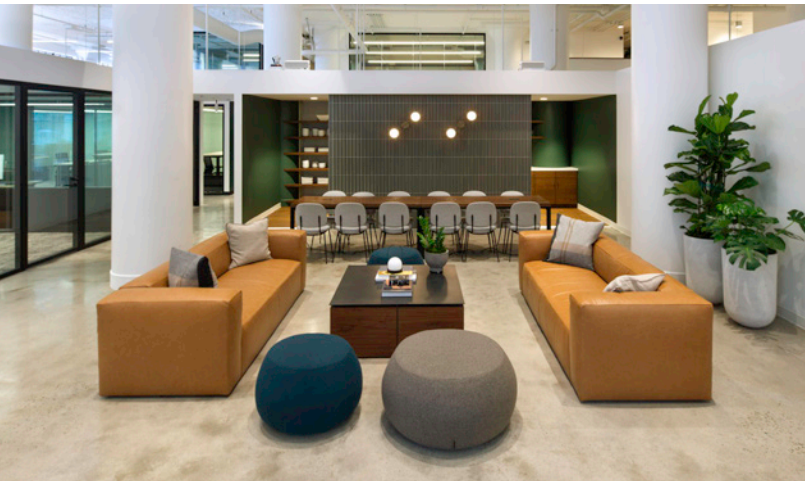
THE NATURE OF THE POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE

By the Silverado Roundtable



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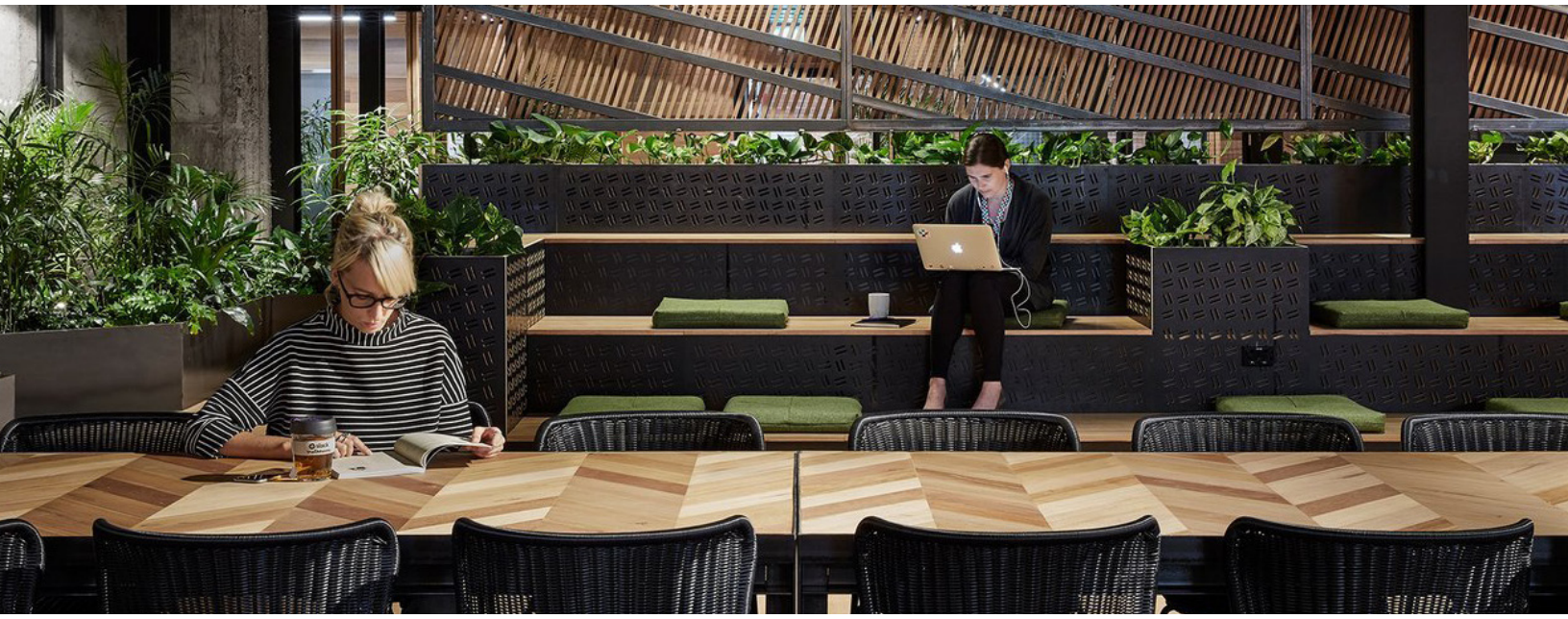


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, human beings are reconsidering the functionality and utility of their interior spaces at home and at work.

Forced into their homes for far more hours and far more purposes than they ever imagined, employees leaned into the opportunity to reinvent their living spaces to better suit their new reality.

Employers now wonder what a transformed post-pandemic workplace environment should look like. What will it take to bring their employees back to the office? Does safety override efficiency? How will human resources professionals and senior management achieve their goals for bringing reluctant employees back into congregate working areas?

What will critical new priorities demand of design and space efficiency professionals?

How much might it cost?

According to the World Health Organization, 19% of factors that affect our health and wellbeing are directly related to the built environment, making architects and designers key to protecting public health.

A ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY

Simultaneously, design professionals have a once in a lifetime opportunity to advance current thinking about the optimal work environment.

The Silverado Roundtable, composed of America's top workplace greenery design and installation experts, presents this white paper to examine these business and design challenges, and explore the human behavior and response behind the issues. It offers answers architects, interior designers, and human resources leaders can incorporate and implement to give their clients the ability to productively and profitably use their commercial space and push back the pandemic threat to their livelihoods.

"For me, it's a pretty simple concept," said Edward J. McDonnell, CEO of Botanical Designs in Seattle, Washington. "In our experience, a well-designed space with natural elements makes it easier to recruit talented employees and can better provide those employees with a workplace that is energy lifting, instead of energy zapping.

"Design professionals have an opportunity to bring life and a story into a workplace environment. Likewise, companies have a chance to develop or reinforce the culture of their dreams."

INTRODUCTION

As workplaces and schools closed forcing a mass "work from home" experiment, employees began to reinvent their surroundings to better suit their new reality. They found dedicated workspaces and made them functional. They upgraded and updated. They cocooned and comforted.

By doing so, they instinctively protected their mental and emotional wellbeing. Surprisingly, a majority found themselves happier and more productive than expected. People found an opportunity for deep work with creativity and initiative in design and expression. These homes of the future are more versatile, more practical, and more comfortable.

Although there are outliers shifting to permanent all-remote workforces, the vast majority of employers want people back together at work. Will their employees comply?

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORKPLACE

As valued talent returns, they will demand surroundings serving their needs at least as well as their home workspaces do. They want assurances they will be safe.

Competition will emerge for these top employees as unemployment rates rebound. Employers will need to make the case in large part through the working environment they create.

What will the post-pandemic workplace of the future look like? What should it look like?

Architects, interior designers, facilities managers, and human resources professionals have a once in a lifetime opportunity to influence and revolutionize workplace design. Workplaces built only to maximize space efficiency are no longer desirable.

The reconsidered workplace will foster collaboration and communication in environments with a focus on creativity and inspiration in a healthier way. Companies must cultivate their culture, creating a place where people want to gather and work together to contribute to a greater purpose.

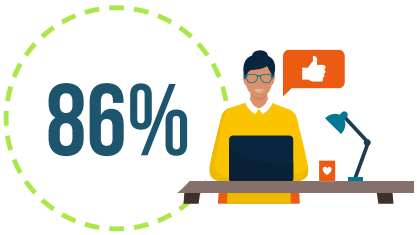
The Silverado Roundtable represents a group of workplace greenery experts, each with more than 25 years of experience working with design professionals and business clients to improve the places people gather and collaborate by introducing greenery and plants into these environments.

THE WORKSPACE REVOLUTION

Long before the pandemic hit in early 2020, businesses and organizations experienced growth in remote work.

In a comprehensive survey of 1,123 remote workers by the Washington DC based global data intelligence company Morning Consult in August 2020, six months into their work at home experience:

SAID THEY SPENT MORE TIME OUTDOORS, MORE TIME TAKING WALKS, MORE BREAKS



SAID THEY WERE SATISFIED WITH REMOTE WORK

SAID THEIR PRODUCTIVITY WAS THE SAME OR BETTER

SAID WORKING AT HOME IMPROVED THEIR HEALTH

SAID THEY WANTED TO GO BACK TO AN OFFICE FULL-TIME

American business must embrace workplace design supporting comfort, safety, and the human need to be part of a collaborative culture to remain competitive and to retain its top talent.

VALUE OF THE COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACE

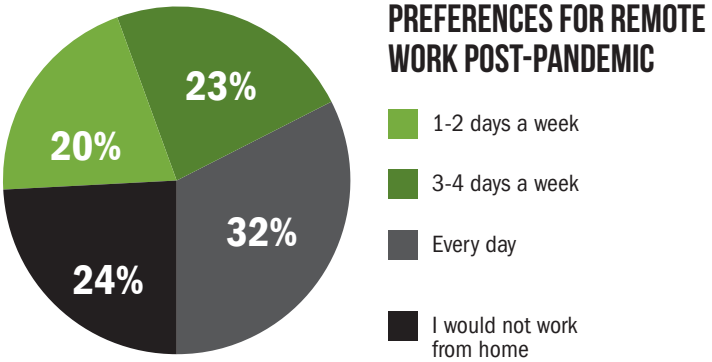
While expanded remote work is here to stay, most businesses plan to return their employees to the office.

Increasingly, this decision isn't an "all or nothing" proposition. The death of the traditional workspace has been exaggerated.

From full time in the office to zero time in the office, the economic and social pendulum is settling into a practical middle. A hybrid model is emerging, with workspace optimized for the collaborative, creative teamwork so difficult to replicate remotely.

Stanford University economics professor Nicholas Bloom reports in his research the optimal workplace efficiency model finds employees working from home one to three days per week on individual tasks, and spending the remainder of their workweek in the office to engage in collaborate tasks. Several days a week at each location is the magic number to maximize the benefits of both options.

According to Morning Consult, 47 percent of those working remotely say once it's safe to return to work, their ideal arrangement would be to continue working from home one to four days a week. Fourteen percent would return to the office every day.



In a Nielson Audience Survey conducted in August 2020, 52% of all employees want the choice of working from home or from an office supplied by an employer.

These measures address basic sanitation and safety. However, few employers are addressing the root problem. Leadership development experts Bryan Ackermann and Dr. Dennis R. Baltzley of the consulting firm Korn Ferry found 50% of employees say they are afraid to return to their workplace.

None of these measures attempt to capture the health benefits and increased time spent outdoors enjoyed by the majority of people working at home and integrate them into the traditional workplace.

DR. JOHN FRASER

Conservation psychologist and architect Dr. John Fraser, President and CEO of the social science think-tank Knology, says we must rethink the modern American office.

"The collaborative nature of work is one of the conundrums of the economy. It doesn't acknowledge the human benefit of tribal thinking," said Fraser.

"Right now the office space you have is useless. But between now and then we can't start with assumptions putting in shower curtains will fix it. What we lose in these barriers is the whole reason we have the physical presence in an office," observes Fraser. "The office is the benefit of the physicality and being fully present."

“Hotels and resorts, spas, even grocery stores place greenery in the entrance to present a good first impression,” notes Shane Pliska, president of Planterra in Detroit, Michigan. “Imagine if the cleaning product aisle greeted you at your grocery store door instead of flowers or fruit. How would that change your perception of the freshness of their products? Yet businesses everywhere are greeting their customers and employees with gallons of chemical hand sanitizer in industrial dispensers. The sanitization may make us feel safer logically, but emotionally it’s dystopian.

“Adding beautiful plants or flowers next to each hand sanitization station is an inexpensive way to soften the experience and make your business feel more welcoming,” said Pliska.

“The pandemic has brought about what I call the ‘Purell Generation,’” said Fraser.

“The American office building has to really confront what’s been done in Netherlands and Germany: office space requires high volumes of fresh air. Natural light. We know plants work in an office but they also purify the air.

“These are all human biophilic needs. Why do people bring cut flowers to work? Because they represent life.

“Air, light these are critical in our office space. Our offices are suffocating us. Where is the fresh air? It’s actual sunlight. It’s actual plants. Why isn’t inside more like outside?” asks Fraser.

DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE POST-PANDEMIC OFFICE

MOST WANTED ELEMENTS IN OFFICE SPACE:

1 NATURAL LIGHT 44%

2 LIVE INDOOR PLANTS 20%

3 QUIET WORKING SPACE 19%

4 VIEW OF THE SEA 17%

5 BRIGHT COLORS 15%

Even with a viable vaccine, human society faces the reality of living with the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the threat of other diseases for several years. Living with the coronavirus is accelerating demand for healthy spaces, which will impact workplace design.

A healthy workplace used to be perceived as a benefit; now it is a necessity. Access to fresh air, light, nature, and any other option to give employees the confidence their work environment is as safe as it can be will be the primary driver in a return to work strategy. Access to nature is increasingly critical for employee mental health and overall wellbeing.

Within the last decade, workplace design has embraced bringing the outdoor environment indoors through the use of light, natural materials, textures, views, access to outdoor spaces such as patios or terraces, and the integration of plants in containers and living walls.

Indoor environments mimicking outdoor environments will give employees greater confidence their wellbeing is not at risk.

In the 21st Century, workplace design had already begun to integrate this approach.

In 2015, The Human Spaces report into The Global Impact of Biophilic Design in the Workplace led by renowned organizational psychologist Professor Sir Cary Cooper found employees who work in environments with natural elements report a 15% higher level of wellbeing, are 6% more productive, and 15% more creative overall.

It concluded office design was so important to workers that a third (33%) of global respondents stated it would unequivocally affect their decision whether or not to work somewhere.

According to the Human Spaces report, natural light is the most desired workplace element (44%). Live indoor plants are the second most desired workplace element (20%), followed by quiet working space, a view of the sea, and bright colors.

But more than half of all workplaces have no plants in them at all (58%).

LESSONS FROM ALTERNATIVE WORKPLACE MODELS

Lingering skepticism about telework has largely been disproven by a massive experiment. The coronavirus pandemic proved a dispersed, remote workforce could effectively meet business objectives.

The pandemic also revealed the value of the physical workplace: the collective culture its leaders create for their employees. Human beings are social creatures. Online connections are a convenient facilitator to getting tasks done, but are not a solution.

In the 2020 Workplace Sentiment Survey conducted by CBRE Group, Inc. (NYSE:CBRE), the world's largest commercial real estate services and investment firm, while 90% of employees say remote work is as productive as working from the office, 60% want to return to the office for community and collaboration. 72% of those surveyed say they prefer to work between one and four days per week in an office setting.

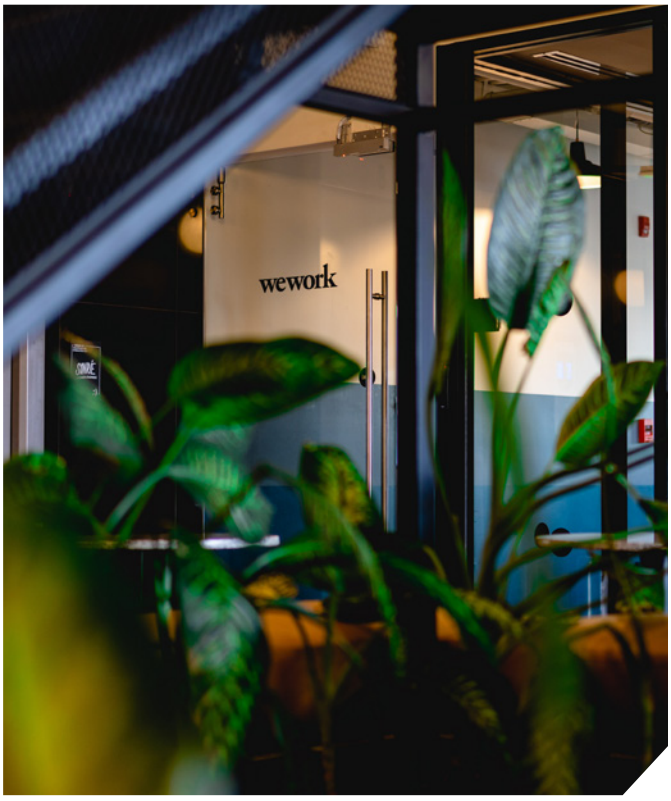
Workplaces can leverage a hybrid model using current space, focused on the most valuable uses:

- **Collaborative spaces**
- **Spaces for small work groups**
- **Individual space as employees move between home and work**

Why do people seem to thrive in coworking spaces? In a 2015 survey of several hundred workers across the U.S. in the Harvard Business Review, researchers found:

- People who use coworking spaces value being part of a community.
- Users value their autonomy, flexibility, and job control.
- Remote workers care more about their work and consider it more meaningful.

The success of coworking spaces depends on delivering a working experience preferable to the traditional office or the work from home model.



Design researcher Dr. Imogen Privett with the Helen Hamlyn Center for Design at the Royal College of Art in London examined successful aspects of coworking space design to determine whether they might be transferable to the corporate work environment.

Key findings from her study, "What Can The Coworking Movement Bring To The Design of the Corporate Workplace?"

- Borrow the model used by retail and hospitality providers to marry space and people management to create an experience extending beyond the physical walls to all potential iterations.
- Implement user-centered design based on behavioral evidence.
- Provide multi-functional, flexible space with the ability to make continuing small changes to adapt to unexpected users or unanticipated user behavior.
- Apply a bottom up approach to the design of space by giving the user community input into the process to understand their perspective on needs and values.

> Draw on the hybrid model of design, drawing from the best of hospitality, member clubs, educational spaces, retail, leisure and home environments.

One year after her study was published in 2019, the mass shift to the work from home (WFH) model drew from a similarly disruptive model, driving a greater interest in retaining WFH as a desirable option due to the quality of the user experience.

TOOLS FOR RETHINKING POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE DESIGN

47% REPORT HAVING NO NATURAL LIGHT IN THEIR OFFICE.

42% REPORT HAVING NO LIVE PLANTS IN THE OFFICE.

28% OF RESPONDENTS REPORT THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE A QUIET SPACE TO WORK IN THEIR OFFICE.

24% OF RESPONDENTS SAY THAT THEIR WORKPLACE DOES NOT PROVIDE THEM WITH A SENSE OF LIGHT AND SPACE.

19% OF RESPONDENTS REPORT THAT THERE ARE NO NATURAL ELEMENTS PRESENT IN THEIR OFFICE.

Getting employees back to the workplace is not merely a function of sanitation and satisfying government guidelines. This is a design professional's problem to solve.

Businesses will need guidance and inspiration using the best element of good design no matter the source of inspiration to create new workplaces incorporating high quality elements emphasizing community, collaboration, choice, comfort, and wellbeing as an economic lifeline and driver.

The direction has come into sharper focus as an unanticipated benefit of the coronavirus pandemic: while employees believe they are productive in a remote working environment, they need and value collaboration and community workspaces to interact with their colleagues for maximum output.

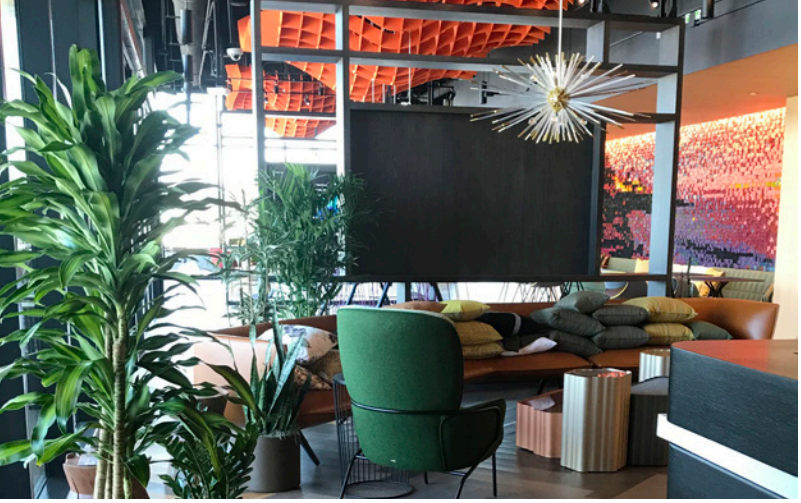
In the 2015 Human Spaces report, employees were asked to describe the office space around them.

One-third of office workers say that the design of an office would affect their decision to work at a company.

Biophilic design elements can provide a common language for discussion. It is essential for design professionals to take the lead and begin the conversation of incorporating biophilia such as plants and greenery into the process. Our environment has a direct impact on our psychological, biological, and sociological wellbeing – and our business wellbeing also.

Workplace design must support health outcomes, both physically and behaviorally. This is no longer a luxury. Without healthy employees, there is no innovation, collaboration, productivity or profits.

Architects and interior designers can benefit from bringing in partners among the greenery professional community who can help with cost-effective ideas and solutions which will provide appealing, comfortable, collaborative workplaces which will naturally draw employees back together.



Biophilic Buffers and Waymarking

Use plants to create customer/employee friendly social distancing barriers:

- Direct foot traffic and create areas of separation with planters and “foliage walls.”
- Add moss walls and living walls (modular or static).
- Retro-fit existing furniture layouts by using plants as space “buffers” for social distancing.
- Use tall plants to mark your collaborative spaces.

Inspiration Borrowed From Hospitality and Coworking

As employers try to make the workplace feel more inviting and attractive for a returning workforce, look for inspiration from hospitality and coworking. Both incorporate generous collaborative spaces featuring comfortable furnishings, gourmet coffee, and plants – lots of plants.

This so-called “resimercial” approach blends home like comfort in an office setting. “It shouldn’t matter where a good design idea comes from if it improves the user experience,” said Jim Mumford, owner of Good Earth Plant Company in San Diego, California. “We have been reluctant to adopt the term ‘resimercial’ but our clients are enthusiastic about this legitimate trend in office design.”

Greenery and plants can become part of a resimercial post-pandemic design plan:

- Position plants at the entrance for a welcoming, friendly first impression.
- Plants are for employees, not just visitors. Move plants into areas and make them visible from the places where employees do the most amount of work.
- Place plants in restrooms and break rooms.
- Use portable plants for flexibility in quickly and easily defining and re-defining workspaces

Homelike Qualities Matter More Than Ever

If companies add hoteling stations or flex-space solutions for their returning employees, don’t forget the desk plant. “One of the reason hoteling space fails is that people like to nest,” said psychologist and architect John Fraser. “If I’m not giving someone a chance to nest where they can have some comfort and busyness around them, we lose productivity.”

Employers can provide desk plants to allow employees to personalize their workspace and create a sense of contentment and relaxation. This addresses the need for psychological calm while requiring little from the employer other than a bit of space.

While it might have been a purely aesthetic choice in the past, the benefits of biophilic design in the built environment provides the tools businesses desperately need to encourage their employees to return to the collaborative work environment.

Research into the benefits of biophilic design through more than 50 studies provides newly useful evidence in the post-pandemic era.

> *"Our findings emphasize the dramatic impact that even simple changes to incorporate nature in the workplace can have on how employees feel when they come to work, and how happy, creative and productive they feel when they are working. This should encourage organizations to consider these effects and take action to incorporate biophilic design practices into the workspace."*
> -- Human Spaces, 2015

In a 2014 study using field experiments in large commercial offices in The Netherlands and the U.K. by Dr. Christopher Knight and his colleagues for the American Psychological Association, enhanced worker performance outcomes were observed when offices were enriched by plants.

Knight reports plants, natural light, and giving people the ability to tune into the normal changes in light as the day progresses makes them happier. Employees are psychologically engaged and better able to perform. When people are locked away from the natural rhythms of the day, they feel disoriented and suffer negative effects on their circadian rhythms.

The researchers hypothesized plants represented a symbolic commitment to a clean office environment, even outside any measurable data. Because people understand plants can improve air quality, workers may believe they're breathing cleaner air and working in a healthier environment. A workspace with plants may also give employees the belief their company's management cares about their wellbeing.

While it might have been easy to dismiss wellbeing as simply a personal matter in the past, employers would do well to embrace the comforts its employees value working at home with the community and marry them with the collaboration they crave in the office, gaining the best performance from the best of both models of work.

Installation of workplace greenery within an existing project adds less than one percent of your interior build out budget.

One month of maintenance costs less than buying lunch for employees once a month – the equivalent of a single premium espresso coffee per day.

DESIGN PROFESSIONALS CAN TAKE THE LEAD

Healthy places support healthier people. Like never before, healthy people fuel a healthy economy. Rebuilding the American economy is vital to the nation's ability to thrive. It can be argued this is also vital to prevent a national mental health crisis.

A healthy workplace used to be considered an employee benefit. It is no longer negotiable. Access to fresh air, natural light, adequate personal space, and cleanliness will give employees confidence in their work environment's safety.

ERIC COREY FREED

Architect Eric Corey Freed, RA LEED Fellow, EcoDistricts AP, LFA, Senior Vice President and Director of Sustainability for the global architectural firm CannonDesign, is enthusiastic about the opportunity ahead. "Can you think of a better time in modern history than to rethink the office, transportation, commuting, and work life balance than right now?" said Freed.

"The pandemic has thrust this upon us, but it's giving us the chance to redesign. The plexiglass dividers feel like a sandbag solution. The floodwaters are coming in; we throw the sandbags down. They are never meant to be permanent.

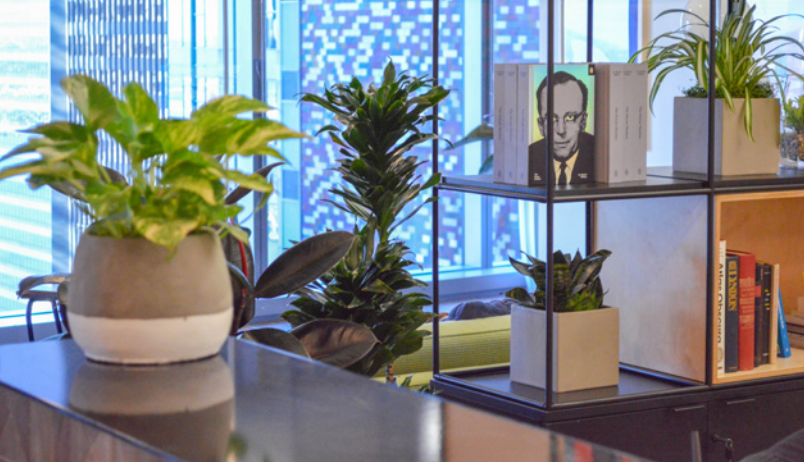
"Forcing everyone to work from home these last six months has been a boon in productivity. Now we're trying to find a way to get them to work less and find work-life balance. If we imagine the office as a respite from home, it will be a relief to go in one or two days a week… plus it has that cool living wall and better coffee.

"For many firms, a cool office was there to impress clients and attract talent. Now that's not the priority anymore. The priority is to make a place where people can connect safely and get work done," explained Freed.

Freed says human behavior must be front and center, not numbers. "The perception of threat overcomes facts and quantifiable data. We've seen this for decades. You can make the argument all you want about updating mechanical systems and lowering risk. If the perception (of safety) isn't there it won't matter. Biophilic design can do a lot of these things. It's a nascent, emerging field," said Freed.

"I've never had anyone say, 'ugh, get these plants out of here.' Biophilic design ideally incorporates nature throughout the design. This is an investment in their space. You'll be able to do more with less space. You'll see a boost in productivity."

> Freed says the role of the architect and allied design professionals is changing as well. "I see our role as architects has already changed into that of facilitator and strategic planner. We are building their 'Back to work after COVID' plans because we understand the space and material needs they have. We are creating road maps of whatever this new normal needs to be for them."



CONCLUSION

Psychologist and architect John Fraser points to the survival tactics of the restaurant industry, among the hardest hit as a result of the pandemic.

"If you look at the way restaurants are evolving with use of outside space and plants, work spaces can do this too. The more we think about office space reflecting the environment we're in, this future is possible," said Fraser.

"The real thing is to get those conversations going about what we do in the aftertimes," says Fraser. "We need to come back different."

On limited budgets, structural changes to let in more light and replace current HVAC systems are not feasible. Creating a nature-based environment with plants and natural materials over plastic is not only feasible, but essential to business survival.

"People overwhelmingly prefer workplaces with natural light, but plants require it for their survival," said Shane Pliska, president of Planterra in Detroit, Michigan. "So, I think of the plant as the canary for the healthy modern workplace. If there is enough light for plants to thrive, then people will thrive, too."

Fraser advises, "Using light, air, and nature; these are the things we need to start over. Start again, because we can."

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) embraced many of these principles long before the pandemic in its **2020 Policy Platform**. The AIA embraces building the nation's future economy through a healthy America, prioritizing job creation through equitable access, promoting climate action, and facilitating energy resilience. Biophilic design supports these vital goals.

"Plants can be luxurious but they are not extravagant," explains Pliska. "In my experience, most overestimate the cost to maintain live beautiful plants in a typical office. For ordinary office plants, the cost to maintain your greenery for an entire month is less than buying your office lunch once per month.

"When you look at these new beautiful co-working spaces, they all have plants. And of all the fixtures and furnishings, the plants are the least expensive design element."

Design professionals can create working spaces with a renewed emphasis on safety while also enhancing and emphasizing workplace culture, which will contribute to the return of a robust economy and improved lives for everyone involved.

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