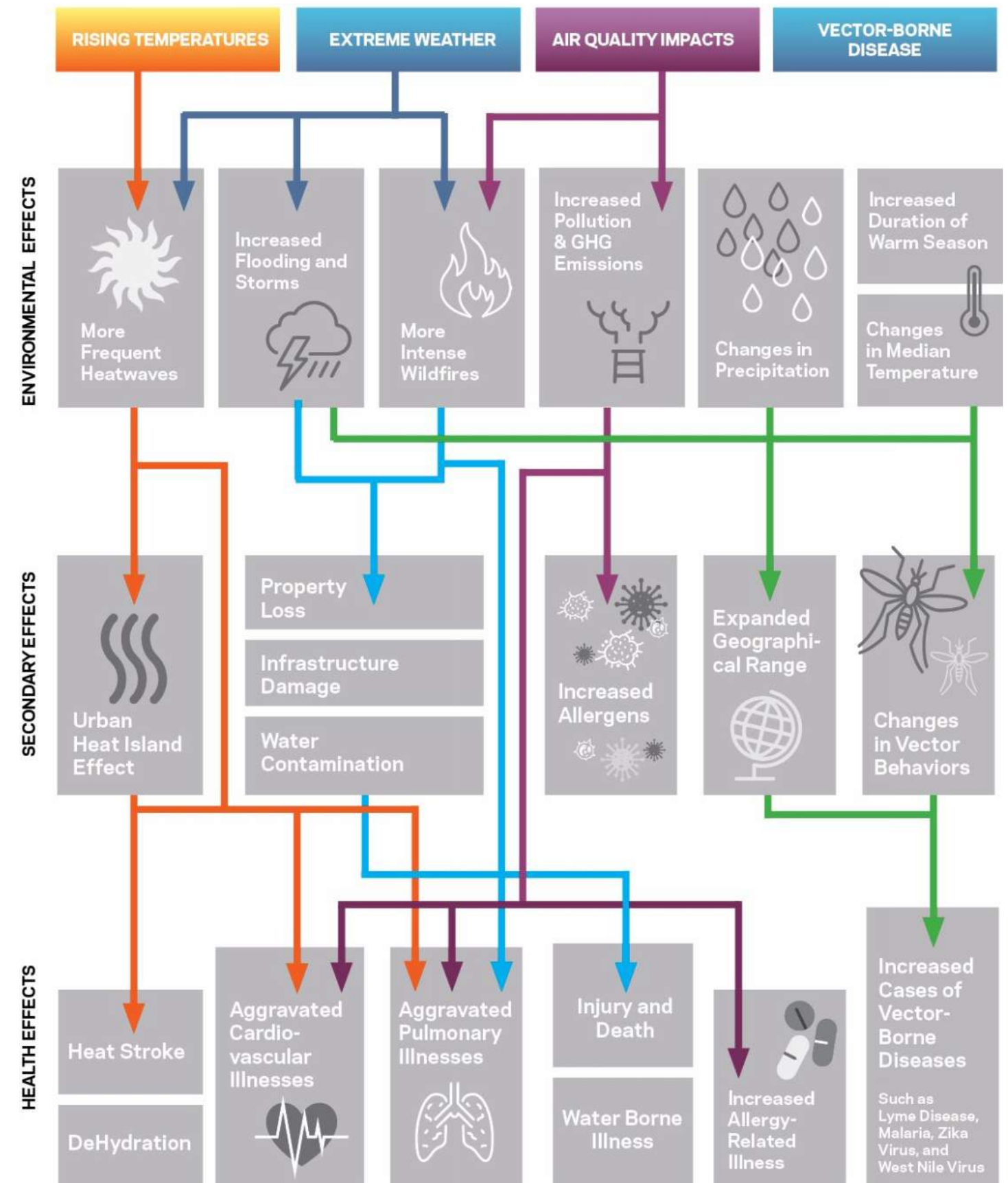




Health, Well-being + Equity

*Sustainability for All:
A Call to Action*

Climate change has exacerbated health disparities and disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations.



COVID-19 reinforced the link between the built environment and health, especially for disenfranchised and minority communities.



A Collision of Crises

“The COVID-19 crisis has brought into sharp focus the issue of health. From the micro (aerosolized particles) to the macro (moving millions of people daily from Point A to Point B), this pandemic has led us into a new appreciation for the importance of individual and community health. Unfortunately, neither are as robust as we may have thought.

As with both natural and manmade disasters, this pandemic has exposed the many vulnerabilities in our business-as-usual mode of operating. A fragile health care system, unstable supply chains, environmental injustice, skepticism of science, accumulating chronic health conditions, food insecurity, and poor indoor air quality are just a few of the vulnerabilities we now see with clearer eyes.

As in nature where shocks to the system are common, we now have the opportunity, if not an obligation, to address these vulnerabilities, grow stronger and improve our ability to bounce back. The window for leadership post-crisis is narrow, as is our collective willingness to change. With a collision of crises—health, economic, social, climate change—now upon us, the time to act with decisiveness and clarity is now.

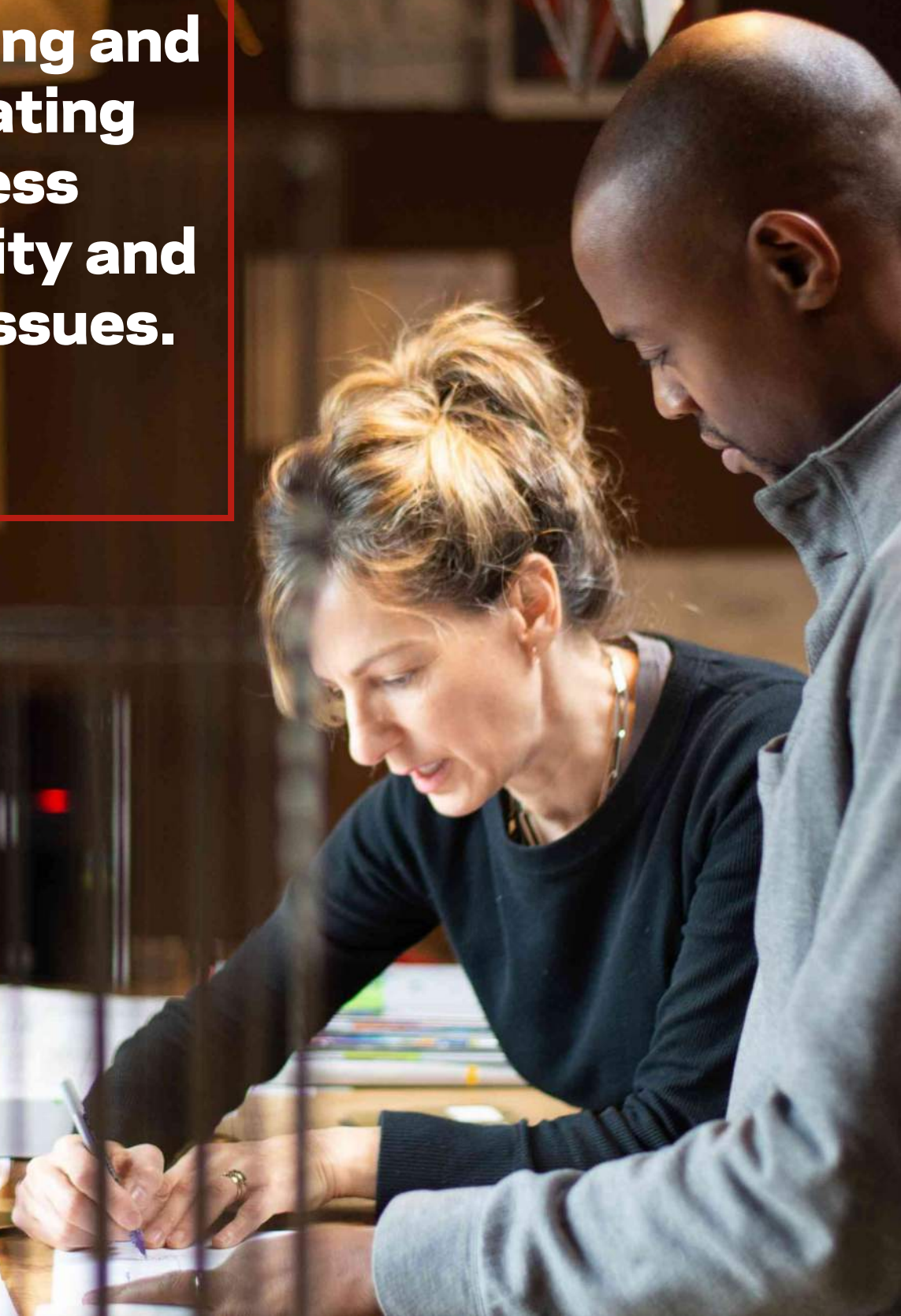
“With a collision of crises—health, economic, social, climate change—now upon us, the time to act with decisiveness and clarity is now.”

Through previous crises, our cities have weathered the storm and emerged even stronger. These crises have demanded that we adapt and evolve. This pandemic is no different. What does a stronger post-COVID metropolis look like? At HOK, we believe this crisis is a call to double down on creating healthy, more sustainable spaces.

Urban growth and density are cornerstones for reducing our carbon footprint and improving other important metrics of sustainability performance. With extensive mass transit, walkability, and access to parks and places of play, cities offer an important framework for improving health. Yet many pandemic narratives are challenging the value and safety of density and mass transit, putting the future of our cities, and the sustainability benefits that come with them, at risk. Can we find solutions that live in the nexus of sustainable urban development and our health?

We say YES!”

Conversations and actions globally are expanding and accelerating to address inclusivity and equity issues.



1

FRONT AND CENTER

The unprecedented events of the past years have proven we need to do more to design a sustainable future.

Organizations large and small have the opportunity to become agents of change.

The question is, where to start?

Here's our take on the five key issues organizations need to consider:

2

Carbon Neutrality

Setting goals to achieve carbon neutrality is critical but also have a clear plan in place to achieve those goals. Carbon accounting, Net-Zero strategic roadmaps and the use of renewable energy are bold steps to ensure success. New technologies and design strategies are enabling Net-Zero Carbon buildings to be more commercially viable.

Climate Resilience

With 25% of the nation's critical infrastructure at risk of flooding, climate resilience is a critical aspect of emergency preparedness. Selecting low-impact development sites, incorporating green space and afforestation, building systems designed for continuous operations in emergencies and other climate resilient design strategies, can help organizations prepare for extreme climate events.

3

Community Health

Failure to respond or operate during a climate event puts vulnerable communities at risk. Organizations should give back to their neighborhoods through green infrastructure that improves air quality, open spaces for the community to gather, and biophilic design solutions that help support community health and equity.

4

Smart Investments

Green buildings are proven to lower operational and maintenance costs, reduce the transmission of infectious diseases, increase productivity, and job satisfaction, and create a sense of community. Investing in sustainable buildings comes with a long-term financial, cultural, and environmental payback.

5

Inclusive and Equitable Environments

The places and spaces people inhabit and interact with have a direct impact on how they feel. Organizations should ensure that these environments address the needs of a diverse population, create a sense of belonging, and not only fit within a community but enhance the community's quality of life.

CALL TO ACTION:

The need of the hour is to broaden our focus on human sustainability to include diversity, equity, inclusion, and giving back to communities.



REDEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable design continues to evolve as we seek to address the challenges of our time. Meet the leaders who are redefining Sustainability in the built environment to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive future for all.



Anica Landreneau

*Director of Sustainable Design
HOK Washington DC*



Komal Kotwal

*Sustainable Design Leader
Health, Well-being + Equity
HOK Houston*

“It’s important to note that none of this is new. Sustainability has always been defined as the ability to maintain something over time. The idea of what sustains our entire civilization, our species, our ecosystems—these are all concepts that have been baked into sustainability from the very beginning.

Human health and well-being and social equity were always part of sustainability because it needs all three legs of the stool. It needs social well-being and equity. It needs environmental well-being and equity, and it needs economic well-being and equity. So, what we are doing now is really making sure that our stool is balanced, that our triple-bottom-line is balanced.

We need to look at the human condition. We are social beings. We cannot thrive without relating to one another. When we create a built environment, it has to be one that supports positive connections and interaction. That means creating spaces that allow all members to participate in that environment and do so in a way that they feel equally supported, protected, and welcomed.

This is what we started to do with our Designing for Neurodiversity initiative. Some people are more neurodivergent or neurotypical than others and need a type of environment in which they can thrive, learn, and do their best work. We need to be open to the diversity that the people we’re designing for require in their spaces and try to provide a platform for diversity so the people we’re designing thrive in the environment we create.

Sustainability is a big umbrella. We’ve spent a lot of time in on the environmental corner of it. Now we’re embracing the social corner, if you will, and the social issues underneath this umbrella.”

“So far, we’ve viewed sustainability in terms of its environmental and human aspects. Health and wellness are integral parts of our discipline and there is both client demand and a business case for it. But now, the conversation is expanding to address the urgent needs of equity and inclusivity.

Health disparities, especially among vulnerable and marginalized communities, have worsened due to climate change. A lot of research has been done, for example, on how the lack of green space leads to a decline in air quality. And because the air quality is poor, asthma and other respiratory issues are on the rise. This is why we see the need to broaden our focus, not just on health and well-being but community health and cultural resilience as well.

When we think about health and well-being, we often think about biophilic design, active spaces, access to daylight, views, and healthy foods. But are we looking at all these aspects through the lens of equity? Are we making sure that the everyone has equal access to clean air and water, equal opportunity for active spaces and access to nature?

Knowing that health and well-being are an integral part of our practice, we need to understand and build the case for these links between climate, health and well-being and equity. The need has never been greater.”

REDEFINING SUSTAINABILITY



Sean Quinn

*Director of Regenerative Design
HOK San Francisco*

“It’s time to shape the built environment in the service of community and nature. While sustainable design has minimized harm to the environment, it’s not enough to lead to a more productive and healthier future. We need to use design as a positive force. The goal is to leverage the power of design to restore and regenerate the natural world, which we need to continue preserving while also creating abundance. How do we leverage building technologies in the service of nature and communities through the infrastructure design work we do?”

Applying the principles of regenerative design, we work to understand the context and nature of place. We want to understand the communities—both the occupants of the buildings and those who overlap our project sites. Finally, we want to start creating design visions for those projects that meet the requirements of the brief but also incorporate external factors.

Instead of trying to mitigate externalities in that context and create value only for the client, we try to determine how we find value in nature, community, and client needs, and then layer them on top of each other. How do we find the intersections of each of their wants and needs and utilize that towards a more productive scope?

A good example across many of our projects is the idea of converting a parking garage into a building to promote adaptive reuse or creating a campus in the park that is shared with the local community. This produces a restorative effect on the ecology, it maintains access to the community but also reinforces it. For the building occupants, it provides a new and more diverse workplace environment. All three stakeholders—the occupants, the community, and the environment—mutually benefited. Regenerative design enhances all those features to create positive outcomes for individuals, the community, and nature.”



Max Driscoll

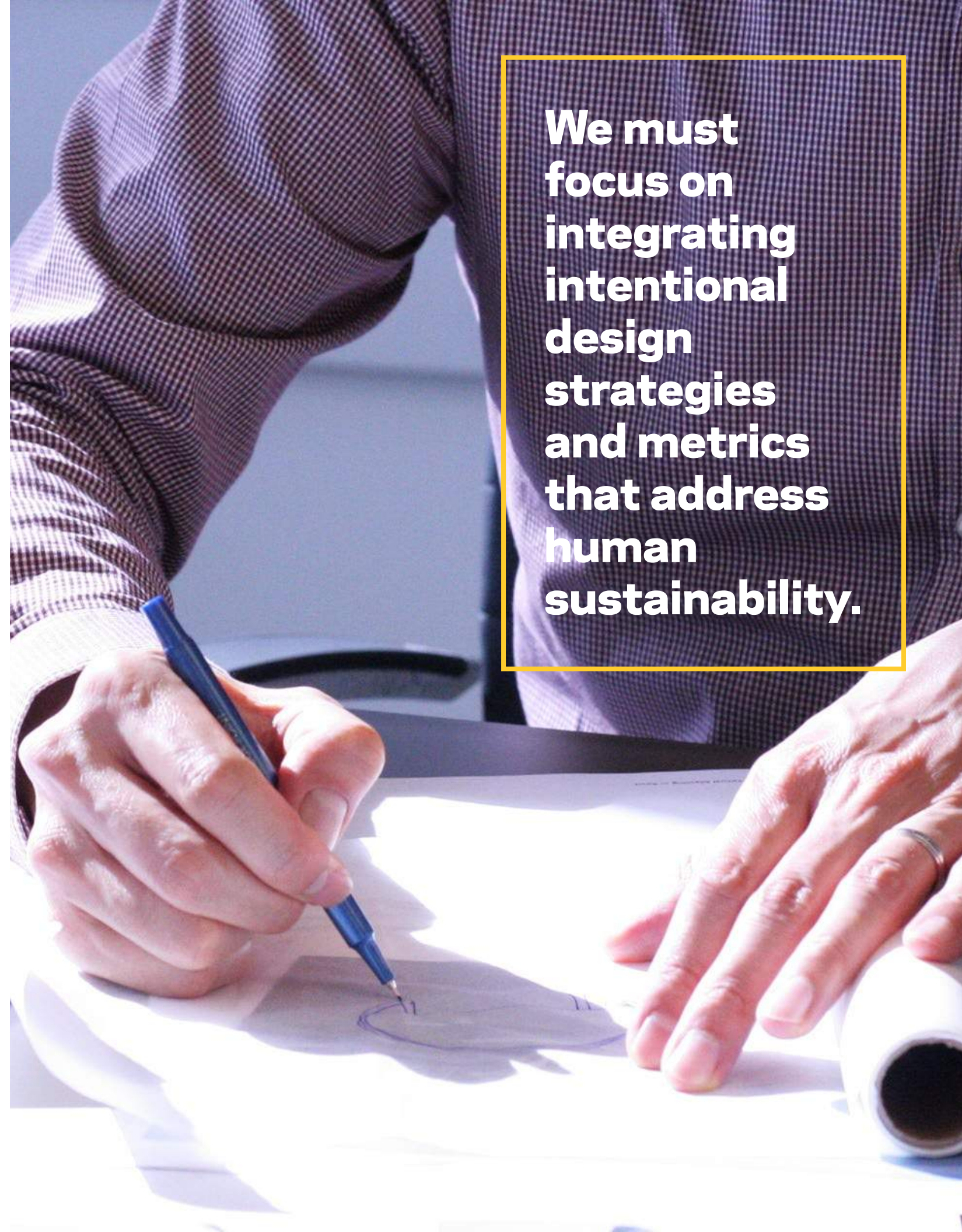
*Sustainable Design Leader
HOK New York*

“COVID-19, the social equity movement, and a hyper-attention to health and well-being in buildings has created a collision of crises that is spurring action. What excites me most is it is opening the door for the conversation to redefine sustainability beyond certifications.

Oftentimes, the sustainability of a project begins and ends with certifications, but there is—and should be—much more to it than that. When we truly embed sustainable design thinking into our regular design process, certifications are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. For many clients and owners, the certification process can feel extremely complicated, leading some to question its value and cost. In this moment, when people are searching for meaningful solutions and work, we are challenged to define sustainability as a goal that goes above and beyond the pursuit of certification.

One of the keys to redefining our approach to sustainability to make it simpler to understand and by putting people first. This prioritization begins with a new focus on health and well-being and D.E.I. (diversity, equity, and inclusion). Organizations can get behind this in a way that will accelerate growth faster than addressing climate change because these design strategies feel personal and tangible versus abstract and long-term. To be clear, it’s really a both/and scenario—health and well-being and climate change.

By incorporating human health and well-being into our sustainable design approach, in addition to climate change, we make sustainability more inclusive and approachable. That is key to broadening the tent and building the critical mass necessary to solve these generational challenges.”



We must focus on integrating intentional design strategies and metrics that address human sustainability.

GETTING TO ZERO

Despite the anticipation leading up to COP26 in Glasgow, the results were lackluster. With buildings accounting for nearly 40% of global CO2 emissions, architect Brian Smiley explains why HOK is doubling-down on its commitment to achieve a carbon-neutral portfolio.



Brian Smiley

Sr. Project Architect
HOK Philadelphia

“We know that the measures at COP26 are not going to get us to the targeted goal of curbing global temperatures to 1.5°C of their pre-industrial levels. More and more reports indicate that even a 1.5°C rise in temperatures will have severe climate implications and lead to more natural disasters. That’s disappointing and proves we must do more.

If we’re not going to have global or even national action on climate, it’s really important that we as architects, designers, planners, and engineers work with clients on an individual basis to make our projects net zero and have them serve as examples we can hold up to legislators to prove that this is achievable.

In the past year, I’ve made a concerted effort to get more involved in policy in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. We know that New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C., all have great decarbonization programs designed to phase out carbon fossil fuel emissions. New York is banning new natural gas connections, which is what we are already doing in the new laboratory buildings we design.

“There are things we can do to achieve Net-Zero on individual buildings and campus buildings... we need to electrify our buildings now, to make Net-Zero labs possible in the near future.”

We’re also hearing more clients ask about net zero labs and how to achieve them. A lot of our recent new buildings are already fully electric with no natural gas. Twenty years ago, research buildings had gas running throughout the labs and gas-fired hot water heaters for domestic and heating hot water. Now, that is really becoming a rarity and we need to continue to focus on a transition away from fossil fuel combustion.

There are things we can do to achieve net zero on individual buildings and campus buildings. We have a lot of forward-thinking clients—especially universities—working toward cleaning up their district systems, phasing out natural gas, installing electric steam generation, and cleaning up the electric grid. It is a lot easier to build net zero laboratories when buildings connect to district systems powered by clean energy. It’s going to take a long time to transition these systems, upgrade electrical infrastructure to support all-electric systems, and upgrade emergency systems to clean energy, but these plans need to be made now.

We must electrify our buildings now to make net-zero labs possible in the near future.”



Sustainability
for all.

HUMAN HEALTH + WELLNESS

We believe it is crucial for people to experience the first-hand benefits that buildings and cities can have on individual health and wellness.

Through cutting-edge research and commonsense best practices, we create spaces that allow individuals to thrive, make healthy choices and holistically improve their indoor environments.



01 Natural Ventilation

Increasing the amount of outdoor air coming into an indoor space can reduce the concentration of indoor air pollutants that can contribute to building-related illnesses and indoor airborne contaminants, including SARS-CoV-2 and other viruses. At the same time, occupants feel better and are more alert and productive in a naturally ventilated and climate-controlled environment.

03 Active Design

Integrating physical activity into our everyday routines contribute significantly to our health and well-being. Active design strategies aid in promoting healthy lifestyles. For example, a central, irresistible staircase designed to be highly visible, well-lit and approachable can persuade occupants to make the healthier option of taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

02 Biophilic Design

Bringing nature indoors through biophilic patterns and planting plays an important role in keeping our nervous system in check and is proven to relieve stress. Stress affects the nervous system negatively, and eventually leads to a degradation of the respiratory system by putting excessive stress on our heart, which increases blood pressure and eventually effect our mood and overall wellbeing.

04 Daylighting

Access to natural light helps our physical and mental well-being. Studies have shown that daylighting minimizes disruptions to our body's circadian rhythm and is likely to improve our energy, mood, and productivity. Good lighting has been linked to higher job satisfaction and more effective learning.

This page:

Sliding doors allow coastal breezes inside WPP's Playa Vista offices in Los Angeles

Next page:

1. Pharmavite Headquarters
2. NASDAQ Philadelphia
3. Shiseido North America



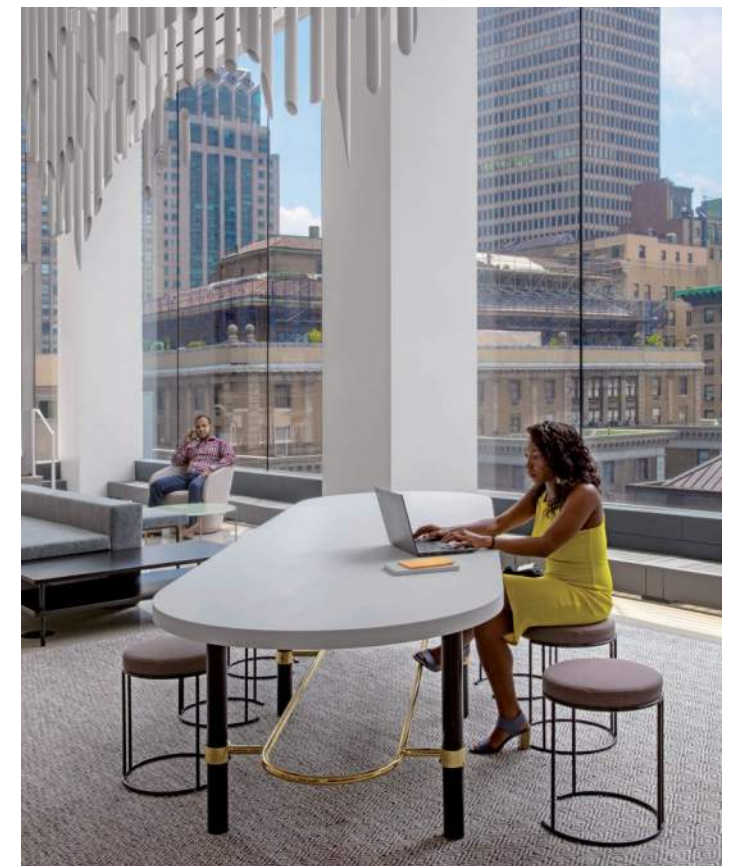
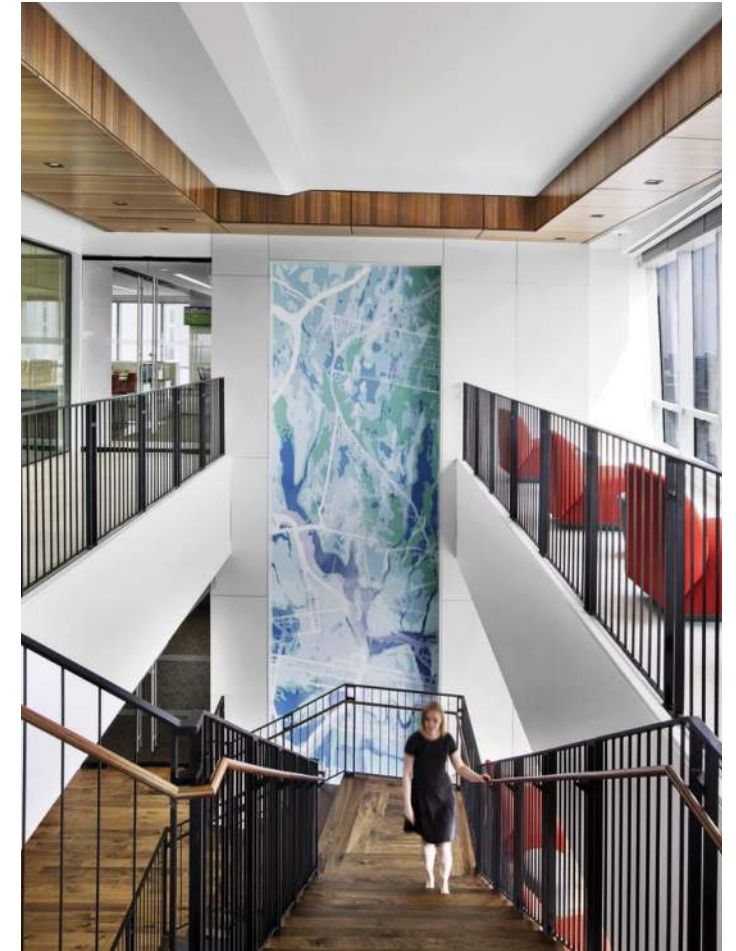
05 Nourishment

The availability of fresh, wholesome foods limits unhealthy ingredients and encourages better eating habits and food culture. Providing occupants with healthier food choices, behavioral cues, and knowledge about nutrient quality encourages healthy eating habits, enabling people to make more informed dietary choices and lead to better health and well-being.

06 Acoustic Comfort

Creating distraction-free, productive, and comfortable indoor environments can enhance social interaction, learning, satisfaction, and productivity. Adopting policies, technologies and practices that ensure quieter acoustical environments and minimize our exposure to harmful and unnecessary sound makes indoor environments places of comfort.

1. A living wall brings in nature at the Pharmavite Headquarters in West Hills, CA
2. An irresistible stair encourages physical movement at the NASDAQ Philadelphia Office
3. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow natural light into Shiseido's North America Offices in New York





1



2



3



4

1. Healthy foods on offer at the Gartner Dallas Office

2. A teaming space at Accenture Federal Services in Washington DC offers an alternative work setting

3. Acoustic panels double as an accent wall at Viacom 1515 Broadway in New York

4. The fitness center at the White & Case Offices in New York

07

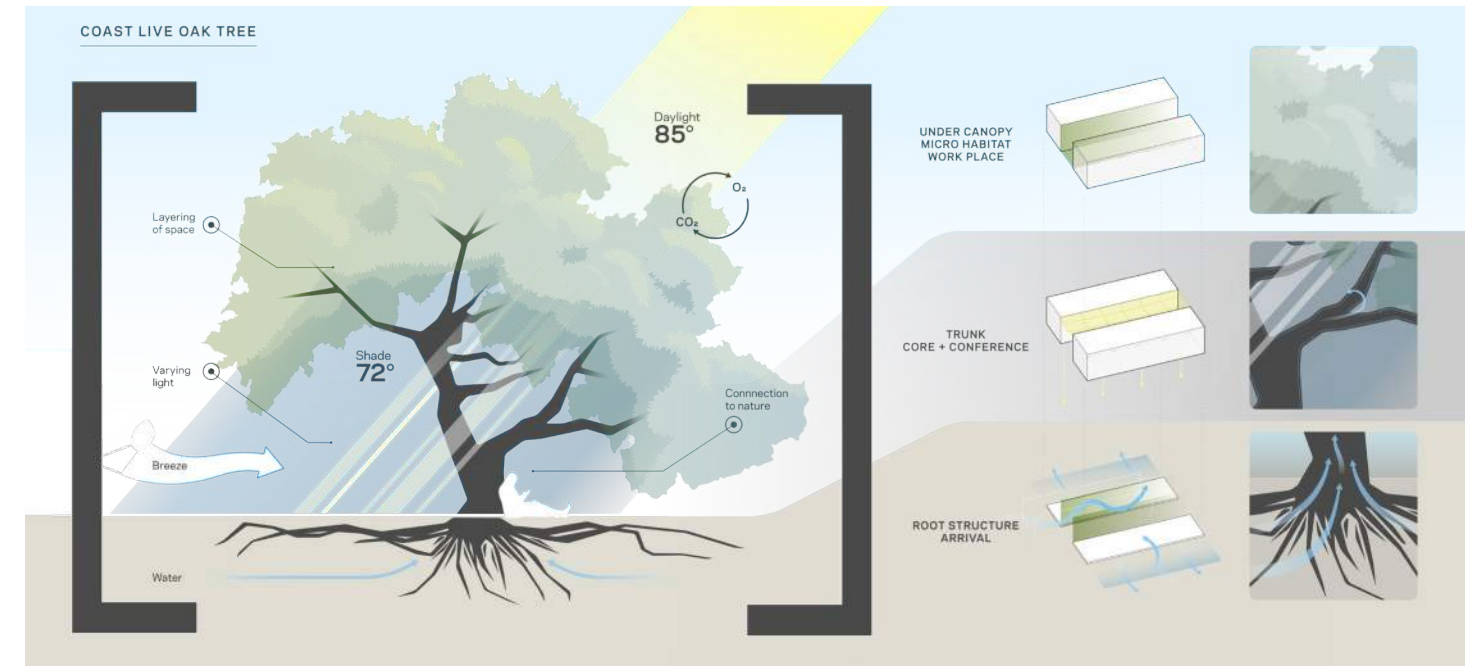
Fitness

Considering that 90% of our time is spent within the built environment, strategies that are consciously articulated to encourage physical activity and discourage sedentariness can constitute powerful intervention strategies to promote a more active lifestyle and ward off obesity and chronic diseases.

08

Spatial Variety

People are happier and healthier when they have choice over their lives, particularly with respect to options for thermal comfort and different workspace opportunities. Not everyone will be equally comfortable under the same conditions so considering a wide range of opportunities, from quiet rooms to standing desks to spaces that are warmer/cooler, can improve the way we experience places where we live and work.



1



2

Coast Live Oak

The structure, mechanisms, and resulting ecosystem of and around the coast live oak provide valuable lessons on how to design habitats ideal for life. The root structure of a trees serves as the gateway arrival inviting diverse people and resources that form the foundation of any place. The trunk and resulting branches identify as the core and communicating spaces of any building creating spaces for work, contemplation, and relaxation. The canopy provides a porous envelope and the opportunity and challenge to structure life in direct connection with nature. When designing for a regenerative built environment, the coast live oak serves as ideal inspiration for "building like a tree."

Biomimicry

Drawing inspiration from natural forms, processes, and systems, the practice of Biomimicry integrates nature's principles and innovations into the planning and design of buildings, communities, and cities worldwide. By mimicking how living organisms have survived and thrived billions of years, designers can create well-adapted products, processes, designs, and policies that are restorative, resilient, and work with nature. This helps to reduce the environmental impact of projects and to define new sustainable standards for design and construction.

For nearly two decades, HOK has partnered with Biomimicry3.8 to further the practice of biomimicry and integrate nature's innovations into the built environment. Built on interdisciplinary research conducted through workshops and real-world project application, this process serves as a springboard of discovery that enables architects, designers, planners, and engineers to identify how material and energy intensity of building facades and structures can be reduced, how buildings can better capture and harvest water resources, and how landscapes can generate ecosystems aligned with local ecology.

1. Taking inspiration from the Coast Live Oak role as an ecosystems organizer to inform building design

2. California Coast Live Oak



Regenerative Design

Regenerative Design engages multiple disciplines in a synergistic exchange towards nature positive results. This leads to development that advances nature positive solutions and enhances a community and their relationship with the environment. All solutions lend to a greater whole to create mutualistic benefits between a client's goals and a thriving environment and community. This requires whole system thinking that brings together the needs of people and nature.

HOK's design approach is inspired by nature's wisdom and driven by data. We begin by benchmarking the ecosystem services the site provides related to water, air, carbon, soil, biodiversity, and health and well-being. We then quantify the performance of a thriving nearby ecosystem and compare the differences between the two. Our goal is to design a regenerative project that emulates and even surpasses those ecosystem performance metrics.

Through the lens of biomimicry, we study the species that are thriving in a project's local environment and consider how natural systems can guide our design solutions. We complement our use of biomimicry with biophilic design solutions that support people's innate desire to be connected to nature.



Biophilia also can provide regenerative effects and improve the health and well-being of people who experience a space.

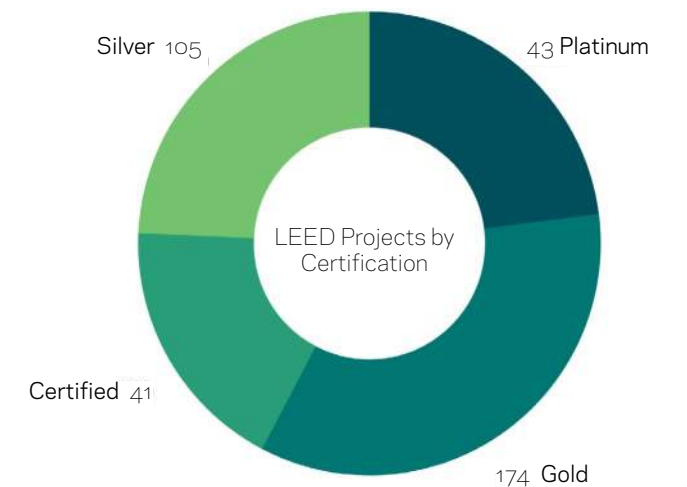
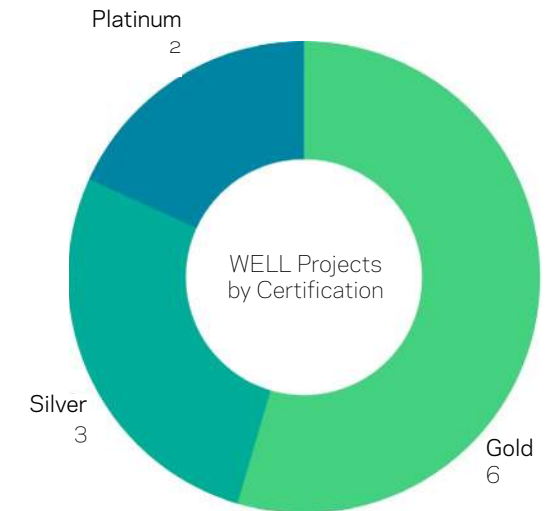
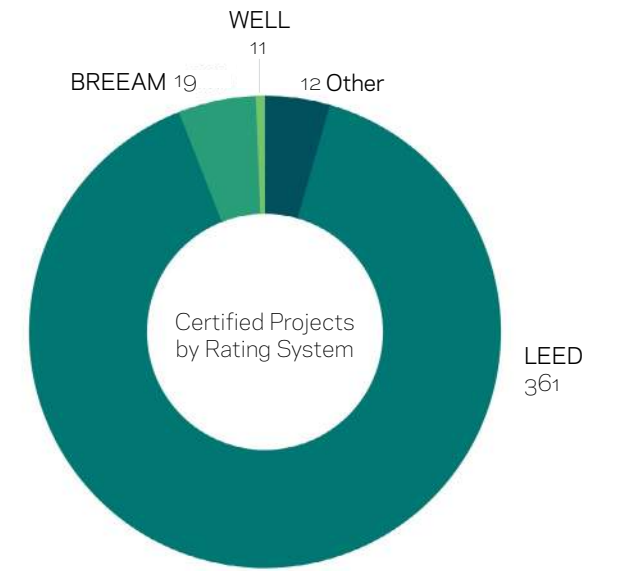
To push beyond sustainability, we build on HOK's integrated design approaches to net-zero energy, water and waste; biomimicry and biophilia; health and wellness; social equity; elimination of embodied carbon in structural systems; and healthy materials and products.

Our participatory design process invites all project stakeholders—including employees, clients, partners and community members—to offer input that enables us to respond to their needs. This leads to projects that enable both people and nature to thrive.

The U.S. Coastguard St. Elizabeth's West Headquarters features a cascading 450,000-sq.-ft. green roof and massive bioretention pond that collects and treats storm water before returning the purified water to the Anacostia River.

KEEPING SCORE

Sustainability rating systems and certifications such as LEED, WELL, Fitwel, and others are an important part of the journey in defining a project's goals, values, and priorities. We incorporate these rating systems through an integrated approach, addressing the goals and requirements of each rating system using consolidated tracking tools. Engaging the team early and consistently is the best way to ensure a cost-effective approach to sustainability and certifications. To-date, HOK has delivered 400+ sustainably certified projects across the globe, encompassing 142 million square feet.



400+

Sustainably Certified Projects Globally

143 million

Square Feet of Sustainably Certified Projects Globally



BRINGING CALM TO THE PASSENGER EXPERIENCE

As air travel becomes more accessible, airports across the globe are having to address the exponential growth in passenger volume and the agonizing experience that comes with it. HOK's Director of Regenerative Design, Sean Quinn, makes the case for elevating the passenger experience by letting nature do the work.



Sean Quinn

Director of Regenerative Design
HOK San Francisco

"Air travel was stressful enough before COVID. Now, in addition to fretting about arriving to the airport on time, clearing security checkpoints and finding the departure gate, passengers must also contend with a litany of new health restrictions and risks. No wonder a recent survey found more than 40 percent of flyers considered air travel more stressful than a trip to the dentist and 55 percent considered it more stressful than visiting their in-laws.

And while airport design cannot alleviate all the stress of air travel, it can make a difference by instilling a sense of calm through nature. This is what HOK has found in designing terminals recently in New York, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Seattle that incorporate biophilic elements, such as daylight, interior plantings, outdoor views and natural materials.

"By incorporating biophilic elements into the buildings themselves, you create a multitude of positive benefits."

Biophilia has proven calming and therapeutic effects, and by using it, the interior begins to emulate the surrounding natural palette that we draw from.

A unique effect is that this emphasis on the health and wellness of the user also ends up being good for revenue. It's a unique opportunity that creates value and transfers it back to the initial stakeholder. While there is an initial cost to building out some of these features, it generally creates spaces that people want to congregate in for longer periods of time. Given a choice of where I'm going to have a two-hour layover, I'm more inclined to choose—and have chosen—airports that make me feel at ease. I've sat in these spaces because they are comforting. They're vibrant and they're alive. And so, this becomes a way in which environmental drivers create economic benefit."



MADE TO MEASURE

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting is the new table stakes for large organizations. We asked our Sustainable Design Lead Max Driscoll why ESG reporting should incorporate health and well-being and how HOK's design efforts can support a growing emphasis on ESG goals.



Max Driscoll

Sustainable Design Leader
HOK New York

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has become shorthand for corporate sustainability—how are our largest companies treating the environment and engaging with their communities? As recently as the early 2010s, finding an ESG report with substance was like finding a unicorn. Thankfully, that situation has flipped, and the outliers are now those companies that do not have an ESG strategy with published data.

Many early adopters focused primarily on energy consumption and carbon emissions to publicly demonstrate their commitment to addressing climate change. While that trend continues, some of our more sophisticated clients have taken to incorporating health and well-being into their ESG strategy. Their reasons for doing so are varied when seen close up, but if you zoom out, they coalesce around a single driver—talent.

In hindsight, it makes perfect sense. People are the engine of most companies, and most companies spend orders of magnitude more on people than they do on energy or real estate. Why wouldn't you invest in your most important asset? Add to this a shift in the priorities among talent to critically examine the company they choose to work for. Survey after survey shows that young employees are "voting their values" and want to see that their company cares about the whole person instead of just units of output.

"Young employees are 'voting their values' and want to see that their company cares about the whole person instead of just units of output."

With so many new entrants into the ESG arena, many are asking the question, "Where do we start?" As early adopters in health and well-being, HOK has developed many tools for designing nurturing and holistic buildings and environments. The six principles of our health and well-being design framework—accessing nature, movement, nutrition, air quality, decentralization, and trust—are flexible enough to serve as a good ESG starting point as well.

Another good tool is the "Culture of Health for Business" framework developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). This tool identifies 16 practices that were found to be effective at influencing both health and business outcomes. Organized into four broad categories—strategic, policies and benefits, workforce and operations, and community—the framework inserts itself between health determinants and health outcomes to leverage the reach and resources of businesses to improve the well-being of stakeholders.

Real estate has proven to be a key point of progress toward ESG carbon goals, let's embrace a "both/and" mindset and incorporate health and well-being into that same portfolio. You may know your company's carbon footprint, but do you know its health footprint?





DESIGNING FOR EQUITY

Designers have a responsibility to protect the health, safety, and welfare of all people. But how exactly can design create a more equitable future? We spoke with Komal Kotwal, sustainable design leader for Health, Well-being + Equity, about HOK's Designing for Equity initiative and how the firm is rethinking its approach to incorporate equitable design principles into every project.



Komal Kotwal

*Sustainable Design Leader
Health, Well-being + Equity
HOK Houston*

What prompted this rethink to promote equity in the environments we design?

"I think the series of events that occurred in 2020 really prompted us to take action in addressing equity issues through design. Everything we've seen in the U.S. and around the world—from climate change and how it's impacting minority communities to social movements and racial justice issues—led us to rethink how we design.

A lot of organizations, especially on the corporate side, are asking for this as well. Our clients have made commitments to establishing more equitable and inclusive workplaces and are looking to us on how to design them.

It's in HOK's DNA to seek out the next right thing to do. We did this with sustainability 20 years ago. Now we look at Designing for Equity as the avenue where we can take on a leadership role and make lasting change."

How is this different from the way we designed before?

"Intentionality. That's the biggest difference. We saw the need to be intentional in the way we approach design.

When we say that we are designing a sustainable building, we need to have actual metrics and have a process that is dedicated to it. If we want to initiate a cultural shift in the way we approach design, it must be formalized. I think that's where it all comes together.

It's like the way we designed before, but now we have a formal process for it. We're thinking about equity at different scales, whether it's at the master plan level, the building, or interiors. We have a diverse group of people across the firm who are championing this initiative and are dedicated to developing this framework. We're really committed to this on every level."

What do we need to consider when designing equitable environments?

"The main thing we need to bear in mind is that the environments where we live, work, and play impact each of us very differently. To make sure that these spaces are inclusive and equitable, we need to understand how the space affects people from different perspectives—racial, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, mental health. We need to overcome our unconscious biases and design intentionally to accommodate these differences.

Next, we need to consider the equitable design principles that guide our design philosophy and help to identify physical design features that support equity and inclusivity. Implementing community feedback into the design, incorporating universal design principles, designing for neurodiversity, promoting health and well-being and environmental justice for all—these are just some of the things we need to consider at different scales.

It's everything from improving public transportation links to installing the right HVAC systems to ensure people are comfortable indoors to adding ramps to improve accessibility. That's why having a formal process and people who are dedicated to implementing this process are important."



Through our network of 24 offices worldwide, we embrace design excellence and innovation to create places that enrich people's lives and help clients succeed.



[hok.com](https://www.hok.com)

SOUND MIND, SOUND BODY

Collegiate sports and recreation facilities are typically designed to address the physical demands of the student-athlete. But what happens when the rigors of competition come to bare on their mental health? Our Sustainable Design Leader Vanessa Hostick discusses the importance of Sustainability in the design of healthy and equitable sports facilities.



Vanessa Hostick
Sustainable Design Leader
HOK Kansas City

“Healthy buildings for healthy bodies” is a HOK design mantra and is why sustainability and health and well-being play a crucial role in our design of college sports facilities. These specialized building types are key to the training, performance, and physical and mental well-being of student athletes. It’s as much about training the body as it is about resting and recovering muscles and the mind. As designers, we understand the physical demands of the athlete. The question is, how can we support them holistically, support them mentally and support them in recovery?

Our clients and their sports teams recognize the importance of mental health, but don’t necessarily realize how the building can play a beneficial role in well-being. They’ll say, “Our student athletes’ wellness, their holistic wellness, their education—they’re all important to us.” But they don’t really think about how the built environment can support that. When we bring ideas about how a building’s program and spaces can facilitate wellness, they become dedicated to making sure it happens.

Wellness strategies are also important in addressing the mental-health aspect of sports and competition. Research has shown that during the height of the pandemic, one in 10 student athletes experienced depression. That’s 2.5 to 3.5 times higher than normal and one more reason why it is important to think about how collegiate sports facilities can provide safe, nurturing, healthy and—ultimately—uplifting spaces for student athletes.

Recreation facilities on college campuses also provide opportunities to support wellness and equity. These spaces should be inclusive and universally accessible. Tracks, for example, shouldn’t be just for people who run with their feet. Rec centers should consider the needs of each individual user. How does the space support those who have hearing or vision issues or those who are gender neutral or non-binary? What about students who are also parents? Or older faculty and students who may have physical limitations?

These are the people who often get overlooked when planning a rec center despite the best intentions of the university to create a welcoming environment for all. Accessible and inviting rec centers increase the likelihood that students will use the facility repeatedly and consistently. That’s important for several reasons. It fosters community and supports health and well-being across the student body.

Be it a sports facility or recreation center, the ultimate goal is to ensure all students—regardless of race, gender or ability—have the spaces they need to perform, recover and grow physically and mentally.

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