BUILDX

RETHINKING THE WORKPLACE

Office trends and design opportunities in Nairobi

T3 Minneapolis, Michael Green Architecture + DLR
Image source : WoodWorks

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SUMMARY

Work environments have been evolving rapidly over the last decade. The design of workspaces should reflect these transformations, to drive productivity and growth.

A number of **global mutations in workspaces** are currently occurring around the world. The way people work and want to work is changing. What specific trends affect offices in Nairobi ? What are the implications of these trends for the design of future workplaces ?

BuildX's research '**The Future of Workplace**' explores these questions, based on a series of interviews with local companies and desktop research, carried out during September-October 2022.

Our findings shed light on a number of key trends in Nairobi's offices, revolving around the following themes :
- **Remote and hybrid work** have become customary in many organisations.
- Socialisation plays a crucial role in building team dynamics in the workplace. Many companies try to **promote personal interactions** and connections between employees, by **encouraging their teams to go back to the office**.
- There is a need for both **team work and focussed times** across many sectors and organisation types.
- More and more companies strive to make work enjoyable and fulfilling for their employees through a **healthy work environment**.
- There is an increasing emphasis on **sustainability goals within the workplace**.

Based on these recurring patterns, the research identifies a range of design considerations, to be kept in mind when creating tomorrow's workplaces :
- Offices should offer **a range of work spaces** and configurations to accommodate the diverse activities happening in the workplace.
- Some **qualities of home** can be brought into the professional environment, to **increase the comfort of employees** at work.
- Designing offices that are **friendly to the environment** and that protect the **physical and mental health** of workers will benefit both people and the planet.
- Using **natural materials** in office spaces, such as **timber**, can lower stress and anxiety while increasing employees' satisfaction, levels of concentration and **improving productivity**. Timber construction also requires **less time, less energy and less polluting processes** than other materials, becoming a great asset for **net-zero carbon buildings**.

✕ TRENDS

What transformations do offices currently face in Nairobi ?

REMOTE & HYBRID WORK

Ever since the Covid pandemic, remote and hybrid working has become customary in many organisations. Increased digitalisation of work is supporting this trend.

Since 2020, many companies have been operating in **hybrid or fully remote working** models. Some have reduced the number of permanent workspaces to match a lower occupancy, or have given up their offices altogether.

Remote working is praised by a large number of employees, who appreciate working from the comfort of their own home or a different location of choice, saving on commuting time and costs and being able to have a better work-life balance.

Remote or hybrid work however can bring **challenges in team coordination and communication** - and lead to drops in productivity and efficiency - which must be considered and mitigated.

"Working from home must be carefully curated, employees have freedom under responsibility."

Johnni Kjelsgaard, Founder & CEO, Growth Africa – Business Accelerator
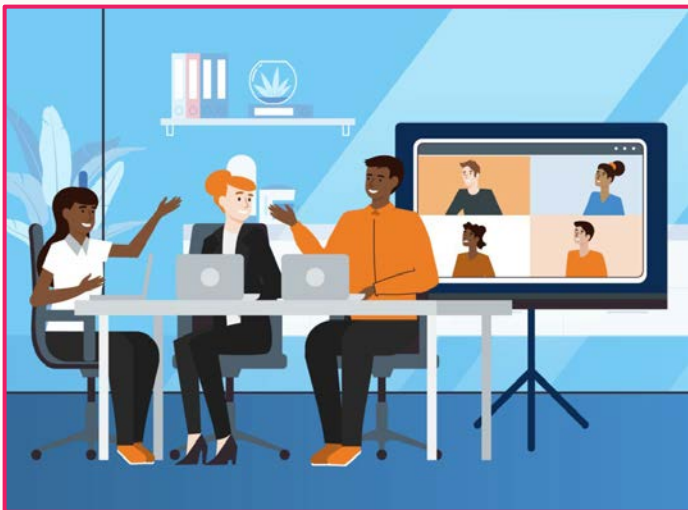
Source : TechSmith, 'Proximity Bias and Hybrid Work'

SOCIALISATION & TEAM DYNAMICS

Personal interactions play a crucial role in team dynamics. Many organisations try to encourage socialisation between employees by bringing them back to the office.

"We want to encourage people to come back to the office, without forcing them to."

Damaris Lilech, Head of People, Open Capital Advisors – Management Consulting

Even though many components of office work can nowadays be done digitally and remotely, **in-person interactions** are still an essential ingredient for team-building and ensuring greater collaboration.

Many workers identify socialisation as a benefit of **being physically present in the office**. Feeling part of a team helps to maintain morale and motivation of teams and ultimately has a positive impact on efficiency and productivity levels.

More and more companies use **social activities and collaborative spaces** as a way to encourage employees back to the office.

Tree planting, BuildX team activity

Team debate, BuildX

COLLABORATION vs. FOCUS WORK

Many office workspaces require gradients of privacy to accommodate collaborative tasks as well as focused work.

Source : Betterteam, 'Employee Engagement Strategies'

In particular organisations with strong pledges for **transparency and openness** aim to reflect these values in their physical workspaces. This usually translates into avoiding designated enclosed offices and emphasising on collaborative spaces.
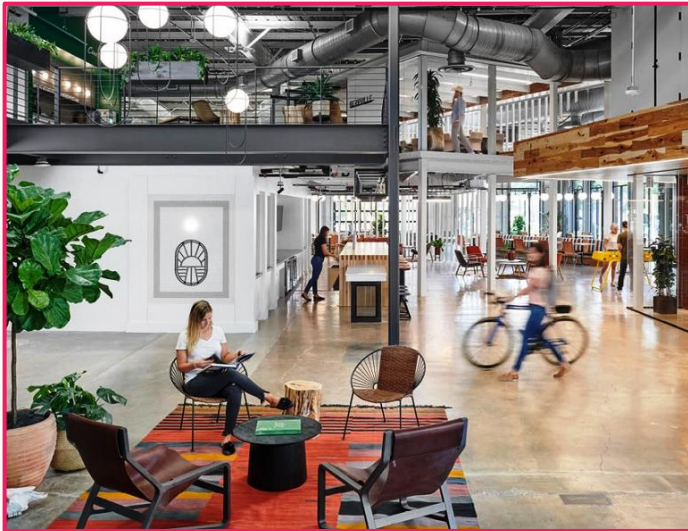
At the same time, workspaces must be able to **house a range of tasks**, from individual work to small team meetings or even large gatherings, while making sure that none of these activities infringes on the focus of other colleagues.

The efficiency of the workspaces must also be considered, to **avoid regularly unused spaces** such as board rooms.

"Everyone works with each other, on top of each other, all the time. [...] But sometimes you shouldn't be able to find the person because they need to focus and isolate."

Alex Pitkin, Chief Technical Officer, Roam – E-mobility

HEALTH & WELLBEING

An increasing number of companies strive to make work enjoyable and fulfilling for their employees through a healthy work environment.

Source : MatchOffice News, 'Flexible and healthy offices facing a tremendous post-corona breakthrough'

For many companies, the provision of health insurance has become a core part of employees benefits. Beyond that, employee health and wellbeing encompasses the **overall mental, physical, emotional, and economic health** of workers. Ensuring employee wellbeing can help them manage their stress levels and maintain a positive and productive team environment.

Mental and physical health at work has received increased attention especially since Covid. For example by providing facilities that allow employees to **momentarily break away from work** and relax their minds, or to do physical exercise.

Bringing **connections to the outside environment and to the natural world** is also an essential factor for wellbeing in the workplace. Natural materials, plants and greenery as well as natural light are important factors to achieve this.

"Offices must feel like nature is brought inside and not like we are forced into a box."

Alex Mwaura, Country Manager Kenya & Uganda, Moove – Sustainable Mobility

SUSTAINABILITY

More and more organisations are putting greater emphasis on sustainability goals. However, few of them apply these principles to their workspaces.

Source : Archdaily, 'Solar Design : How Architecture and Energy Come Together'

In the context of climate change, the **demand for green office buildings is increasing,** especially from companies with formal sustainability goals.

Currently, **the offer for green office spaces in Nairobi is relatively low,** both for shell-and-core buildings and co-shared offices. Tenants seldom have the possibility to adapt their rented spaces to integrate sustainable systems and equipments.

Most companies' main focus is to provide a maximum number of spaces with **natural light and ventilation**, in order to minimise the use of energy for lighting and air conditioning. Very few of them have the possibility to implement stronger sustainability measures such as reducing the carbon footprint of their offices during construction.

"Office building owners and developers must create the conditions in which tenants will perpetuate environmentally-friendly behaviours."

Alex Mwaura, Country Manager Kenya & Uganda, Moove – Sustainable Mobility

Designing **green and sustainable buildings refers** to **reducing the environmental impact of buildings**, both at the level of design & construction (using low-carbon materials, providing options for reuse and recycling) and during operations (minimising the energy consumption for lighting and A/C).

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

How can we integrate current office trends in the design of workspaces?

DIVERSE WORKSPACES

Workspaces must accommodate a range of functions and ensure the comfortable co-existence of different tasks and activities.

The **Five Work Modes** concept introduces critical activities for knowledge creation and basic principles for organising the workplace.

1. Focus -- *Create **zones for distraction-free work** that power company success on an individual, team and organisational level.*
2. Collaborate -- *Offer **places that harness team synergy and serendipity** to drive creativity and innovation.*
3. Learning -- *Create **spaces that celebrate mentorship and learning** across all levels of an organisation.*
4. Socialise -- *Foster opportunities to build culture and social connections through **environments that grow trust, meaningful work and mental wellness**.*
5. Rest -- *Provide **purposeful spaces for respite, engagement and positive distractions** that encourage relaxation so people can let their minds wander.*

Source : nbbX, 'How Five Work Modes Can Redefine the Return to the Workplace', Kelly Griffin, 2021.

Office spaces become **more and more open and free-flowing,** which often translates into open spaces and hot-desking (non-assigned desks free to be used by anyone).

This configuration helps to encourage socialisation and cross-pollination of ideas, though it must be complemented by a range of **spaces with varied scales** for more or less private and isolated tasks.

Each space must have **curated qualities** (light and noise levels, acoustics, temperature, size, furniture) **and equipment** to match with the activities it will house. For example, open spaces will require muffled acoustics to mitigate the noise induced by collaborative activities while phone booths should have minimal furniture and natural light, to avoid their monopolisation by certain employees.

Diversity should also exist in the **flexibility of workstations,** providing a range of layouts to match different types of postures (seating or standing desks, semi-formal couches, walking meetings, etc.). The various workstations must be distributed throughout the spaces according to the type of tasks, as well as to **ensure the comfort of users** and to promote a certain level of physical activity at work. Office design should encourage users to get up and move around regularly.

LESS DESKS, MORE OPTIONS

Companies have been struggling with low desk utilisation levels, a phenomenon that has increased since the advent of Covid and hybrid work.
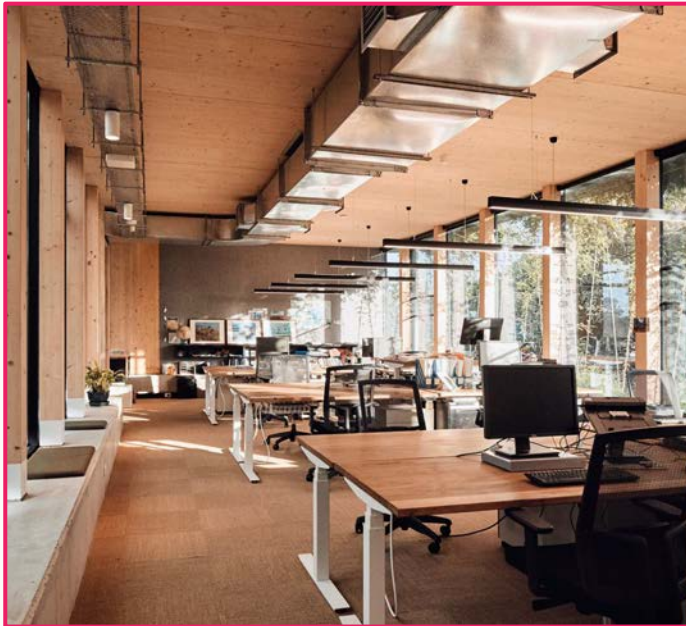

Albert Park Office & Depot, Melbourne, Australia.

Given lower office occupancy rates, conventional desk space can be reduced and be made available for free use by a portion of the staff. The proportion of desks required varies according to the company size, the amount of hybrid work and the type of work.
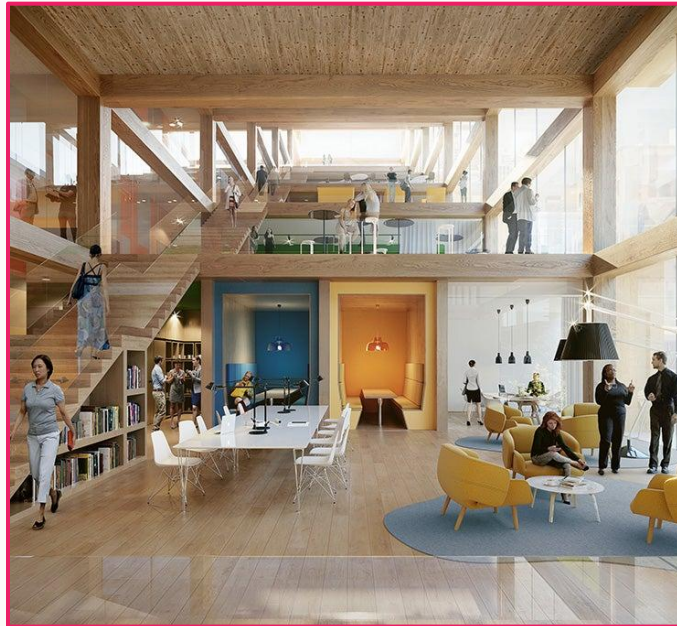
T3 Bayside, Toronto, Canada.

Office plans that are open and versatile allow for a better flexibility in their use. Each space work type can be defined through furniture and light elements, allowing for future transformations as the companies' needs evolve.
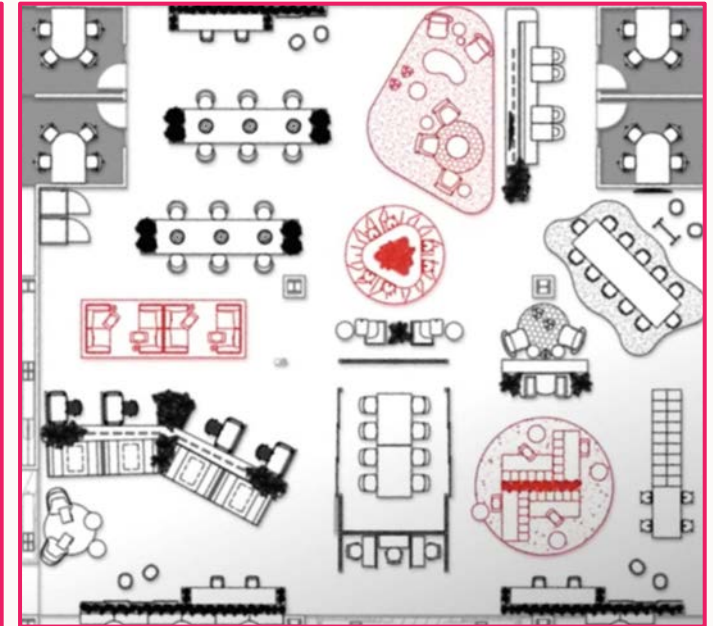
LinkedIn Headquarters, Sunnyvale (CA), USA.

Providing a variety of configurations for the workstations within one space encourages employees to vary their posture throughout the day and to avoid the monopoly of 'favoured' spots.

THE POSTURE MATRIX

US designers developed a tool to guide space and furniture layouts, factoring in the time spent, the type of work performed and the ergonomics needed.
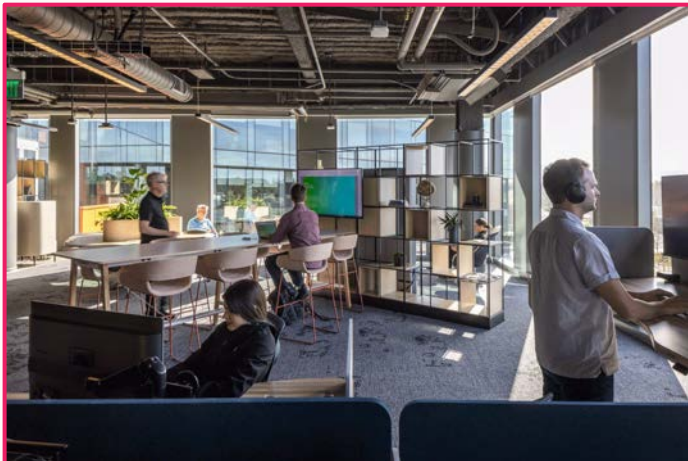
Opened in 2022 in California, **the new LinkedIn headquarters** conceived and built by the design firm NBBJ used learnings from the the pandemic on the transformation of work. The architects developed **the 'Posture Matrix' as a method to tailor every space's layout** and position to its specific needs. The matrix takes into account what **kind of work** is being done in a space, the **time** it requires and the **level of ergonomics** that need to support the activity in question.

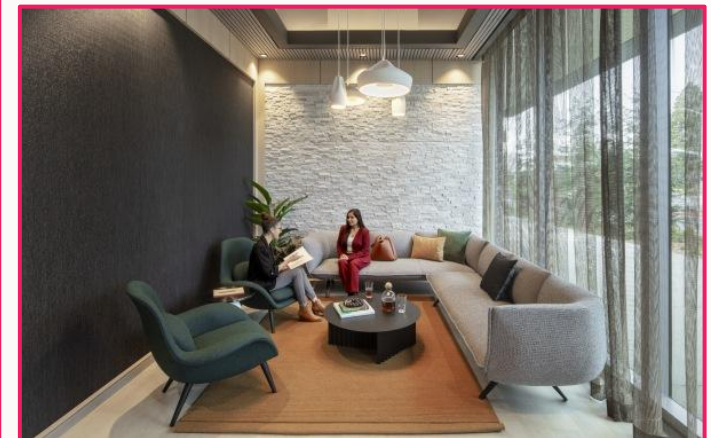Image : NBBJ

Photos (all) : NBBJ/Eric Laignel. Source : FastCompany

FROM SOCIAL TO FOCUS

Daily work lives include a range of tasks, from social interaction to 'deep focus' work, which should all be reflected within the workspace.

Having **gradients of privacy**, from the most public spaces to hidden nooks, allow workers to mindfully choose the atmosphere in which they feel most comfortable to perform a specific task.

The **circulation pattern** set in the office spaces should reflect this gradient. For example, the most social and vibrant areas should be located near the entrance, to welcome visitors.

On the other hand, 'deep focus' and quiet spaces should be placed in a more secluded part of the office, protected from noise and distractions.

IBM Headquarters, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Image Powerhouse Company.

SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

Properties of a room play a big role in how it is perceived by its users. Clearly displaying the atmosphere for each workspace can guide employees in which task to perform where.


VM Project office, Russia.

Colours have an influence on our mood and mindset. They can be used to encourage one type of activity or another at work. Although it varies between cultures, red seems to boost performance for detail-oriented tasks, while blue sparks up creativity.

Ceiling heights also drive workers' performances for different activities. Low height spaces are better for focussed tasks (studying, reading) while high ceilings encourage abstract thinking.
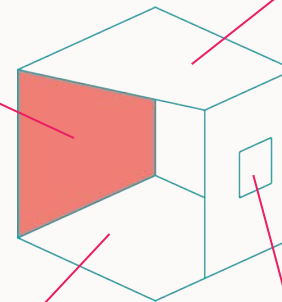
Levels and colours of **light** in a space can influence the mindset of users. Likewise, different **sound atmospheres** (conversations, light music, silence, etc.) will steer employees towards socialisation or focus.

Views to the outside, particularly to nature, bring wanted distractions and allow the mind to wander. Rooms without windows are better suited for short occupancy times and undisturbed activities.
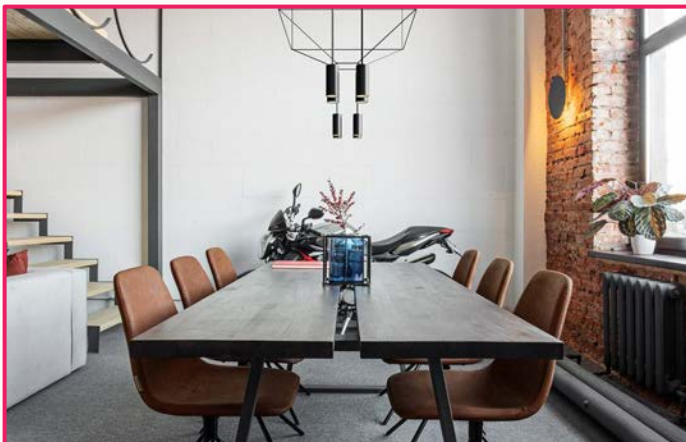
HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Employees value working in the comfort of their own home when working remotely. Some qualities of home environments can be brought to the workspace.

Workers often mention that they appreciate working from home for its **casual atmosphere** and the **sense of homeliness** they experience. Another advantage they highlight is the convenience brought by the **proximity to amenities** and the possibility to perform domestic tasks for a moment during the work day.

Although the workplace must remain a productive space, some elements borrowed from domestic environments can contribute to creating offices that feel welcoming and cosy.

A certain **"home aesthetic"** can be achieved through warm colours and lights (natural and artificial) and soft textures. The presence of accessories (items that are not related to work) or art pieces also contribute to **giving an identity to the workplace** and to allowing office users to personalise the space.

Considering **access to alternative spaces** outside the office allows employees to better integrate their work and personal lives. Amenities can be in the vicinity of the workplace, such as child care services, wellness and sports facilities of convenience shops (groceries, bank, dry cleaning, etc.). Some facilities can also be included within the office like nap rooms, cooking spaces, relaxation areas, nursing rooms or changing rooms and showers.

AMENITIES

Having a number of facilities and services close-by is an aspect of the practicality of home that should ideally be considered when designing workplaces.

Possible amenities to be available in the office space or nearby (walking distance) include :

- Gym and workout spaces (including showers and changing rooms)
- Childcare and petcare services
- Convenience shops and services (groceries, drycleaning, bank, etc.)
- Nursing spaces
- Napping room or pods
- Library and reading space
- Spaces for creation
- Game space
- Cooking space and equipment
- Variety in food offers (e.g. food court or food trucks)
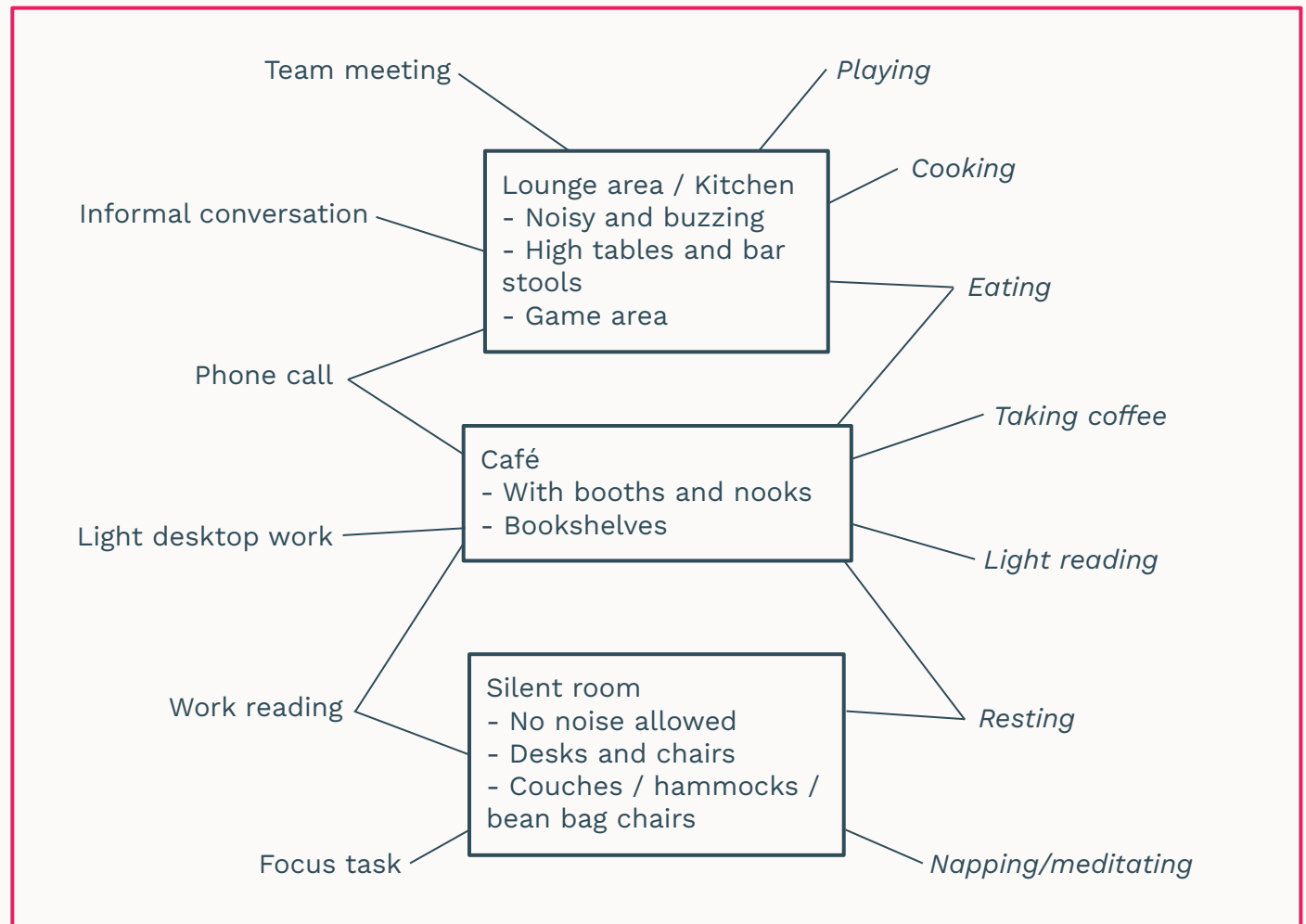- Outdoor and natural spaces

1. Creche in Safaricom House, Nairobi, Kenya.
2. TripAdvisor Headquarters, Needham (MA), USA.
3. Kofisi coworking, Ikoyi branch, Lagos, Nigeria.
4. Dropbox Headquarters, San Francisco (CA), USA.

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WORK IN A CASUAL ENVIRONMENT

One of the reasons why working from home is valued by workers is the **casual atmosphere** that reigns in domestic spaces. People feel more free and safe to be themselves at home.

Beyond each company's individual policy, casualness can be brought to offices by **combining work and relaxed spaces**. Many work tasks require similar conditions as some non-work-related activities and can easily share common spaces.

Grouping work and non-work activities together can also address the need for efficiency of office spaces by **increasing the frequency of utilisation** of each area. Considering the timelines of the different uses of a same space can also help curating how it is shared.

Team meeting

Playing

Informal conversation

Cooking

Lounge area / Kitchen
- Noisy and buzzing
- High tables and bar stools
- Game area

Eating

Phone call

Taking coffee

Café
- With booths and nooks
- Bookshelves

Light desktop work

Light reading

Work reading

Silent room
- No noise allowed
- Desks and chairs
- Couches / hammocks / bean bag chairs

Resting

Focus task

Napping/meditating

Example of grouping for work tasks and *non-work activities*.

ARE WE SHARING ?

Research on communal living in the housing sector can be applied to workspaces. Harmonious sharing of spaces can lead to thriving teams.
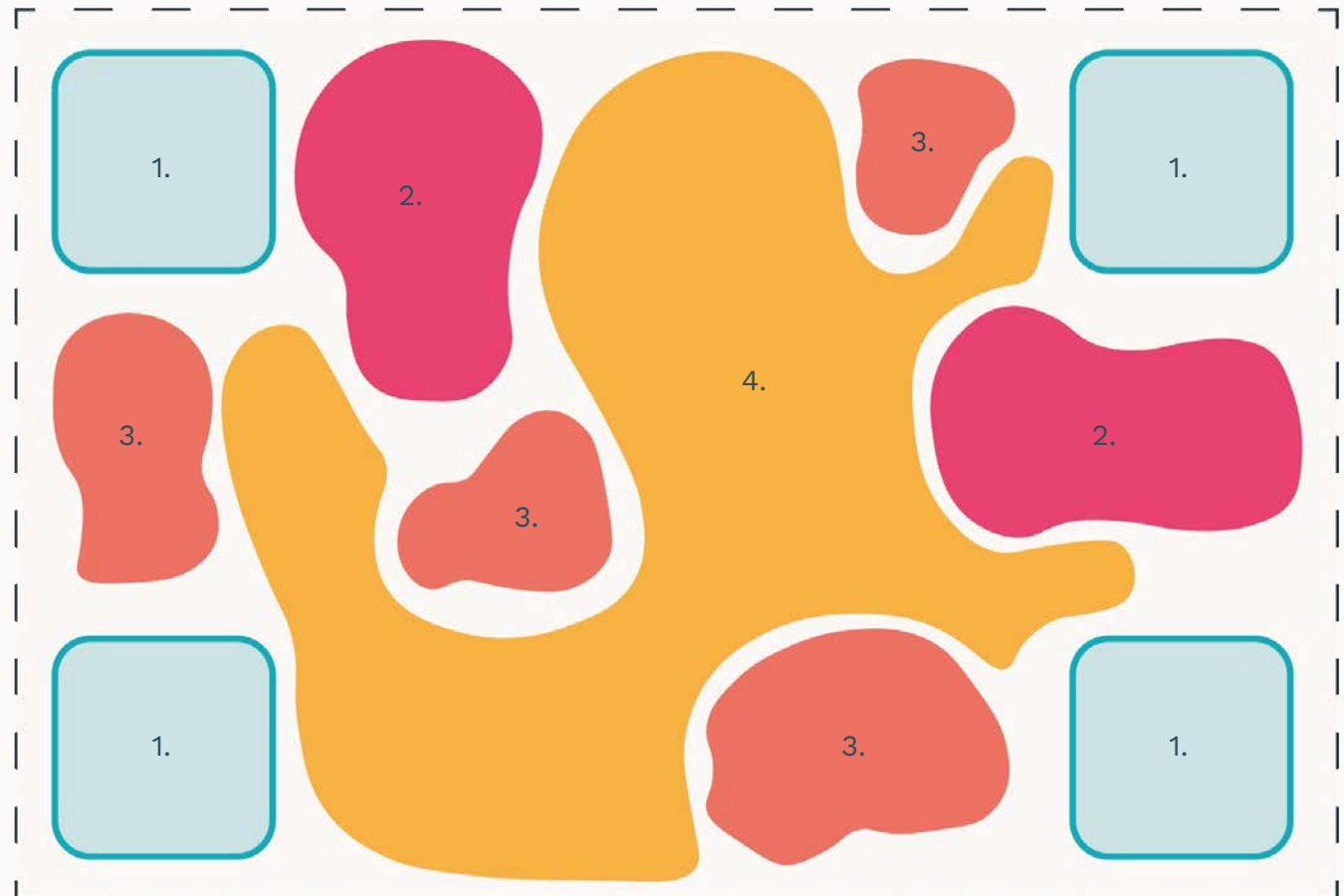
Separated offices tend to struggle in socialising with the neighbouring companies, whereas communal models such as coworking spaces bring challenges of privacy and maintaining boundaries between tenants. Offices need to find a **middle ground between excessive segregation or proximity**.

Different companies occupying the same office building have potential to create a work community, if **shared spaces are carefully curated** and organised.

Workspaces can be divided into four categories with different levels of collectivity:
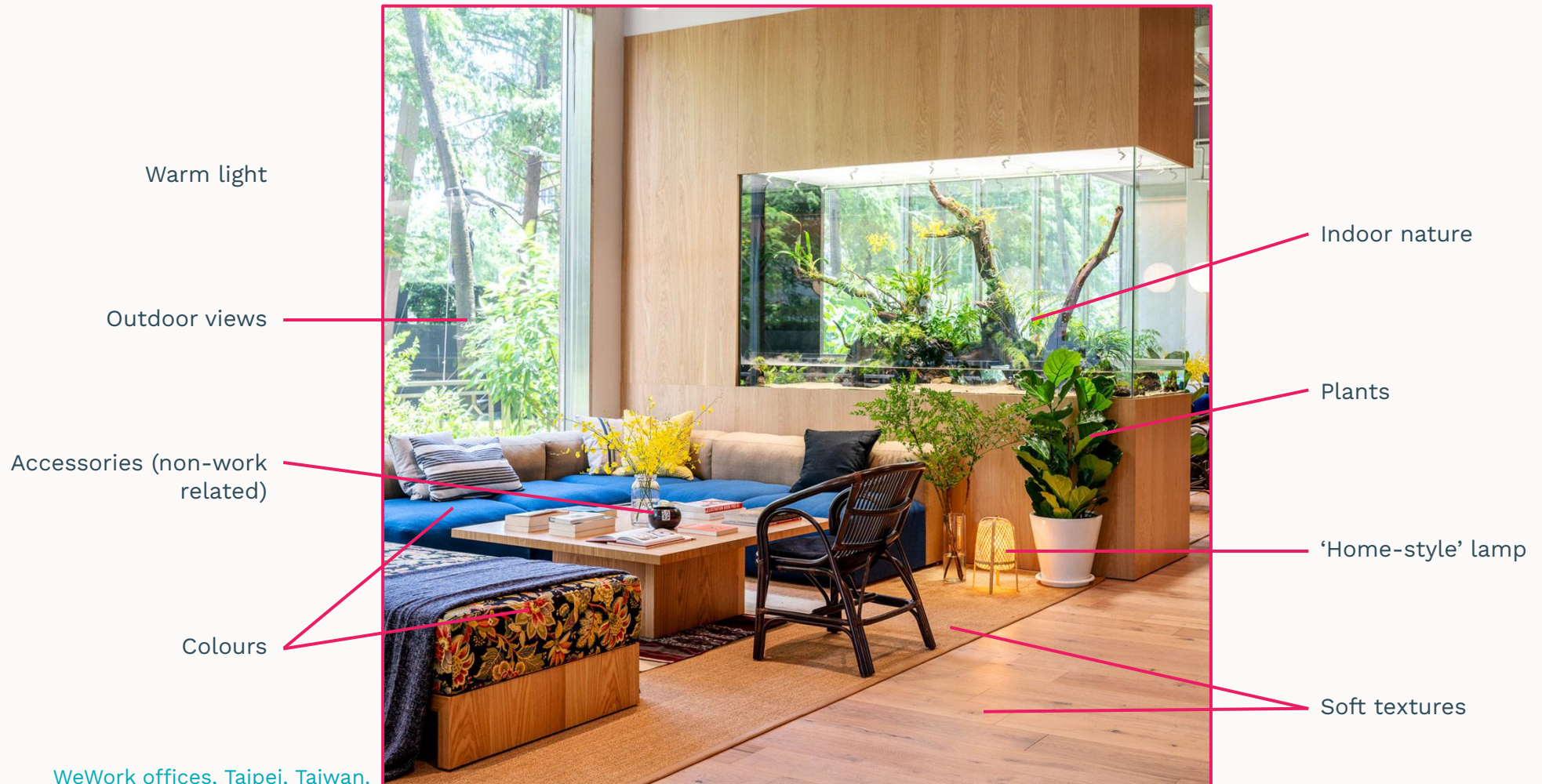**1. Core private**: work and focus spaces, desktops, private meeting rooms.
2. Reserved spaces (often underutilised in traditional offices): board rooms, conference halls, projection rooms.
3. Communally shared (with a curated use): gym, kitchen, library, nap and nursing rooms.
4. Places for socialising: lounge areas, cafés and restaurants, game rooms.

FITTINGS & FINISHES

The feeling of homeliness is also carried through finishes and accessories : warm lights, soft textures, colours and plants participate in the cosiness of a space.

Warm light

Outdoor views

Accessories (non-work related)

Colours

Indoor nature

Plants

'Home-style' lamp

Soft textures

WeWork offices, Taipei, Taiwan.

HEALTHY & SUSTAINABLE

An increasing number of companies strive for work environments that are healthy for their employees and for the planet.

Green buildings that are **designed with natural and low-carbon materials** and **a connection to the outdoor environment** benefit their users and have a lower impact on the planet. In the case of office spaces, this can boosts occupant perceived satisfaction, health, well-being and productivity.

Natural materials, such as timber or earth, can **lower the carbon footprint** of buildings, compared to widely used building materials such as concrete, stone and steel. Keeping those materials exposed as well as **integrating biophilic properties** in the design of offices (connections between the occupants and the natural environment) also has a positive influence on employees' health and wellbeing. The use of greenery and plants inside is one of the main approaches of biophilic office designs.

Office spaces should be conceived in a way to **maximise natural light and ventilation** and to **reduce the energy consumption** due to artificial lighting and air conditioning. Strategies such as transparent partitions or interior atriums can provide solutions, especially in the case of wide buildings.

Encouraging **shared means of transportation** (public transport, carpooling) to reduce carbon emissions can be done by choosing a central location for the office building and through incentives such as carpool parking spots or reduced areas for parking. Providing safe bicycle parking and showering facilities also encourages physical exercise by cycling to work.

BIOPHILIA

Biophilia describes the innate relationship between humans and nature, and focuses on the need we have to be continually connected to it.

Definition
From the greek '*bio*' (life) and '*philia*' (love), *biophilia* can be translated as 'the love of living things'.

Popularised in the 1980's, biophilia states that **being connected to nature** is an adaptive human function that allows psychological restoration. This means that within an urbanised environment, bringing in elements that allow **direct or indirect nature connection** (e.g. parks, natural materials or indoor plants) can provide respite from our day-to-day activities and maintain a positive well-being.

WeWork offices, Taipei, Taiwan.

Providing symbolic connections to nature also produces positive impacts on employees' wellbeing. Options of indirect nature connection include:
- free-flowing water features
- green plants
- **natural materials** such as stone and wood
- **natural ventilation**
- textured fabrics and surfaces with **patterns mimicking nature**

Workspaces that incorporate nature provide more **tranquil settings** that allow for more effortless attention on tasks, helping to restore - rather than deplete - our mental capacity.

Natural light, **window views** as well as outdoor connections to **greenery, water and wildlife** play a major role in workers' wellbeing, productivity and creativity. **Colour schemes** of green, blue and brown also impact positively these factors, although they seem to variate between different cultures.
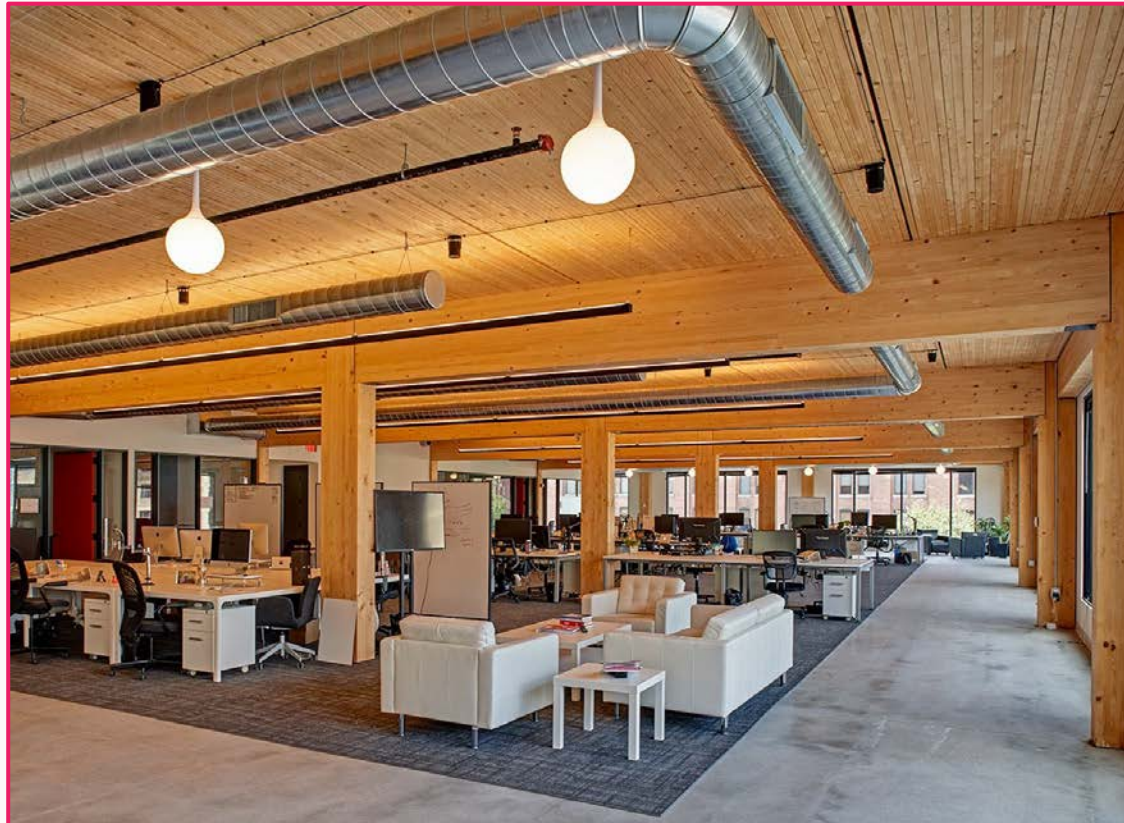
MASS TIMBER

Trees absorb CO_2 from the atmosphere as they grow and keep it stored in buildings. Timber sourced from sustainable forests avoids uncontrolled deforestation and leads to net-zero carbon buildings.

Definition
Mass timber is a building system using multiple solid wood pieces bonded together to create panels, columns and beams of **exceptional strength**. Developed in the 1990's in Austria and Germany, mass timber construction is can be used in structures as **an alternative to concrete and steel**, particularly in large and tall buildings.

T3 Minneapolis (MN), USA.

Building with mass timber requires **less time, less energy and less polluting processes** than with materials such as concrete or steel. The structure, assembled with screws and plates, can be dismantled at the end of the building life. All the timber elements can then be reused, keeping their carbon stored.

As a natural material, spaces made out of timber have positive effects on their occupants' physical and mental health.
Wooden interiors in offices can **lower stress and anxiety** while increasing employees' satisfaction, levels of concentration and **improving productivity**.

CHOICE ARCHITECTURE

Definition
Developed in the 1970's, the concept of choice architecture relies on the '**Nudge Theory**', stating that subtle interventions guiding choices without restricting them can **subconsciously influence behaviours**.

Applied to workspaces, choice architecture can **facilitate positive behaviours** that improve individual and collective wellbeing and discourage negative ones.

Some interventions can **encourage movement and physical activity**, by accentuating the stairs visibility instead of lifts or by providing standing desks or outdoor spaces for walking meetings.

Other nudges **highlight circulation paths and separated areas**, a method used since the pandemic for social distancing.

1. Sculptural stairs encourage physical activity.
2. Floor signage guide circulation patterns.
3. Visual islands stand out to identify activity zones.

1.

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GREEN MOBILITY

Promoting sustainable transportation means for commuting has a significant impact on the reduction of traffic and associated polluting emissions.

Discourage car use
Decreasing parking spaces in the office building can lead to employees to look for alternate means of transportation. Providing incentives for **carpooling** solutions, such as parking spaces reserved for shared cars, can also help lowering their number.

Green mobility
Locating the office building at walking distance from **public transportation nodes**, as well as supporting the use of **electric vehicles** by providing charging stations within the parking spaces encourages workers to use more sustainable mobility means.

Cycling and walking
Workplaces should promote cycling and walking, both for their environmental and health benefits. **Safe bicycle racks, showers and changing rooms** are crucial ingredients for making exercising to work a success.

A BUILDING AS AN ECOSYSTEM

Office buildings have the potential to become autonomous systems, by producing their own energy, clean water and even their own food.
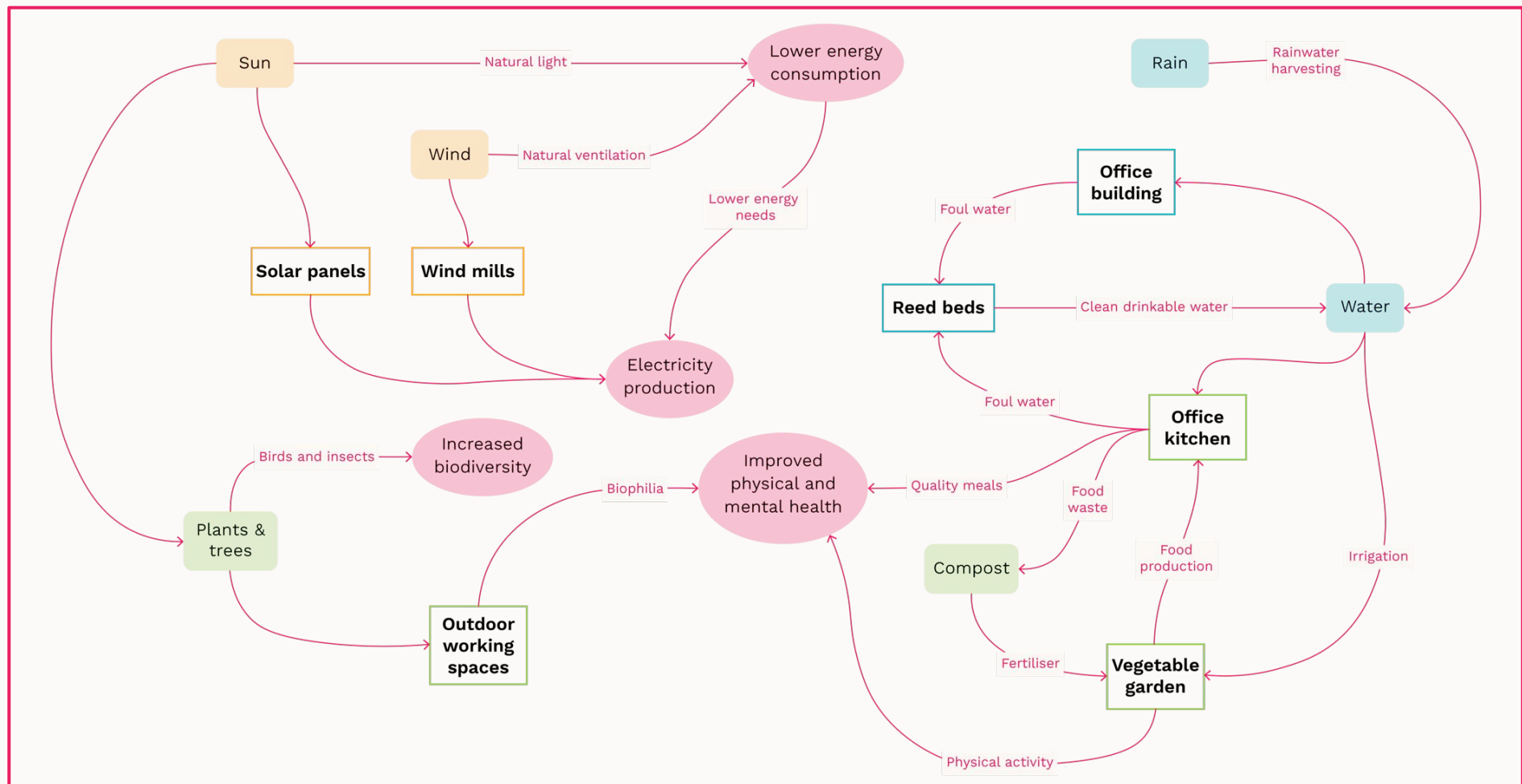
✕ CONTRIBUTIONS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the Future of Workplace interview participants for their time and candour, without whom this work would not have been possible.

THANK YOU

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