

Prospect-Refuge

A tendency to prefer environments with unobstructed views (prospects) and areas of concealment and retreat (refuges).

People prefer environments where they can easily survey their surroundings and quickly hide or retreat to safety if necessary. Environments with both prospect and refuge elements are perceived as safe places to explore and dwell, and consequently are considered more aesthetic than environments without these elements. The principle is based on the evolutionary history of humans, reasoning that environments with ample prospects and refuges increased the probability of survival for pre-humans and early humans.¹

The prospect-refuge principle suggests that people prefer the edges, rather than middles of spaces; spaces with ceilings or covers overhead; spaces with few access points (protected at the back or side); spaces that provide unobstructed views from multiple vantage points; and spaces that provide a sense of safety and concealment. The preference for these elements is heightened if the environment is perceived to be hazardous or potentially hazardous.

Environments that achieve a balance between prospects and refuges are the most preferred. In natural environments, prospects include hills, mountains, and trees near open settings. Refuges include enclosed spaces such as caves, dense vegetation, and climbable trees with dense canopies nearby. In human-created environments, prospects include deep terraces and balconies, and generous use of windows and glass doors. Refuges include alcoves with lowered ceilings and external barriers, such as gates and fences.²

The design goal of prospect-refuge can be summarized as the development of spaces where people can see without being seen. Consider prospect-refuge in the creation of landscapes, residences, offices, and communities. Create multiple vantage points within a space, so that the internal and external areas can be easily surveyed. Make large, open areas more appealing by using screening elements to create partial refuges with side- and back-barriers while maintaining clear lines of sight (e.g., shrubbery, partitions). Balance the use of prospect and refuge elements for optimal effect—e.g., sunken floors and ceilings that open to larger spaces enclosed by windows and glass doors.

See also Biophilia Effect, Cathedral Effect, Defensible Space, Savanna Preference, and Wayfinding.

¹ The seminal work on prospect-refuge theory is *The Experience of Landscape* by Jay Appleton, John Wiley & Sons, 1975.

² See, for example, *The Wright Space: Pattern and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses* by Grant Hildebrand, University of Washington Press, 1991.

This section of an imaginary café highlights many of the practical applications of the prospect-refuge principle. The entry is separated from the interior by a greeting station, and the ceiling is lowered to create a temporary refuge for waiting patrons. As the interior is accessed, the

ceiling raises and the room opens up with multiple, clear lines of sight. A bar area is set against the far wall with a raised floor and lowered ceilings, creating a protected perch to view interior and exterior areas. High-backed booths and partial screens provide refuge with minimal

impediment to prospect. Windows are tinted or mirrored, allowing patrons to survey the exterior without being seen. Shrubbiness surrounds the exterior as a practical and symbolic barrier, preventing outsiders from getting too close.

