For Bloomberg, responsible design includes everything from local input to material selection to how you move around in a building. A focal point of the London office is its continuous ramp, which flows throughout the building and encourages conversation while acting as a chimney, where natural air flows up to the building’s atrium and out onto the roof. Conversation starters like the ramp, from the moment an employee walks in the door. “Responsible design is the rule rather than an exception for us,” says Christiana Hiemstra, Bloomberg’s global head of design. The company has long been a leader in sustainable design, and it also recently earned the moniker of the “world’s most sustainable office space” for the new European headquarters in London (as per BREEAM standards). The 39-story building earned a 98.5% BREEAM rating, the highest score for an office building to date.

Hiemstra says tailoring that design is vital. “The other way of doing it is basically having globally centric design solutions, which a lot of companies do, where they have materials that are preset because that’s the aesthetic that’s been selected on a global scale,” he says. “It’s just not the right thing to do. Understanding that you’re a guest and you are a visitor there is a crucial part. And understanding how you can attain the knowledge, the expertise, the intellect, and the knowledge of the local culture and location is very important.”

Choosing the right building, that’s centrally located and accessible to transportation, is also key. Healthy design for Bloomberg in general includes a series of “musts,” things like LED lighting and pushing building owners to manage waste responsibly. Then there are the beautiful, sustainable features—even things like fish tanks or round collaboration is also key. Continuing to share knowledge and work with others for the greater good is core to Bloomberg’s mission. While Barry is part of the Renewable Energy Buyers Alliance, Bloomberg itself is a major player in the New York City Office Energy Conservation Ordinance pledge to reduce their New York City emissions by a certain percentage by a certain year. Bloomberg is also working toward 90% waste diversion overall by 2020. Barry says net zero should be the goal of offices in the future. “We’re a member of RE100 and we’re 100% of our energy from renewable sources by 2025, which is a really beautiful sustainable feature—enough to supply a building when there are extreme wind events. We’ve done a few on-site projects where we can, but ideally we’d figure out ways for offices to have a net zero impact; that’s really where things need to go, to be as sustainable as we can be. Bloomberg is more located in local spaces, especially in more urban areas like New York City, is the majority of carbon emissions, and it’s important for new projects and new buildings to continue to push the bar.”

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BETTER WITH BIOPHILIA

Designs from Ambius encourage happy, healthy workplaces.

BY LAURA ROTE
EN YEARS AGO, when Kenneth Freeman started working with Ambius, the term “biophilic design” didn’t exist. Today biophilia is a thriving segment of design that continues to evolve, and its implementation far exceeds installing plants that please the eye (though it does that, too).

The term “biophilia” was coined by American biologist Edward O. Wilson in his 1984 book *Biophilia*, which describes humans’ innate attraction to nature. But it wasn’t until much later that it caught on. Freeman, Ambius’ head of innovation, remembers first seeing the term more prominently in 2008. With his background as a biologist, he says thinking about how interior landscaping may affect people just as animals made perfect sense. He uses zoo animals as an example—they get stressed when removed from their natural environment. “Do you put people in offices for 8,000 hours a year?” he says. “You may as well be a lab rat.”

Consider how we’ve seen a radical shift in our everyday environment in a relatively short amount of time—we now spend an average 90% of our time indoors. As a result, we’ve learned a few other new terms, like sick building syndrome (a condition affecting office workers that’s often marked by headaches and respiratory problems), and seen an increase in diabetes, heart disease, and depression, among other issues.

While researchers have been talking about plants’ benefits and even their ability to reduce pollution for years, it wasn’t until recently that research showed how benefits go beyond the physical to psychological, as people appeared more relaxed around greenery.

“We did other research, a lot of people did, that found whenever you put plants in buildings, wellbeing seemed to improve, but the improvements couldn’t be adequately explained by the more physical properties of the plant,” Freeman says. He says a plant’s metabolism is much slower indoors, so they can’t really do much to the indoor environment in terms of their biology, but what they seemed to do for the mind was great. “It seems as though they throw a switch in the brain: ‘I’m back in my normal environment, it induces this sense of well-being.”

**Design in Action** Ambius, the world’s largest interior landscaping organization, was one of the first companies to begin talking about how offices could look different (more plants) and be worth it (employee well-being). Not long ago, office design was dominated by sterile interiors and a commitment to minimalism. Many architects looked at the experts at Ambius like their suggestions were crazy at first.

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While researchers have been talking about plants’ benefits and even their ability to reduce pollution for years, it wasn’t until recently that research showed how benefits go beyond the physical to psychological, as people appeared more relaxed around greenery. “We did other research, a lot of people did, that found whenever you put plants in buildings, wellbeing seemed to improve, but the improvements couldn’t be adequately explained by the more physical properties of the plant,” Freeman says. He says a plant’s metabolism is much slower indoors, so they can’t really do much to the indoor environment in terms of their biology, but what they seemed to do for the mind was great. “It seems as though they throw a switch in the brain: ‘I’m back in my normal environment, my wild environment.’ It induces this sense of well-being.”

With more than 50 years of experience, Ambius’ experts work in 15 countries to improve spaces with interior landscaping, living green walls, and even scenting solutions. To date, Ambius has installed more than 700 square feet of living walls for Envestnet.

*Envestnet* is a recent repeat client that’s worked with Ambius over the last few years. The architect Baumann Studios approached Ambius to collaborate on the Envestnet projects, as Ambius offers custom interior landscaping solutions, living green walls, and even scenting solutions. “We started with one green wall in our Philadelphia office a few years ago and loved the addition to our environment so much that we now have five large walls—including one in our main lobby—and several smaller green walls,” says Ala Gavrilis, facilities manager for Envestnet. “They really opened up the space and add to the atmosphere for both our team and visitors to our office.” Ambius specifies, designs, builds, installs, and maintains each project it does.

Ambius joined Baumann to help produce the designs and implement the installation for Envestnet. From reviewing drawings and ensuring they had the necessary plumbing and lighting design to working with the contractor throughout construction to make sure the green wall system functioned properly. No matter the project, Ambius works closely with the architect and owner to design systems that work despite any challenge you could dream of, even if that means a project needs a tank system behind the wall. Ambius doesn’t disappear after the install, though. “We maintain all these walls. We have a team that’s dedicated to that building. I think that’s part of why clients like us,” Hills says. While many companies don’t have the capability to provide the maintenance, Ambius guarantees it and can do so easily, including on a national scale for companies with multiple locations.

Ambius has completed three of four living wall projects for Envestnet so far. The third project, completed in August, includes four green
walls covering more than 500 square feet. The Ambius Philadelphia team provides the warranty and maintenance services for all the green walls at this property.

Having that maintenance guarantee is crucial, especially as the first weeks after installation are used to monitor irrigation and make sure plants aren’t under- or over-watered. Service then tapers to biweekly, where an Ambius expert comes in to check the walls, make plant replacements if necessary, and dust the plants or pull dead leaves as needed. “We want to make sure the wall is looking its best at all times,” Hills says.

**EASY TO INTEGRATE** Freeman was recently struck by a conversation he had with a facilities manager who didn’t realize green walls in buildings were professionally designed and maintained. She assumed plants were brought in, installed, and that was it, thinking an office manager or someone internal had to be responsible for keeping the plants alive, for example. “I started talking about a professional services company doing it and that it might only cost as much as a premium cup of coffee from Starbucks each week,” Freeman says. “You wouldn’t trust the photocopier to be looked after by just anyone. You’d get a professional engineer. The same applies to indoor plants. They work best if maintained properly. You can create a strong biophilic environment without having to do much to the fabric of a building. Freeman says. “We don’t have to revolve or replant things or knock down walls. We just have to think differently about the way we design with the plants and the containers and the accessories.” And the whole service—from design and installation to maintenance—is relatively inexpensive.

**GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH** While green walls certainly draw attention, their benefits far outweigh being beautiful, and researchers are currently in the midst of a comprehensive study to prove just that.

Ambius is working with BRE, the world’s leading building science center, on a 10-month study that looks at biophilic design in a 7,000-square-foot office building on the BRE campus near London. The building is being refurbished based on biophilic design principles, and Ambius is working with BRE, Oliver Heath Design, and other partners to collect data on the design’s impact on the health, well-being, and productivity of office occupants. “They’re taking over refurbishing a floor in a 1980s concrete framed office, and we’re going to redesign that space along biophilic lines with different degrees of interventions,” Freeman says. Ambius and core partners will evaluate impacts on the office environment, including daylight, lighting, indoor air quality, and acoustic, thermal, and humidity comfort. Office occupants will wear technology that allows researchers to track key health metrics and gain insight into the impact of biophilic design. They will undergo confidential health evaluations and participate in a series of online surveys. The products used will also undergo laboratory evaluations to establish whether a health and well-being potential can be quantified at product level. Results are expected to be available in early 2020.

“Endless Possibilities” Hills expects future workplaces to be increasingly green as more office workers tire of the old cubicle mindset. “Companies like Envestnet and Apple are stepping back and starting to do the research and really change the way their workplace looks,” he says. “Now you have office spaces with no walls and open offices with lots of glass to the outside. Even just having a view of plants or a picture of plants motivates people. These companies are trying to find innovative ways to keep their employees around.” Freeman hopes people see the opportunity before them to do more, too, without getting caught up in things like uniformity and brand standards. He wants people to have fun with it. “One thing that really depresses me in office buildings is when you see plants because they are supposed to look minimalist. That to me is not biophilic.” He suggests varying plants’ texture, color, and height in different arrangements and giving employees a choice. People like choices. “It’s not just about the stuff that goes into the building, it’s about making the people who work in the buildings as comfortable as possible,” he says.
WHY BETTER DESIGN MAKES A BETTER TEAM

National Business Furniture’s new study and recent work reveal office furniture’s impact on workers’ well-being. BY CHRISTINE BIRKNER

Executives and employees alike can appreciate beautifully designed workspaces, but a recent study from National Business Furniture (NBF) shows just how valuable they can be. According to the study by Kelton Global on behalf of NBF, a whopping 92% of American workers say that when their physical workspace is not up to par, their mental well-being and productivity can suffer. Because office design affects stress levels and mood, more thoughtfully designed workspaces can mean happier, more productive employees.

The shift in the nature of work is a major driver of this trend. Because working from home is on the rise and technology like laptops and smartphones allow for increased flexibility, the days where workers sit at their desk for eight hours a day are dwindling. “Employees have greater flexibility than ever before to work outside the office,” says Dean Stier, chief marketing officer at NBF. “It’s more of a centralized hub, where people can meet, share ideas, and check in on projects. We don’t see this trend slowing down, in many offices, static cubicles, offices, and corner offices are giving way to a variety of new creative spaces: meeting nooks, phone rooms for privacy, and conference rooms that allow for greater flexibility. When digital advertising company Sizmek outgrew its space, it turned to NBF, which it had worked with to redesign its offices in the past. They sought the furniture company to build out a new space from the ground up, making it a colorful, vibrant work environment in keeping with the company’s branding. The space is a blend of collaborative and private areas: open desks and breakout meeting areas as well as small conference rooms and phone booths to take personal calls.

“NBF is great about matching our furniture requirements with a cool, fun look and feel,” says Tim Quillin, associate vice president of real estate and facilities at Sizmek. “The result is high-quality, stylish pieces that are still cost-effective, which is a win for us. There’s plenty of breakroom and private space for our teams and a variety of furniture. People were ecstatic when they first saw it. It really helps with employee retention.”

LUXURY IS KEY NBF’s study shows workspace preferences differ somewhat by generation. While nearly one in five working millennials attribute open-floor plans to their happiness at work, they still desire some privacy in the workplace; 40% of millennials, compared to 30% of boomers, say having privacy screens or walls around their workspaces are essential. In general, flexibility is key, as 43% of NBF’s study respondents said not having a private space would affect their mental wellness, and 25% value flexible areas to work away from their usual workspaces.

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Companies can accomplish a lot by making small changes to their workspaces, like updating their breakroom or redesigning a conference room, according to Stier. “When it comes to employee retention and recruitment, a lot of attention has been given to things like adding ping-pong tables and creating Silicon Valley-type environments, but that’s really not what’s driving great office spaces,” he says. “It’s about making people comfortable, with different spaces for different needs—having open space but being careful not to ostracize your introverts. Acknowledging that the nature of work is changing and doing small things to your office can make a really big difference.”

The walls of the cubicle are coming down, and people are using their spaces for different purposes,” Jenkins says. “Having a cool, fun work environment shows employees you care and affects their morale and productivity.”

THE IMPACT

A recent study by Kelton Global on behalf of NBF pinpointed four primary factors that can derail workplace satisfaction.

1. CLUTTERED WORK AREA
2. OUTDATED TECHNOLOGY
3. POOR WORKSPACE ERGONOMICS
4. LACK OF PRIVACY AND FLEXIBILITY

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