



Designing wellbeing: The therapeutic prison?

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Designing wellbeing: Architecture at the nexus of a healthy prison

- Draw on notions of therapeutic landscapes to theorise the prison as a nurturing, 'therapeutic' rather than punitive environment.
- Extend to prison buildings Kraftl and Adey's (2008: 228) contention that through their design, buildings have '*potential capacities to affect their inhabitants in certain ways*'.
- Critique the assumption that prison design impinges upon the lives of those inhabiting carceral space in *harmful* rather than *therapeutic* ways.
- Draw upon data from research in recently-built prisons in the UK and Scandinavia to explore the lived experience of the contemporary prison.

‘therapeutic landscapes’

- introduced by Gesler (1992) and explored further within geographies of health and care
- certain environments promote mental and physical wellbeing, and these landscapes can be “created” as well as “natural”
- environmental, societal and individual factors intersect to promote healing and well-being
- place as relational, and holistic model of “health” that encompasses the physical, emotional, spiritual, societal and environmental

Institutional therapeutic landscapes

Research into the possible therapeutic effects of buildings

- Covers colours, natural light, views of nature, curved corridors, managing noise, etc.,
- Tends to come from studies of hospitals and other ‘healing’ and ‘healthy’ buildings.

Most work shows better outcomes in institutional environments which have

- ample natural light and ventilation,
- interesting and varied interiors with differing internal views and angles,
- outward views of **green open spaces** and preferably long-distance **views of open landscapes**,
- and the potential to move about relatively freely.

green views

- *Impossible to overstate how **effective** these are.*
- The **one thing** for which there is conclusive evidence of reductions in stress, feelings of pain and impatience.
 - Faster **recovery** from medical interventions
 - Higher levels of **self-discipline**
 - **Impulse inhibition** and ability to **delay gratification**
 - Better directed **attention** and self-perception of ability to **concentrate**
 - Increased feelings of **privacy**
 - Lower **frustration**
 - Increased **patience** and task **enthusiasm**
 - ***prisoners with nature views made fewer sickness calls***

How does this apply to prisons?

To support a **rehabilitative culture**, prisons need to be less oppressive and pay greater attention to '**normalising**' or 'humanising' the environment, i.e.;

- making conditions approximate **normal** living and working conditions in society as far as possible.
- embedding an attitude is that people go to prison **as** punishment not **for** punishment.
- designing environments which feel **safe, clean, calm**, and are **low-stress** – *these reduce violence and increase staff wellbeing.*
- if rehabilitation requires **self-reflection**, then they also need to encourage focus, concentration, relaxation and achievement.
- **privacy** and **autonomy** are among the most important things highlighted by prisoners.

The ideal is a **humane** environment within a secure perimeter, ideally **close to prisoners' families**.

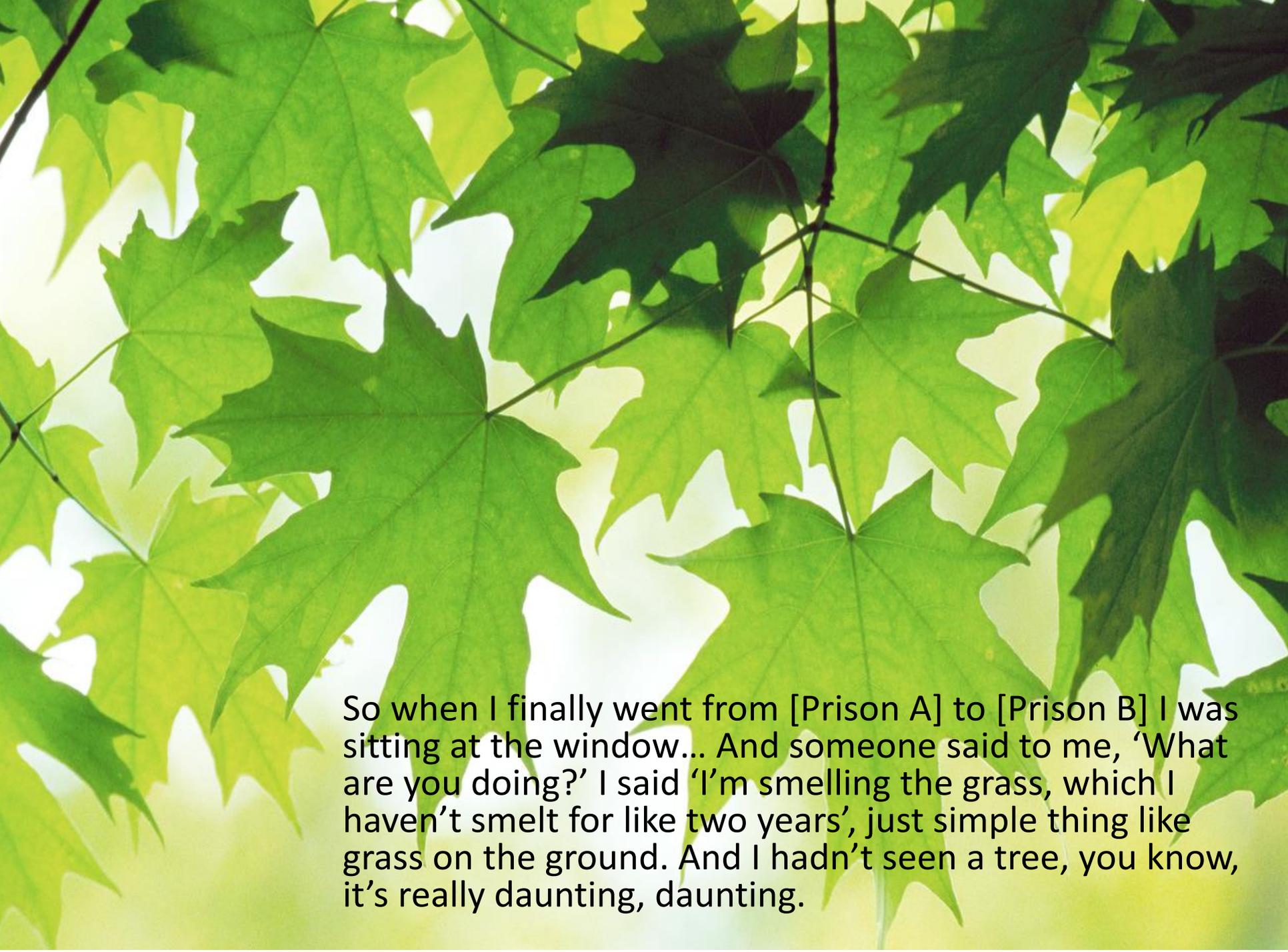
How does this apply to prisons?

Issues of extrapolation

- Other institutions have an overtly and explicitly ‘healing’ function.
 - Both functionally, and in terms of legitimacy
- No intent to ‘punish’ inhabitants, who are viewed as innocent and deserving of assistance.
- Little (perceived) public sympathy for offenders
- Vigilant media critiquing ‘undeserved’ ‘perks’ for prisoners
- Swingeing cuts; tight budgets
- Challenges in balancing immediate build costs with longer-term costs (beyond facilities management)

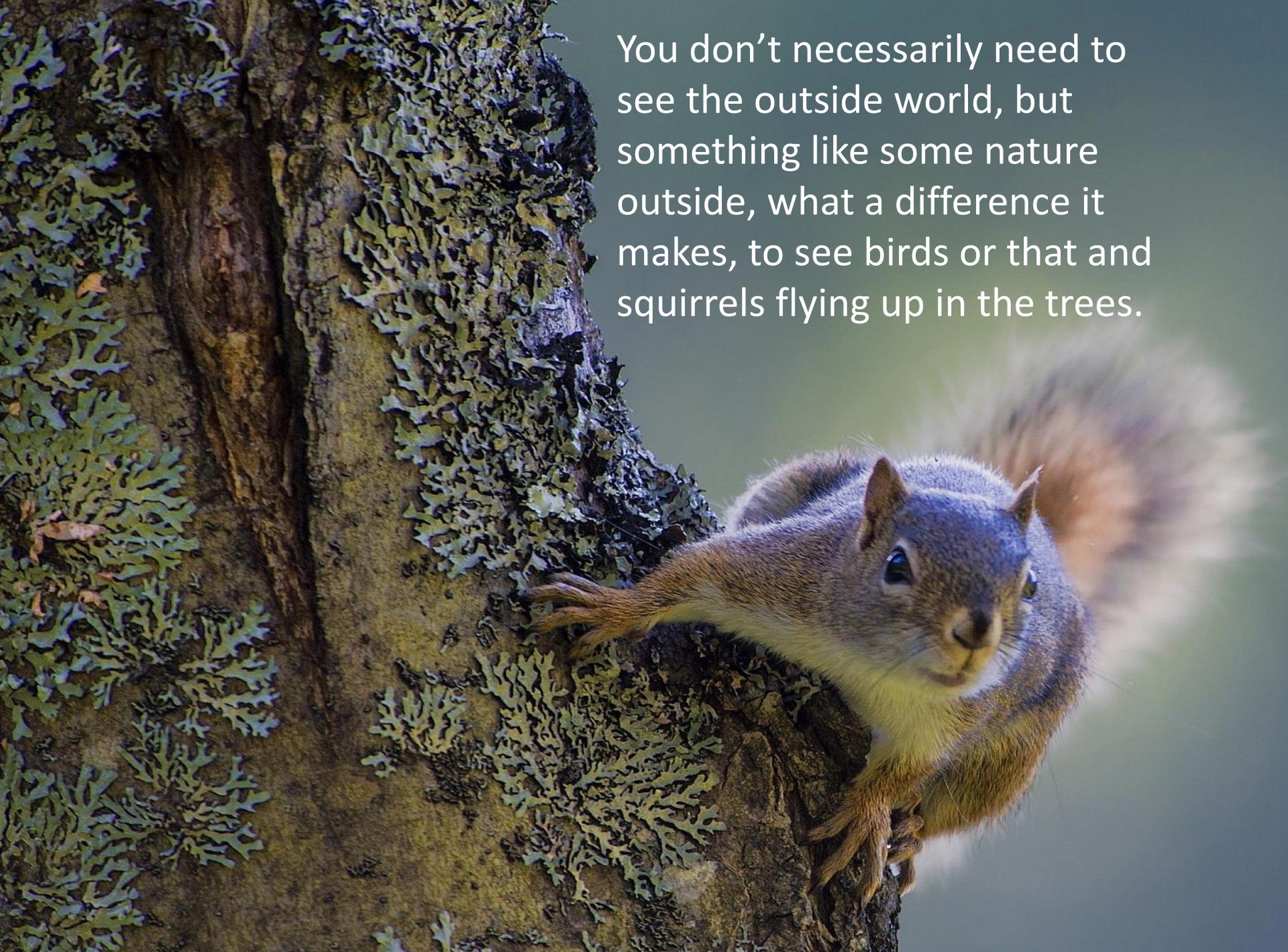
Therapeutic vs Punitive

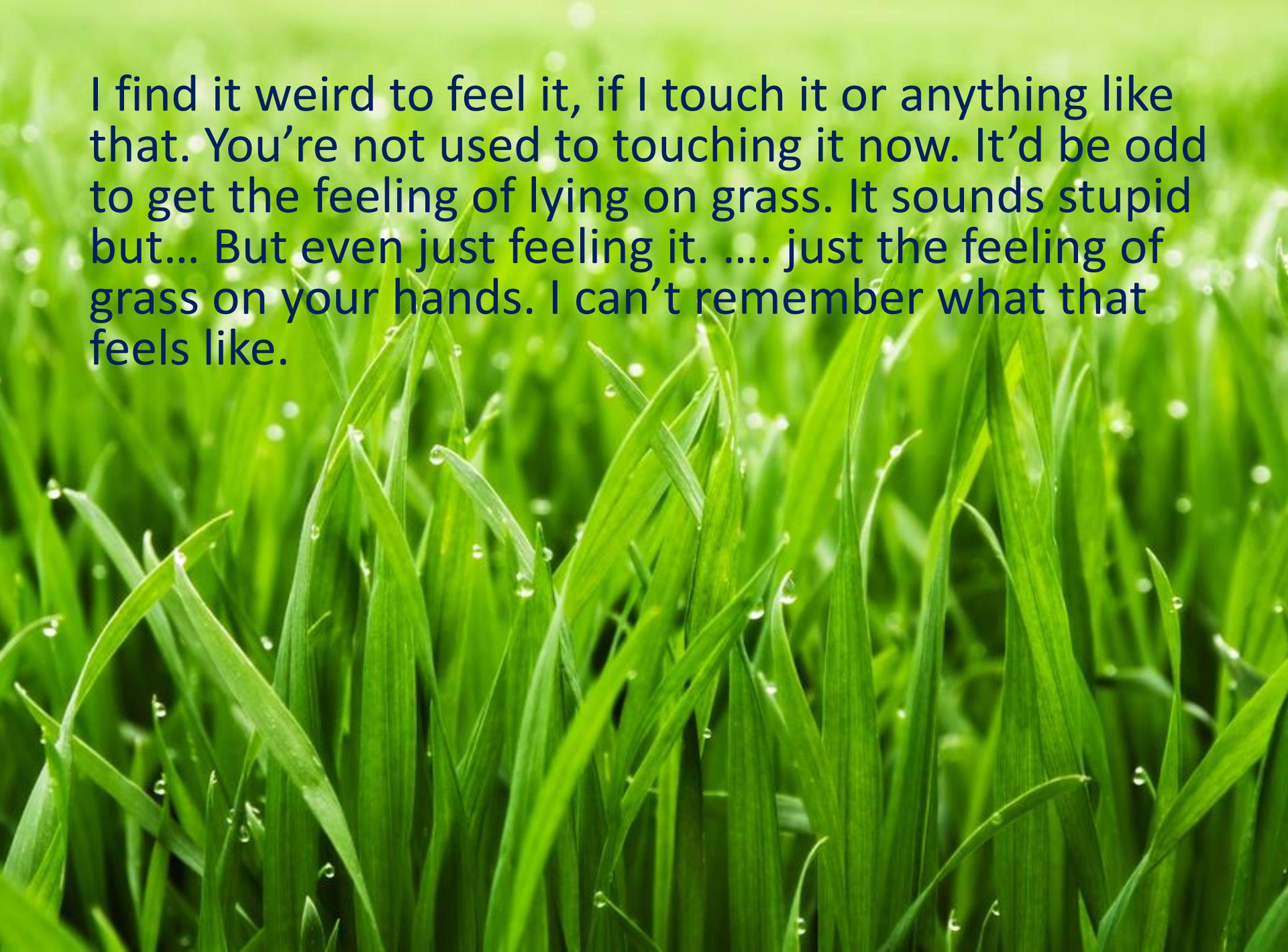
- UK prisons are rarely designed as overtly therapeutic environments
- The triple bottom line is usually cost, safety and security
- Long term societal costs (e.g. of reoffending) are seldom considered
- Although rarely setting out to *punish by design*, neither are prisons designed to heal
 - e.g. access to/views of green spaces
- Scandinavian model is different



So when I finally went from [Prison A] to [Prison B] I was sitting at the window... And someone said to me, 'What are you doing?' I said 'I'm smelling the grass, which I haven't smelt for like two years', just simple thing like grass on the ground. And I hadn't seen a tree, you know, it's really daunting, daunting.

You don't necessarily need to see the outside world, but something like some nature outside, what a difference it makes, to see birds or that and squirrels flying up in the trees.





I find it weird to feel it, if I touch it or anything like that. You're not used to touching it now. It'd be odd to get the feeling of lying on grass. It sounds stupid but... But even just feeling it. just the feeling of grass on your hands. I can't remember what that feels like.

...we've just got tarmac and big high fences. And even to
grass, even if you just got to lie on the grass. I don't know
there's just something decent about lying in some grass



Can the prison be a therapeutic landscape?

- Depends on the prevailing punitive philosophy, i.e. what prison is thought to be 'for'.
- Is there appetite for spending on prisoners' quality of life?

Falster prison, Denmark (under construction)

The architects' intention for rehabilitation is: *“a very varied and stimulating environment of different spaces and landscape features - hopefully this will contribute to the resocialization of the individual and to create renewed confidence in the community and mutual respect for society as a whole”.*



And of course the **green elements** must be so important in a situation like this where you are in the same place in a strong fence for many years. So to have the light, to have the green, to have the changes at the year, all this, and just to have the simple human feelings outdoor, it's very important

But just to have so many trees in this space, it has really been a long argument. And it has been a long argument because it's very, very easy to take away all the green because of the security. But we did very close work together with the engineer who made the video spots, so we planted a lot of trees in this area. And then we told him to okay you put the video and we will put trees, because then we could exactly put the trees where it was not disturbing the whole view...

Landscape architect, Falster prison



In the exercise yard... you sit down on a table, there's grass around you. There's fences, not walls, fences which you can look through and see all the shrubbery and the trees and the greenery around you. ... Even though it's only an hour a day that you get to be outside, it's still a very important hour. ... You also [look through] the windows at the end of the common room, which all face out towards that exercise yard so even though you aren't in it all day, you see it all day.

Halden prison, N



All of the inmates love that
I don't know if they all see
they do love it. For instance
summer when we have good
I'm not much of a sunbather
most of them throw off their
lay down on the grass and
an hour, just enjoying it...

Can a prison be a therapeutic landscape?

- TL theories apply in the prison environment
- Green views and green spaces are desired and appreciated and *may* assist rehabilitation
- Although rehabilitation is an intention of most prison systems, level of commitment to it varies
- Green spaces are good, but 'risky'.
 - Does a 'softer' environment need a stricter regime?
 - Can we consider the environment to be an 'intervention' in and of itself?
 - Is there a right 'dose' of 'green' for diverse prisoners?
- Research ongoing....
- Influence on prison interiors/exterior in the UK