

Architects have pivotal role to stimulate culture of health and wellbeing

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THE last year has brought into sharp focus that one of the lasting legacies of Covid-19 – when the pandemic eventually subsides – will be a greater awareness of the importance of health, safety, hygiene and inclusiveness in the design of our buildings and environments.

It will be about the wellbeing of the people who will ultimately use and inhabit them.

In workspace environments the focus on wellbeing has developed in parallel with the desire to improve collaboration, and perhaps in recognition that open plan environments done badly can have a negative impact on peoples experience of the space, as well as their productivity. Employers are realising that engaged and enthused staff are better and more productive employees.

This realisation of the importance of genuine staff engagement and involvement in the design, and function of workspaces, and the development of user-centric environments, focused on wellbeing will be even more important as we develop new models of working and inhabiting our offices as people return to physical workspaces in the future.

The rapid move to working remotely away from our offices has reinforced that we need human contact and interaction, and offices will continue to be one of the key environments for this, places to reinforce organisational culture and community, even if we maintain some of the benefits and freedoms of a more blended approach to physical workspaces and home working.

If we genuinely embrace this focus on wellbeing and engagement in workplaces it will ensure that the 'environments' we deliver will be inclusive. Indeed, we are fortunate to be working with employers who genuinely value all of their employees and are providing spaces for assistance dogs for those who require them, where inclusivity is a key driver in the approach to signage and wayfinding and the choices of colour, texture and even smell in offices.

Mental health is rapidly becoming one of the most important considerations of wellbeing. The understanding that we all have mental health, sometimes good, sometimes not, and that it is often one of the least visible aspects of our health has grown.

An awareness of the potential impacts of the workplace on the mental health of employees and building users has become even more important.

Organisations who realise the importance of creating a physical environment, and a culture, that is both positive and supportive, which promotes choice and control for the individuals while enabling collaboration will continue to thrive. An understanding of how to create these environments will enable forward looking consultants to better support their clients.

Our entry point to wellbeing has been our projects with Macmillan Cancer Support over the last 15 years, where the approach was always to find ways of enhancing the environments that the NHS were able to provide on their own.

Through this relationship we have been able to explore the benefits of dedicated art programmes – working with local artists and community groups; therapy gardens – exploring the sensory benefits of garden spaces and connections to nature.

One of the greatest drivers is giving control to individuals, people living with cancer often reference the loss of control they experience during treatment and the difficulty of relying on others to a greater level. Being able to reintroduce control over the treatment environment, through opening windows, control of temperature, lighting and view has been proved in academic studies to contribute positively to the treatment journey.

The move to focusing on patient centred environments, rather than simply the number of bed spaces in a ward, is driven by an understanding that the wider patient experience is a huge factor in reducing length of stay. The experience of Covid-19 has reinforced the importance of providing flexible healthcare spaces that can quickly adapt to changes in the treatment landscape.

We have been able to build on our understanding of the healthcare sector with NHS Boards and Trusts, and private healthcare clients, across the UK.

We are also seeing the emergence of wellbeing as a key factor in the design and development of residential projects. The importance of community and a sense of belonging cannot be underestimated.

A move away from simply maximising the number of units on a site to providing genuinely accessible amenity space in developments and access to external space for each property can only be viewed as a positive.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a huge accelerator of change, and our industry is one that should always be seeking and developing new responses to the challenges of how we live and work, especially right now when for many the home is also the workplace.

Architects can alter and influence the physical environment that we all live and work in. With that opportunity comes a responsibility to try to continually improve the places and spaces that we all inhabit, this should be viewed as a privilege.
