges from the interaction

between landscape and human cultural and historical development. It serves as a conceptual framework for the correlation between healing and place [24]. As an aspect of cultural geography, so-called therapeutic landscapes are concerned with the relationship between these landscapes and the treatment or cure of disease. The term therapeutic landscapes were first coined by the health geographer Wilbert Gesler to explore why specific environments appear to contribute to a healing sense of place [25]. According to Perriam “therapeutic landscapes of spiritual significance allow for cultural and personal quests for alleviation, connection, and renewal” and, thus, offer a retreat from daily routine [23]. Therapeutic landscape theory forms a systematic analysis framework of the three basic aspects of landscapes, namely, physical, social, and symbolic landscapes [21]. This theory has been used to explain how tourists obtain therapeutic experiences from tourism destinations [26,27]. These three aspects form the foundation for an authentic sense of place that is deeply relevant to the basic need for internal cohesion, mental health, a sense of security and direction, and a feeling of relationship with the world. An authentic sense of place is “a direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places, not mediated and distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions” [28]. Authentic landscapes work as therapeutic environments through the merging together of environmental, and most importantly, interpersonal factors. Many holistic practices contribute to the formation of authentic landscapes. The use of these practices contributes to creating therapeutic landscapes, which benefit the healing process [28]. The relationship between the mind, space, or place and the landscape or environment can be described as human ideas molding the landscape and human intentions creating and sustaining places [29]. The latter part of this relationship, where the experience of space and place molds human ideas, is of particular importance in discussing therapeutic landscapes in the practice of holistic medicine [24]. This is because the landscapes that individuals experience, either physically or mentally, influence their overall health and well-being. The sense of place defines the identity, significance, meaning, intention, and felt value given to places by individuals [30]. According to Gesler, places are meaningful to individuals in various ways, through identity and security, as settings for life, and as places of esthetic experience [25]. As a response to the theory, Weidinger et al. [22] proposed a design framework which allows adaptation of the design to these contexts. Within his theory, the atmosphere—the sense of place forms an essential dimension of successful design. Accordingly, atmospheres represent the patina of modeled spaces, which gain influence on the character of space and shape one’s perception [22]. Like a patina, a thin layer which fosters mutual and characteristic relation perceptions and contents, the atmosphere adheres to spaces. Besides materials, forms and volumes, time periods have to be taken into account when shaping atmospheric qualities and thus, the mood visitors can get into. Arrangement of design components creates openness and closure, perspective and refuge [22].

Related to the sense of place and its opposite, placelessness, is the inauthentic landscape. This typology distinguishes between caring, authentic environments and cold, inauthentic environments. Inauthentic environments result more often in spatial separateness and isolation. A recent study has found three interconnecting generators of designing atmosphere: materials, light, and movement [31].

These parameters also play an essential role in the concept of biophilic design, which aims to counteract the felt isolation from nature. Biophilia, meaning “love of life” [32] refers to the psychological tendency in humans to be attracted to all that is alive and part of nature. Popularized in Wilson’s *Biophilia*, the term’s meaning turns out to be an “innate love for nature” [33], which suggests biophilia is genetically inherited. The art of mimicking patterns, such as materials, light and movement and whole systems found in nature, allows the improvement of human well-being through design. Observing and understanding patterns in nature and their application in designs reduces stress, promotes creativity and clarity of thought, improves well-being, and accelerates healing [5]. This phenomenon

explains why crackling fires and crashing waves are mesmerizing and why a glimpse into the garden inspires creativity [5].

Relationships between nature and design are divided into three broad categories—nature in space, natural analogs, and nature of space. Each of these provides design patterns, which when applied, reduce stress, enhance cognitive reduction, and have positive impacts on emotions and moods. A biophilic design recreates a sensory relationship between nature and humans, in which the latter respects and appreciates the former. One philosophy that aims to design with nature in mind is permaculture. Permaculture refers to the close connection of the healing processes to the healthy balance of the surrounding environment. This balance is achieved through the harmonious interrelationship of humans and the earth. Permaculture ethics are covered by three broad maxims, which are care for the earth (its soils, forests, and water), care for humanity (self-care and care for community), and fair share, which sets limits to consumption and reproduction and redistributes surplus [34,35]. Accordingly, permacultural design follows methods that limit negative impacts and represents a paradigm shift towards zero or even positive impact footprint of the built environment, underlining the importance of sustainable land use, energy, building materials, water and waste generation [36–46].

### 3. Materials and Methods

The science of Strolling was used as a field method to analyse the given environment in its context [47,48]. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, principles and design methods found in nature have been applied to create an authentic healing destination, supporting touristic development and nature protection. The eco-conscious design guide was conceived to be applicable to any location, climate and culture. Chosen according to discrepancies between touristic development and protection of the nature of the place, the architectural competition Yoga House on a Cliff met the requirements to put the eco-conscious concept into practice. The competition of the Yoga Retreat Vale de Moses aimed to gain inspirational design ideas for the new Yoga house (Sanskrit: Yoga Shala) in Oleiros.

#### 3.1. Analysing the Study Area

The science of Strolling primarily aims at a change of perspective and takes its participants on a journey to unknown aspects of landscapes of a rural or urban nature [49]. The method offers itself as an effective method to think out of the box and discover novel ways of solving urban and rural problems. Lucius Burckhardt's interdisciplinary approach to the city and the built environment incorporates social aspects and strives for a holistic view of planning processes [50], aiming to intervene as little as possible. The smallest possible intervention means: not wanting to cure everything with a universal solution, dealing carefully with the everyday experiences of those affected and being wary of one-off, seemingly neat solutions [51].

Within the study, this method has been used to identify conflicts and potentials of the study area from a perspective of design and nature conservation through long and thoughtful observations [52]. These perceptions relate to what was observable in the area under study: the cultural and natural environment (atmosphere), activities that promote health and mental well-being (programme/function) and the built environment (designed space), which are described below (Table 1).

Vale de Moses is located in the Serra da Estrela Natural Park in Central Portugal. Serra da Estrela is part of the Iberian Central Cordillera and is the highest mountain in Portugal [53]. The altitudes vary from around 200 m in the Alva valley to 1993 m at the Alto da Torre. Since 2020, this has been a UNESCO Global Geopark. It has an area of 2216 km<sup>2</sup> distributed among nine municipalities, with about 170,000 inhabitants. The main towns inside the geopark are Guarda, Covilhã and Seia. The position of the geopark is of territorial advantage for tourism, at 44 km from Spain and with excellent connections to large Portuguese cities. The climate is Mediterranean, with dry and warm summers, with annual precipitation over 2500 mm in the higher areas, making the geopark a strategic

source of drinking water for all of Central Portugal. The Geopark is a low-density territory with an aging population, low level of education, and weakening of the traditional economic structure marked by a strong rural exodus. The main employment areas are tourism, the textile industry, agriculture, and animal production. The territory has a good network of tourism, transport, cultural and health facilities.

**Table 1.** Observations of the study area through the science of strolling.

Observations under the Conceptual Framework	Cultural and Natural Environment (Atmosphere)	Health and Mental Well-Being (Program)	Built Environment (Space)
Long, thoughtful observations of the site	Strong connection with the natural environment and the local community	Region still honors its connection to Tibet, teaching Tibetan practices to retreaters	Situated on mountain terraces of the Moses Valley
	Historical connection to Tibet as the foundation for the spiritual retreat destination	Healing treatments and consultations, Yoga and Meditation practice, Forest bathing	Exposed and arranged with focus on the use of solar energy
	Native vegetation in the valley of invasive pines and eucalyptus trees	Nourishing, local meals	Self-sufficient
	Fear of recurring forest fires	Accordingly, consisting of buildings for the purposes of implementing the programme	Natural, local building material
	Use of the valley topology to create meaningful connections and use natural energy sources	Limited space for a small group of people	Eco-conscious building techniques

Oleiros is far off the international tourist routes and, as such, still pristine. The isolated nature of the mountain communities means the culture is one of self-sufficiency for food, water, and housing. Due to economic reasons, hundreds of Portuguese have left the valleys over the last 40 years. The Vale de Moses project has brought back life and employment to the population and put Oleiros on the global map of well-being tourism destinations. In return, sustainability was taught by the local community. The foundation for the Retreat destination is the local history. In 1600, the local priest of Oleiros, Padre Antonio de Andrade, traveled and studied in Europe and India before eventually crossing the Himalayas to Tibet. There, as one of the first Europeans to enter Tibet, he opened orphanages and spread his faith messages, even converting the Tibetan royal family to Catholicism. Four hundred years after the priest Padre Antonio de Andrade was one of the first Europeans to enter Tibet, the region still honors its connection to Tibet [54]. The program at the Retreat has a strong connection to the history of the area and aims to imply a conscious way of living, restoring mental health and well-being among the Retreaters in an authentic, healing environment.

Oleiros is allocated to the middle belt of the Serra de Estrela vegetation. The potential natural vegetation is formed by deciduous or mixed deciduous, evergreen oak forests with *Quercus pyrenaica*, *Quercus rotundifolia*, and *Quercus pyrenaica* (oak trees). Nevertheless, only small and incomplete examples of those forests remain, mainly due to forest fires and agricultural activities, leaving behind invasive pines and eucalyptus trees (Figure 2a).

Topographically, the valleys and rivers of the landscape are essential for riverine forests, hay meadows, aquatic and riparian vegetation, and overall water supply. They also have an essential corridor function. These valleys can be used to create meaningful connections that save time, energy and building material using for example the natural flow of water through the valley, and to identify, collect and store local renewable energy resources [53]. In that way, the building philosophy can be carried on, creating self-sufficient buildings in a sustainable way (Figure 2b).

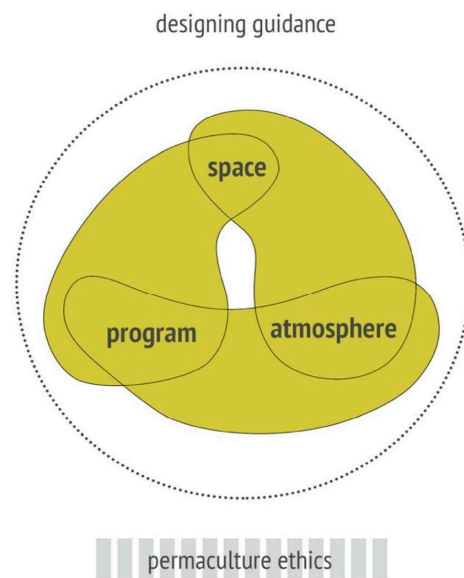




**Figure 2.** The study area Vale de Moses: (a) view from the mountain terrace over the valley; (b) existing buildings of the Retreat on the mountain terrace below.

### 3.2. Conceptual Design Framework

The proposed design was based on Weidinger's 3-dimensional design framework (Figure 3). Intertwined and co-dependent, these three dimensions create a conceptual framework for designing authentic places in sensitive environments.

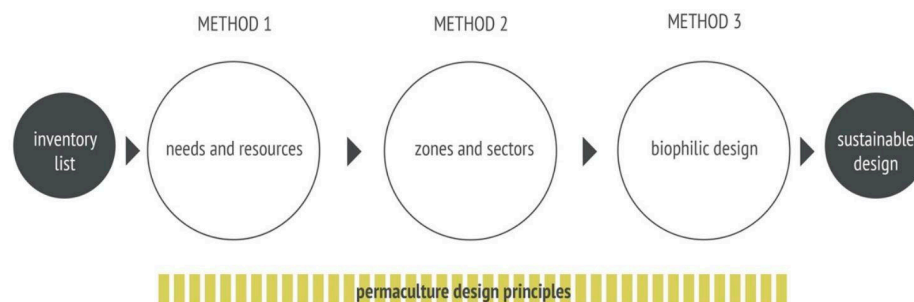


**Figure 3.** The concept of landscape design (Source: compiled by the author).

The therapeutic potential of traditional and complementary medicine systems forms the healing-focused program offered at the destination. Environmental and cultural circumstances prevalent in the region speak through the proposal to create a sense of place in the destination that has a unique, authentic atmosphere. This sense of place, which creates an authentic, caring environment, promotes humankind's healing process and the desire to return to the place. The built environment, the space, is designed by applying

natural principles that focus on environmental sustainability and human health, creating a destination that is furthermore nourishing, beautiful, and narrative.

The permacultural design was proposed and organized in a three-step method as described in Figure 4. Aiming to structure the design and its elements specifically for pre-existing circumstances with a focus on environmental sustainability and the improvement of human health, these design methods are mimicking patterns and relationships found in nature.



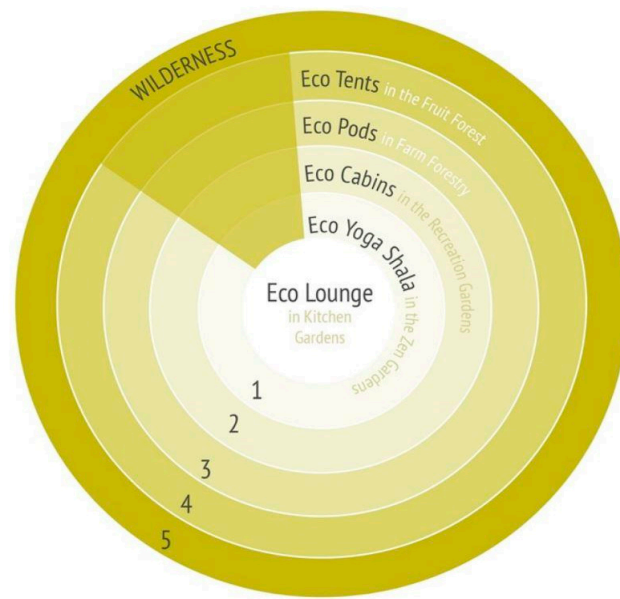
**Figure 4.** Permaculture design guidance towards mental health and environmental sustainability (Source: compiled by the author).

Accordingly, fundamental to any sustainable design is the creation of an inventory to define and limit the design to its essential needs, to minimize the impact on the environment caused by building and construction processes [34]. In the context under study, the inventory addresses the architecture, its design elements in regard to land use, water and energy cycles, and building material and techniques. While the former methods focus on analyzing the site and the placement of necessary design elements to create an eco-conscious concept that focuses on self-sufficiency, resilience and multi-functionality, the latter aims to improve human well-being by creating an esthetically pleasing and mind-calming design.

The design method of needs and resources establishes relationships between the inputs (needs) and outputs (resources) of different design elements. All components in a design have needs in order to function. Likewise, they have impacts (outputs), be they physical products or effects on their environment. In a successful design, these needs and resources of one design element connect with other elements. The product of one is arranged in such a way to provide outputs that other elements require, thus reducing work, resources, consumption, time, and energy. In this way, needs and resources analysis of the significant elements in the design points out useful connections to create and connect the parts of the design [34].

Zones and sectors deal with eco-efficient energy planning. The placement of elements in the design, such as trees and plants, structures, and buildings, is planned thoughtfully to achieve the most efficient use of energy. Zoning determines an element's position in a design by the frequency of its use and its required maintenance. This method describes a system that organizes the parts of a design concerning the center of use. Zoning is a logical method in which the components that require more frequent use and maintenance are closest to the design center.

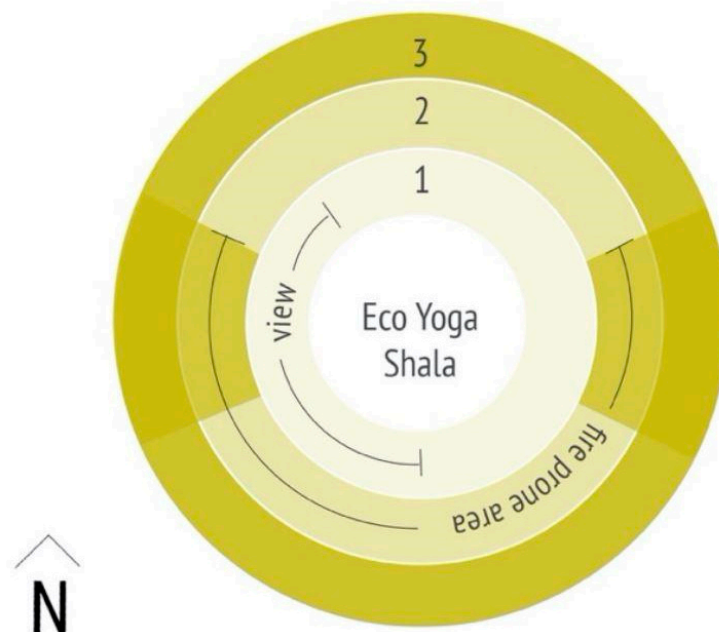
Consequently, the least used elements requiring little or no maintenance are placed farthest from the center. Accordingly, areas around the center of use are divided into zones to put this method into practice, as shown in Figure 5. The lowest number identifies the most frequently used areas, while the highest number identifies the least used and untouched parts. These zones merge into one another and can have any shape.



**Figure 5.** Permaculture design method of zones classifies with the lowest number the most frequently used areas, while the highest number the least used areas (Source: compiled by the author).

This method results in an eco-efficient design in terms of energy consumption, reduction of land use, and conservation of the natural environment.

Sector planning deals with natural energies that originate outside the developed space. It is concerned with the elements and forces of nature that come from outside and permeate it. Since these energies can be channeled to some extent, sector analysis organizes design elements in meaningful relationships to take advantage of these external energies, as shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Tri Shala’s zones and sectors affected by external natural energies (1) view, (2) fire prone areas and (3) weather elements (Source: compiled by the author).

Naturally occurring energies include hot summer winds, cold winter winds, winter and summer solar radiation, salty or damaging winds, water currents and flood-prone areas, undesirable views, and fire-prone areas. Sectors in the design control the incoming



wild energies moving through the site. Through strategic placement of elements in the design, these natural energies can be blocked, channeled, or invited to optimize energy use at the site. The classic examples of design sector determination are the sun, wind, fire, wildlife, and visual axis. The core of the whole-system design is the placement of design elements in effective, beneficial relationships.

Finally, the biophilic design was also applied. The art of mimicking patterns and systems found in nature will allow flourishing of human well-being through design. In addition, the application of natural patterns will serve to reduce stress, improve the visitors' well-being, and accelerate their healing. Biophilic design reconnects humans with nature and motivates tourists to respect and appreciate the former.

#### 4. Results

The approach design of the new Yoga Shala follows the previously introduced design guidance. Inspired by the tree model in a forest ecosystem, the new Yoga Shala is named after the Sanskrit number tri (3). Among its many auspicious meanings, this number reflects Tri Shala's three dimensions—its program, atmosphere, and space. Together, these three are the foundation of the eco-consciously designed Yoga Shala that harmonizes with its surroundings, allows the human mind to fade away, and above all, takes care of the environment.

##### 4.1. First Dimension—Tri Shala's Program

The Retreat program at Vale de Moses forms the first dimension of Tri Shala. Following their philosophy, various Yoga styles are taught in an earthy, simple, kind, and compassionate manner. The morning Yoga sessions are flowing and energetic, inspired by Ashtanga, Vinyasa flow, and dynamic Hatha Yoga, and prepare for a day of therapies, sunbathing, and exploration. Afternoon classes include Yin-Yoga, focused asana exploration, and playful Acro-Yoga sessions [55]. A sensory appealing program builds the base for developing consciousness, which leads to human mental health. It furthermore provides tools of coping with depression-triggering socio-economic factors in the future. The effects of the program are deepened through the building's design and as such, build the foundation for the design process.

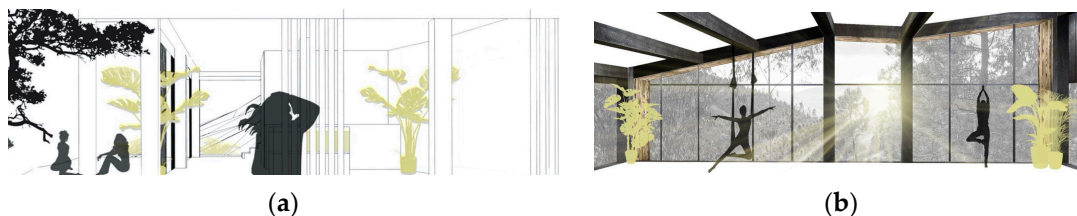
##### 4.2. Second Dimension—Tri Shala's Atmosphere

The atmosphere is Tri Shala's second dimension. This dimension interacts with the sense of the environment. The atmosphere of a place is what one can sense, what creates memories, and the longing to return to a particular place. The essence of a place, felt by exploring the given historical, cultural, and natural environment, has inspired the creation of the new Yoga house of Vale de Moses—the Tri Shala. Pronounced phonetically 'Tri' also plays along with the English term tree. Considering the strong connection to the local community, the new Shala forms the forest home—a place to find shelter, community and connectedness. Yoga-wise, a tree in its spiritual context can be seen as the expansion of the soul and spiritual awakening. Interfering with the forest landscape of the foothills of Serra da Estrela, Tri Shala is woven into the forest ecosystem, as Figure 7 shows. Its roots are grounded in the earth and thus represent a stable base for inner growth. The stems of Tri Shala grow up through the thicket of the forest and stand for inner growth and life experience. The crown of the tree provides shelter and calmness, which allows us to reach a meditative state of mind during Yoga practice. The blooming of the flowers on top of the tree in the sunlight stands for spiritual awakening and enlightenment.



**Figure 7.** Tri Shala's atmosphere (second dimension of the design) (Source: compiled by the author).

The stems growing through the forest thicket can be experienced on Tri Shala's ground floor (Figure 8a). This floor is open to its surroundings and gives the feeling of strolling through a forest thicket with its mysteries and prospects. Due to its openness, the floor grounds into the earth, building a stable base for inner growth and a connectedness to the earth.

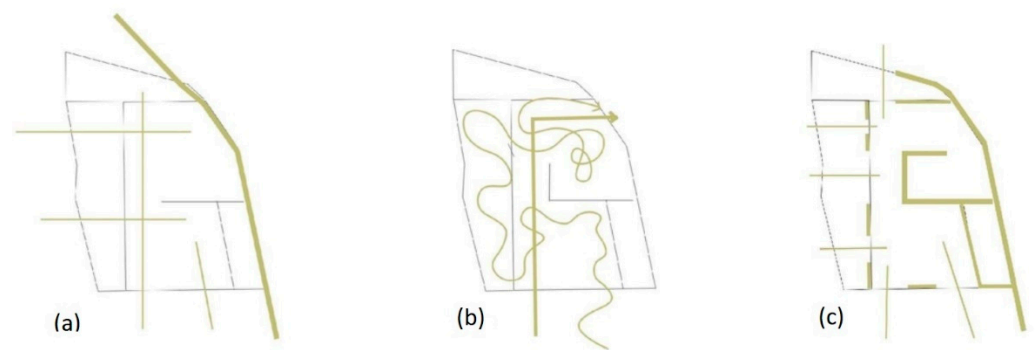


**Figure 8.** Tri Shala's atmosphere (second dimension of the design). (a) Tri Shala's forest stems (ground floor) (Source: compiled by the author); (b) Tri Shala's forest crown (first floor) (Source: compiled by the author).

The Yoga space floats above the ground floor facing south-west. The Yoga space allows melting into nature, to be secure, sheltered and still in the middle of the forest's tree crowns. In closest touch with nature (Figure 8b).

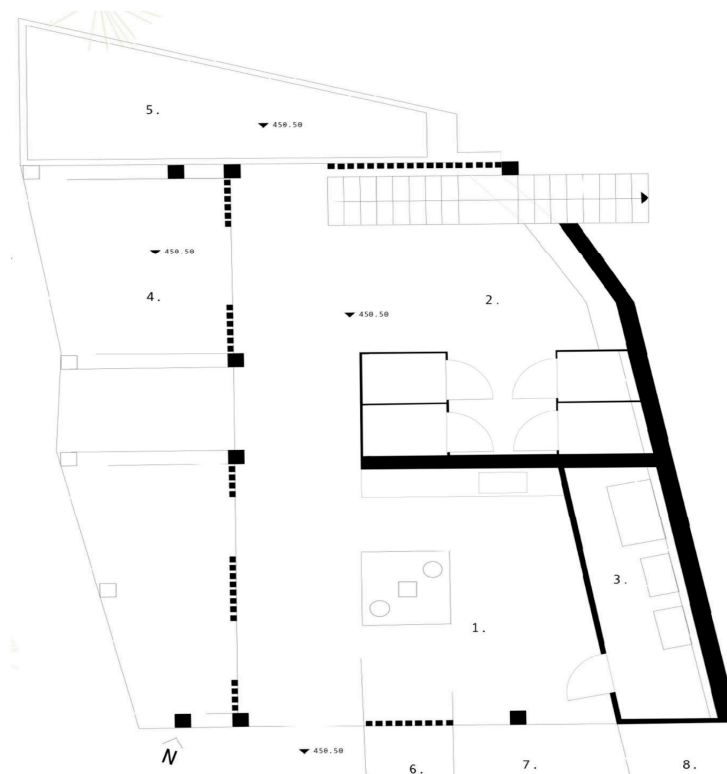
#### 4.3. Third Dimension—Tri Shala's Space

The space forms Tri Shala's third dimension and aims to support Yoga's effect on the human psyche. The construction process is cost-effective, environmentally responsible, and energy-efficient. The structure is fully self-sufficient and low maintenance in terms of efforts and costs, resistant to heat, cold, rain, and wind. The space is characterized by southwest-facing visual axes (Figure 9a), which provide views of the Moses Valley. Movement through space can be both more linear toward the Yoga space hovering above with no obstacles or slow through exploration and socialization in the thicket of the forest (Figure 9b). The north-east side of the Yoga Shala nestles along the slope behind it, offering protection from natural forces such as cold winter winds (Figure 9c). Likewise, the shower area is protected from the forces of nature and gazes.



**Figure 9.** Tri Shala's Space (third dimension of the design) (a) Tri Shala's visual axes (Source: compiled by the author); (b) Tri Shala's movement through space (Source: compiled by the author); (c) Tri Shala's prospects and shelters (Source: compiled by the author).

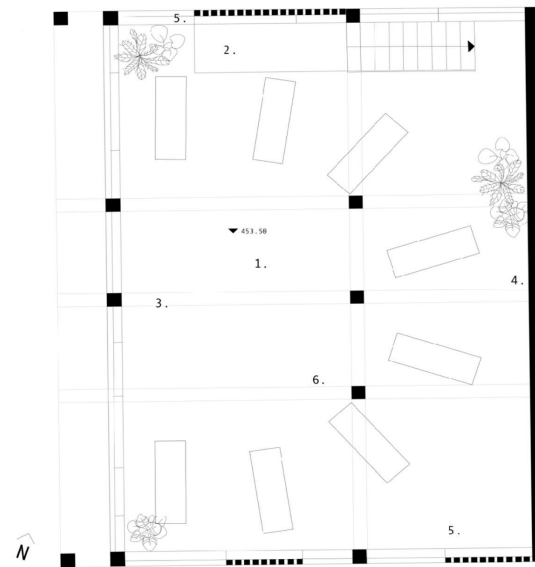
As shown in Figure 10, the ground floor is open and, thus, melts into the outside surroundings and grounds into the earth. The kitchenette is visible from the moment one arrives at the mountain terrace, thus, inviting the visitors to come in. The ground around the Yoga Shala is covered in mulch to keep it moist and safe from forest fires (7). The Zen garden design is reduced to a minimum and functions mainly for fire protection and restoration of the natural environment. Landscape elements such as the Yoga patio (4) and the natural water purification pond (5) are attached directly to the house, enabling a smaller footprint by making the design more compact and less impacting on the natural environment.



**Figure 10.** Tri Shala's ground floor—the forest thicket. (1) kitchenette, (2) living room, (3) storage, (4) patio, (5) water purification pond, (6) shrub beds, (7) mulch, (8) ground (Source: compiled by the author).

The floor above (see Figure 11) floats on a timber structure that is grounded in the earth. The Yoga Shala provides unobstructed space for practice (1) with a panoramic view of nature (3). Floating in the middle of the surrounding tree crowns allows a feeling of

infinite expanse and inner growth. In contrast, the back side of the Shala, in the east, is of enclosed construction, giving the feeling of protection (4). The semi-permeable north and south sides protect against sunlight and unwanted glimpses and play with light and shadow (5). The ceiling provides a horizontal wooden structure that can be used for aerial Yoga (6).



**Figure 11.** Tri Shala's first floor—the Yoga space in the tree crown. (1) Yoga space, (2) storage, (3) panoramic view of nature, (4) enclosed construction, (5) sun protection, (6) aerial Yoga (Source: compiled by the author).

The building is designed along permaculture principles and methods, which move towards zero impact buildings (ZIB) in terms of land use, energy, water, and building material (see Figure 12) and aim to enhance mental health through biophilic design.



**Figure 12.** Aspects towards zero impact of Tri Shala on the environment (Source: compiled by the author).

The design promotes human well-being and restorative effects on the human mind. A positively impacted attitude and overall happiness are supported through the visual connection with nature, which is especially strong in the floating Yoga space, providing a panoramic view over the valley. The non-visual connection with nature through the natural building material of the Yoga Shala positively impacts the heart rate, blood pressure, and sympathetic nervous system and improves mental attentiveness. Dynamic and diffuse light is achieved through wooden screens on the sides of the Shala, imitating the shades and lights of a forest thicket. These shades of light are proven to impact the circadian system positively. The presence of water reduces stress, increases feelings of tranquility, and lowers heart rate and blood pressure. It furthermore awakens positive emotional responses, which leads to overall well-being [5].

## 5. Conclusions

Human mental health diseases such as depression and anxiety occur increasingly among citizens, often reflecting socio-economic and environmental stressors. Tourism represents an opportunity to switch off, escape from everyday routine and participate in hedonistic experiences, which increasingly promote well-being, health, and happiness. Escaping the city, especially to pristine environments, has become a trend known as ecotourism. Meant as a solution that allows both the socio-economic and ecological enhancement of the destination, this trend has turned into a sort of mass ecotourism, exceeding the capacity of sensitive environments. To counteract this development, eco destinations must be designed to attract tourists at the hard end of the ecotourism spectrum.

Based on findings in the literature, the design guidance is formed by three intertwined dimensions; its healing program, authentic atmosphere, and designed space. Together, these three dimensions can lead to beneficial outcomes for the human mind, without exceeding the capacity of the sensitive environment. An eco-destination, if consciously developed, is capable of ensuring a sustainable way of development regarding the impact on the local community, natural resources, biodiversity, and the ability to assimilate negative effects.

Future research should focus on diverse target groups at the hard (active) end of the ecotourism spectrum and a variety of landscape characteristics by applying the design guidance of the three dimensions following the three steps approach. The hard end of the ecotourism spectrum includes further groups of audiences, leading to distinct tourist characteristics and diverse destination requirements. This information could provide an eco-destination database, which allows the design of such destinations in different scenarios in a simple and thoughtful manner. On a larger scale, this database could further include socio-cultural, economic, spatial, and political factors. In this way, design approaches focussing on human well-being and environmental protection are obtainable, which is especially important since the ecotourism trend is spreading rapidly worldwide.

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