Wellbeing Design

Creating Space for Human Flourishing

cohere

Can we truly create the conditions for health and wellness, or is this just wishful thinking?

About the Author

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Introduction

Wellbeing is one of the fastest growing global trends in design.

With the release of numerous reports and tools from groups such as the International WELL Building Institute and the Global Wellness Institute, it has be suggested that we can use design to promote wellbeing and human flourishing.

However, is this really the case? While it sounds like a worthy aspiration, can we truly design lifestyles, organisations and buildings that bring out the best in people? To answer this question, we need to understand wellbeing's underlying nature, because it's an elusive quality, one that is different for everyone. It's in constant flux, rising and subsiding, and there is certainly no 'one size fits all' solution for it.

This paper explores the multidimensional nature of people and place based wellbeing, and investigates what designers can do to elevate the potential for human flourishing on their projects.

Our findings have been developed through extensive interdisciplinary research, drawing on industry leading publications and is presented in a way that supports a wide range of applications.
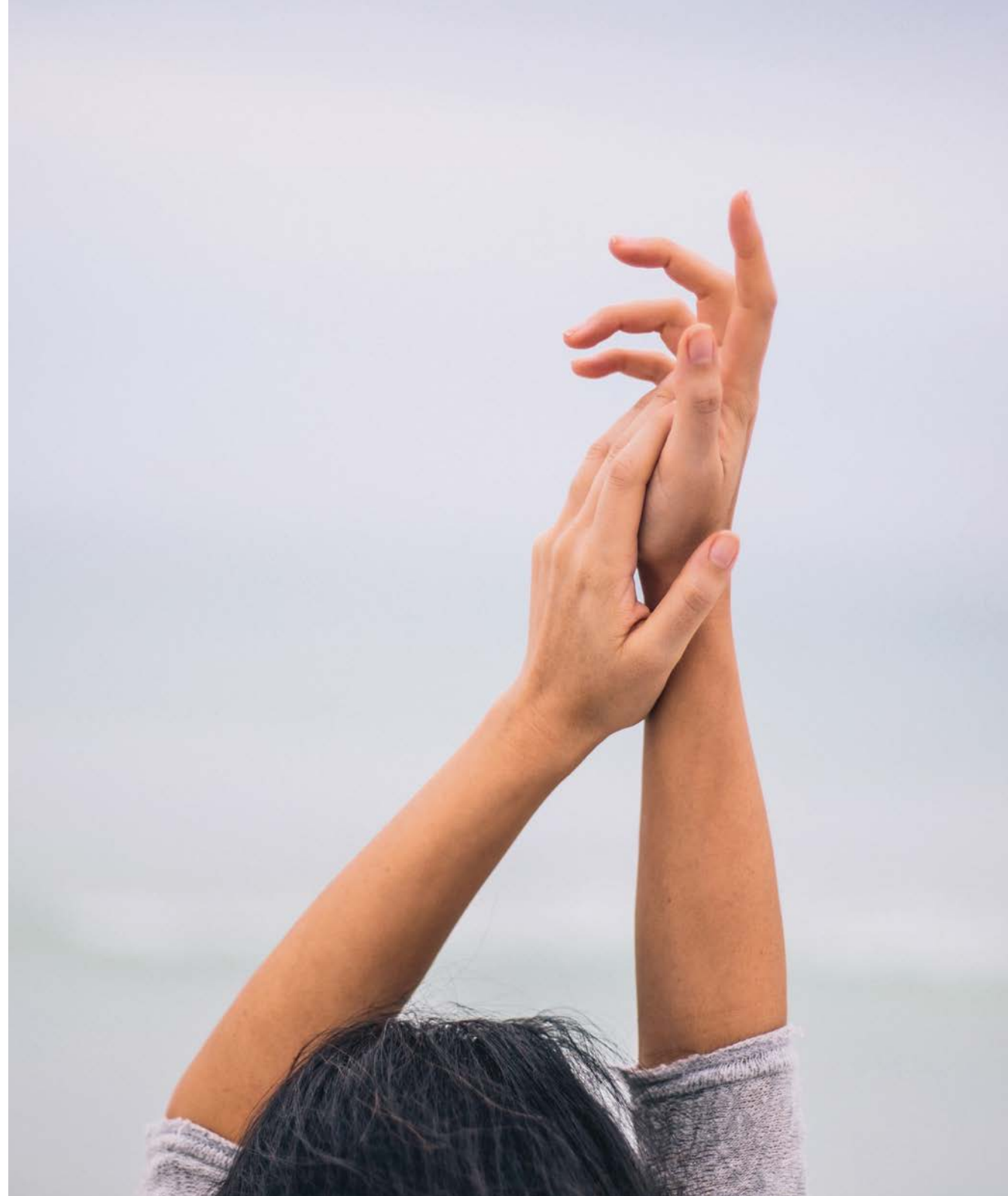
What is Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a multidimensional quality that has both simple and complex elements.

It generally includes a person's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. It is strongly linked with a person's social and environmental context as well as their levels of happiness, life satisfaction and resilience.

Therefore, wellbeing is best thought of, not as a person centric quality, but rather, as an always adapting pattern of relationships. It is the result of an ongoing partnership, something that happens in concert between people and the places they live and work.

Some of these partnerships are *physical* and *ecological*, such as access to healthy food, and being in nature, while others are *social* and *psychological*, such as community and having positive emotions. Wellbeing depends on what happened yesterday, as much as it depends on what is happening in the moment, or could happen in the future. It's a dynamic quality that can't be simplified into a shopping list of things that make us well.

The analogy we like to use to describe the qualitative nature of wellbeing is that it's like throwing a good party. You can have all the right bits, like a good DJ, good food and an awesome dancefloor, but this is no guarantee it will be a good party. What makes it a good party is not simply the bits and pieces, but the unique 'concert' that occurs in the 'space' between people and place.

To consider the qualitative nature of people and place based wellbeing, its useful to think about it as being made up of four interwoven and irreducible dimensions – the *physical, psychological, social* and *ecological*.

Each of these dimensions is explored in more detail in the following sections of this paper.

Physical

Creating extraordinary spaces that nurture human flourishing.

Psychological

People connecting with a deeper level of their humanity.

Social

Bringing people closer together with purpose and vitality.

Ecological

Cultivating high-quality relationships between people and nature.

Physical Dimension

A popular focus for designers are the physical elements of wellbeing. There is now a rich variety of programs and tools that encourage the development of better places for people. This includes guidelines for the design of interior and urban spaces that have the potential to transform the quality of our lives and enhance the richness of our workplaces and communities. Popular design references that are predominantly physical in nature include:

WELL Building Standard

By the International WELL Building Institute

An evidence-based tool providing design guidelines for building features that impact wellbeing. This includes air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind interventions.

Healing Spaces

By Esther Sternberg

A book exploring the design of places that promote healing, health and happiness. Sternberg examines how our senses can lead us to our own unique "place of healing".

Happy City

By Charles Montgomery

A book examining how we can transform the quality of our lives through better urban design - and everyone can help build it. A tool for reimagining the potential of our own communities.

"We shape our buildings,
and afterwards, our
buildings shape us."

- Winston Churchill

EXAMPLE INTERVENTIONS - PHYSICAL

Activity	Nourishment	Comfort	Urban Design	Multisensory
Creating spaces that support active lifestyles – promoting everyday fitness opportunities.	Availability of nutritious food that encourages a healthy and wholesome food culture.	Maintaining productive and distraction-free indoor and outdoor environments.	Shaping the way our cities influence our feeling, behaviours and relationships.	Spaces that engage and excite our senses reduce stress and enhance wellbeing.

Psychological Dimension

In recent years there has been an explosion of research into the traits that constitute psychological flourishing in our inner lives of thoughts and feelings. Spaces that nurture rich and deeply meaningful experiences and practices opens people up and helps them show up more fully at work, and in life. In turn, this can promote psychological flourishing as well as a number of other desirable human qualities like creativity, vitality and productivity. Popular references that are predominantly psychological include;

Flourish

By Martin Seligman

A Positive Psychology framework used to describe the building blocks of psychological wellbeing. Includes; Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.

5 Ways to Wellbeing

By New Economics Foundation

Drawing on psychological and economic literature, the NEF have developed a set of actions to improve wellbeing. Includes; Connect, Give, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Be Active.

10 Keys to Happiness

By Actions for Happiness

10 keys to happier living that make life more fulfilling. Includes; Giving, Relating, Exercising, Awareness, Trying Out, Direction, Resilience, Emotions, Acceptance and Meaning.

> "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener"
>
> – Bill O'Brien

EXAMPLE INTERVENTIONS - PSYCHOLOGICAL

Mindfulness	Gratitude	Kindness	Engagement	Learning
The mental state of being aware of something in the present moment.	The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation and to return warmth.	The quality of being friendly, generous and considerate of ourselves, others and nature.	The mental state of being fully immersed in an activity, feeling energized and in flow.	An openness to new experiences, trying something new and challenging ourselves.

Social Dimension

In addition to our inner world of being, there is the often overlooked fact that we live in a profoundly interconnected world. We are both separate and connected to everything else in this universe. Therefore, our wellbeing is also a function of the quality of our relationships. Spaces that promote culturally rich, diverse and connected communities is fundamental in elevating our collective potential. This includes creating spaces that resonate with their contexts, and express values that purposefully pull communities and organisations forward. Popular design references include;

Community

By Peter Block

A book on what healthy and resilient communities look like, and a pathway for getting there.

Deliberately Developmental Organisations

By Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey

A model for unleashing organisational potential. Organisations will best prosper when they are deeply aligned around our strongest motive, which is to do deeply meaningful work.

Reinventing Organisations

By Frederic Laloux

Exploring the emergence of a new management and organisational paradigm – Teal Organisations

> We are all bundles of potential that manifest only in relationship."
>
> – Quantum Physicist

EXAMPLE INTERVENTIONS - SOCIAL

Purpose

Having a deeply meaningful reason for living and working that is greater than the self.

Wholeness

Inviting everyone to reclaim their inner wholeness and show up more fully in life and work.

Culture

Using share-values to unite and empower everyone to self-manage their future.

Development

Communities and organisations that nurture the unfolding and flourishing of all.

Dialogue

Conversations that create communal commitment and foster a sense of belonging.

Ecological Dimension

We are innately wired to be in relationship with natural elements such as daylight, air, water, flora and fauna. There is now overwhelming evidence that a connection with nature improves our health, wellbeing and productivity as well as enhancing desirable human qualities like learning, empathy and compassion. Therefore, spaces that bring the best of the outdoors, indoors, plays a key role in a holistic approach to health and wellbeing. Popular design references include:

Biophilic Design

By Stephen R. Kellert, Judith Heerwagen & Martin Mador

A book on the practice of bringing buildings to life. It explores how experiences of natural systems and processes is critical to human health, performance and wellbeing.

14 Patterns of Biophilic Design

By Terrapin Bright Green

A reference of 14 biophilic patterns designers can use to improve wellbeing and expedite healing in the built environment.
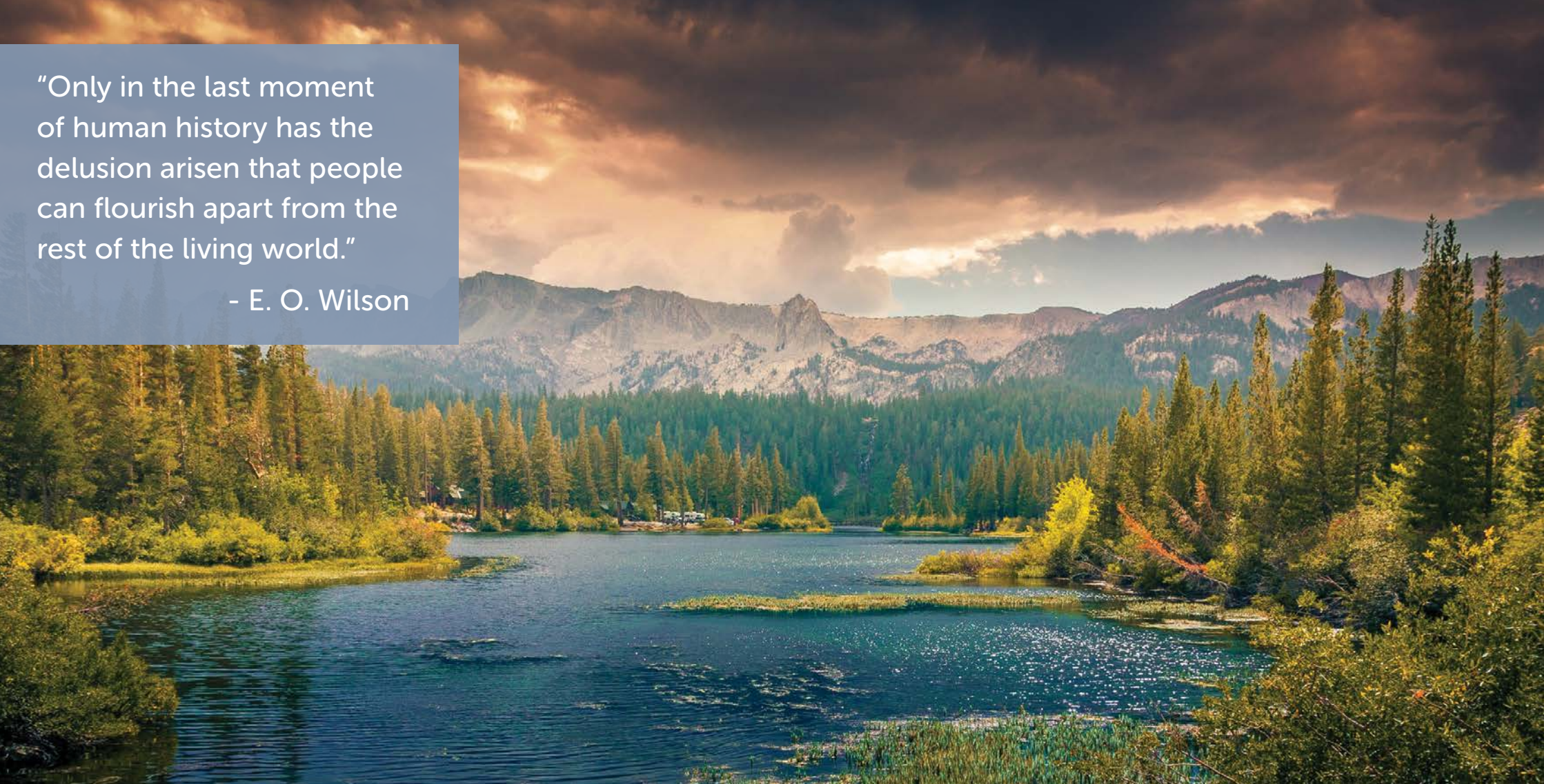
The Nature Principle

By Richard Louv

Connecting with nature boosts mental acuity and creativity; builds smarter and more sustainable businesses, communities and economies; and strengthens human bonds.

"Only in the last moment of human history has the delusion arisen that people can flourish apart from the rest of the living world."

- E. O. Wilson

EXAMPLE INTERVENTIONS - ECOLOGICAL

Green Spaces

A view of greenery can improve learning, promote healing and enhance productivity.

Daylight

Experiencing the dynamic rhythms of daylight promotes a broad range of health benefits.

Water

The presence of water as a life giving element has a calming and captivating effect.

Air

Fresh air positively influences our concentration levels, enhancing human potential.

Biomimicry

Using natures time-tested strategies to inspire the way we live, work and flourish.

The Beauty is in the Unity

The potential for wellbeing is at its highest when the design of spaces is informed and uniquely enrichened by all four of these dimensions — in a way that addresses the authentic needs of people and place.

In today's reductionist culture, it can be suggested that many over simplify the scope of wellbeing, only focusing on one or perhaps two of these dimensions. For example, architects and engineers tend to concentrate on the physical aspects, psychologist overly focus on the things going on in our inner lives and biophilic specialists point to our ecological connection. But it's the concert between all four of them that really matters.

Because the thing is — *the beauty is in the unity*. It's in knowing how to create vital spaces that elevate the potential of our humanity in four dimensions simultaneously. It's about recognising that none of these dimensions can be reduced to each other. Rather it's the emergent synergy between all four of them that creates the conditions for human flourishing.

But exactly how do we best create the conditions for this unity? This is explored further in the second part of this paper.
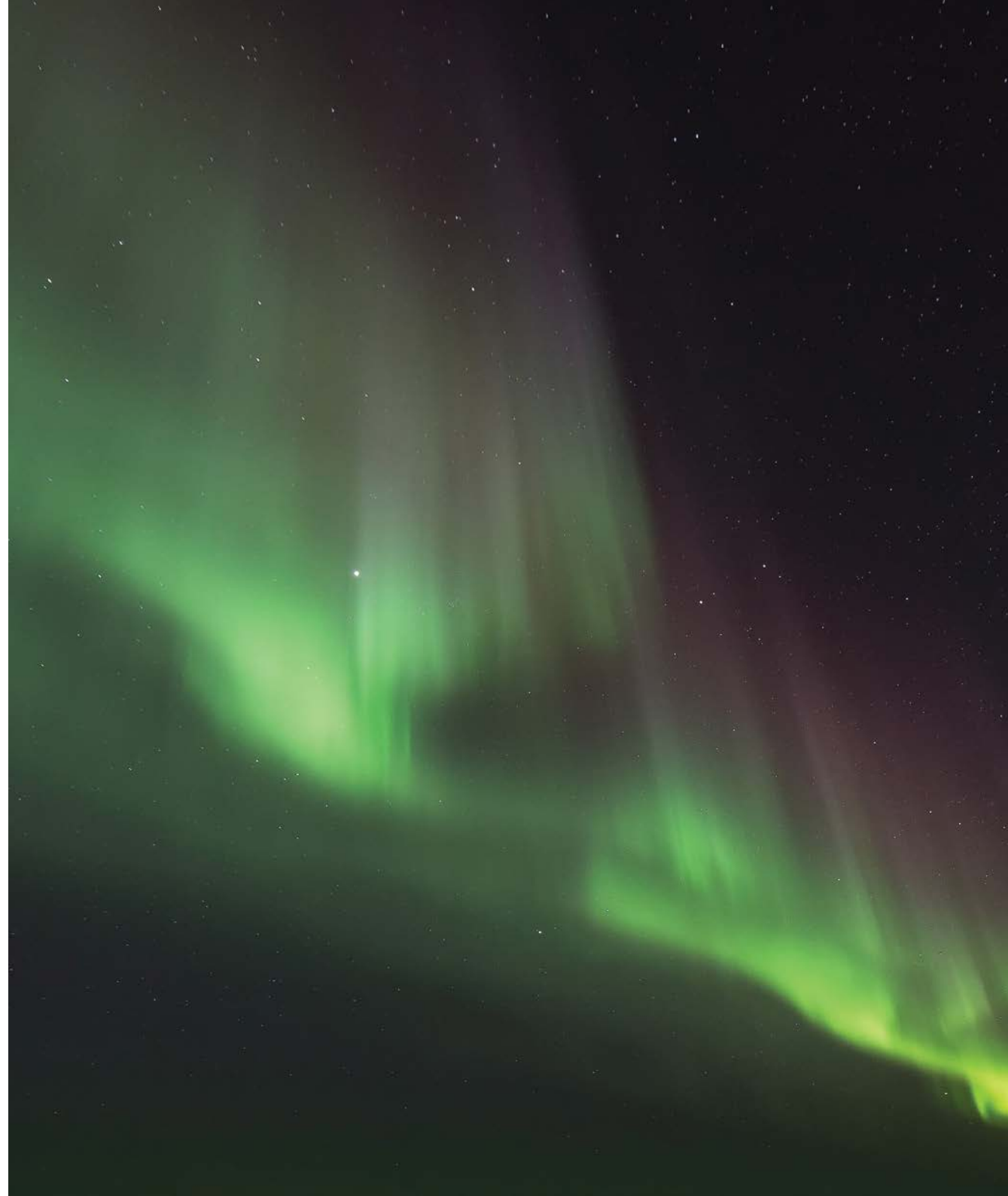
Navigating the potential of wellbeing is rarely straight forward – its rather complex, unpredictable and context specific.

Just because a study found something was good for a bunch of people somewhere, doesn't necessarily mean it's going to bring out the best in your people.

To create the conditions for human flourishing – careful consideration needs to be given to the process of design itself.

Wellbeing by Design

## How are different design approaches likely to impact wellbeing outcomes?

Can we promote wellbeing using traditional design processes, or do we need to think differently about the way we design? How do we move beyond token gestures and best address the multidimensional nature of wellbeing?

Because as impressive as all of this research is, the effectiveness of any wellbeing intervention is highly dependent on its ability to unlock the unique potential of people and place.

In this section we compare two fundamentally different design approaches and explore their suitability for promoting wellbeing. This includes;

- **Problem Solving Practices**; including Traditional Staged Design, Professionally Planned Programs and Design Thinking

- **Future Making Practices**; Including Social Labs, Design for Social Innovation and Transitions Design
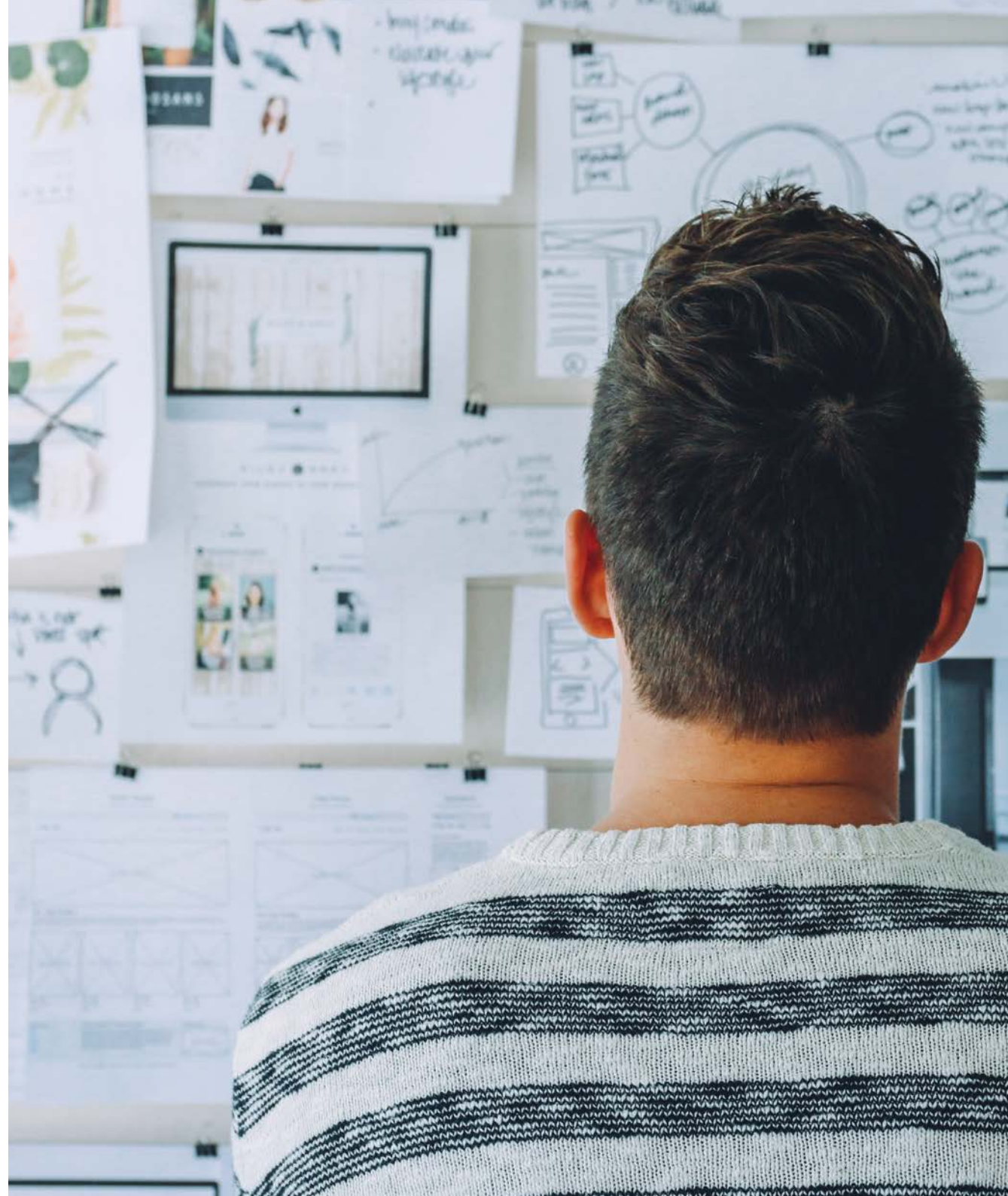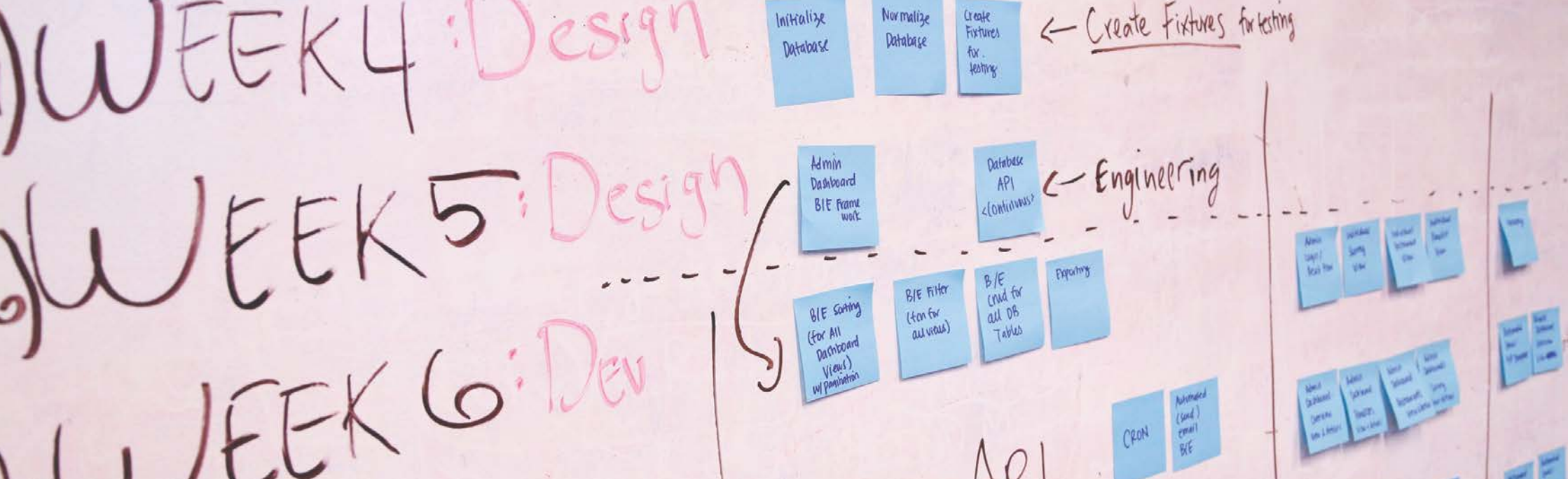
Problem Solving Practices

Problem solving design practices are typically centrally controlled, expert-led and planning based. Specialists are engaged to develop a brief, analyse options, recommend solutions and measure performance. These approaches are often used to design new buildings, develop workplace wellbeing programs and integrate wellbeing into the education curriculum. Common practices include:

- **Traditional Staged Design** - The most common design process used in the world today for the design and construction of buildings and places.

- **Professionally Planned Programs** - A professional who provides expert advice, recommendations and solutions. Often provided by either in house specialists, academics or by external consultants.

- **Design Thinking** - A human centred design process that focuses on identifying the real problem that needs to be solved before prototyping and delivering solutions.

While these practices may appear logical, their suitability for promoting wellbeing and human flourishing by design is questionable:

- **Strengths** - Produces reliable outcomes when addressing 'simple' wellbeing challenges in conditions of low complexity. The client and design team generally know what to expect. They'll have an idea of the scale, cost and timeline for the project.

- **Limitations** - Generally poor at addressing the multidimensional nature of wellbeing. These practices also typically treat wellbeing as a problem to be solved, leading to 'tick box' interventions and 'bolt on' features.

In summary, problem solving design practices are best suited for addressing *simple* wellbeing challanges, where clear causality can be established. They generally have limited efficacy in complex situations. They also tend to focus on 'fixing' pathologies such as poor health, unhealthy habits and stress, rather than unleashing the full potential of our humanity.

Future Making Practices

Rather than looking at what needs solving, future making approaches ask: what are the seeds of potential that want to be actualised? How can we go beyond what 'is'—and become what 'could be'? How can we come together and create nurturing conditions for people and place to thrive? Common design practices include:

- **Social Labs** - A practice for addressing complex challenges. Social Labs use a range of processes including Theory U, storytelling and prototyping to create shared design responses.

- **Design for Social Innovation** - A participatory 'co-design' process where designers work as facilitators and catalysts to develop responses that are more effective than existing solutions.

- **Transition Design** - A design-led approach to societal transformation. Based upon acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependency of the systems we are apart.

When reviewing their strengths and limitations, it becomes clear that future making practices are better suited to promoting wellbeing by design.

- **Strengths** - Generally good at navigating wellbeing's *simple* and *complex* elements, and for addressing its multidimensional nature. These practices create change from within the system, rather than looking outside.

- **Limitations** - These approaches are not widely known or used. The client and design team are less likely to know what outcomes to expect from the process, impacting the scale, cost, and timeline of the project.

By treating wellbeing as a future to be co-created, these practices create the space for people—together with their organisations and communities—to find their own way, artfully unlocking the latent potential which lies within us and between us. Spaces where people can feel more human and bring out the best in our humanity

Co-creating Wellbeing

The key takeaway here is this; the quality of results we create is highly dependent on the design approach used.

Treating wellbeing as a problem that can be solved by experts with plans and checklists will only get us so far. Its only when we use future orientated approaches that are up to the task of tackling both *simple* and *complex* challenges that we create the best conditions for human flourishing.

Future making design processes are valuable tools for empowering people and place to find their own way – unifying the *physical, psychological, social* and *ecological* dimensions of wellbeing.

This finding may be confronting to many designers, academics and consultants because it challenges the status quo. It challenges them to think about how they must step out of the 'expert role', and best 'hold the space' for people and place to do what they need to do. This will be no easy task, requiring many to reinvent the way they work and service their projects.

The Reichstag

The German parliament building is an inspiring example of a space based design response that interweaves the four-dimensions of wellbeing in practice.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany, architect Norman Foster used a combination of problem solving and future making processes to refurbish the Reichstag to tell a deeply meaningful and inspiring narrative. It's a narrative that has played a potent role in the wellbeing of building users and the whole nation.

At the heart of the design is a glass dome (physical element), that collects daylight (ecological element) and shines it directly onto the political process (social and psychological element). The dome includes a 360-degree wall of mirrors, and a walkway that accommodates a steady flow of tourists who circulate the dome. When politicians look up, they can see the faces of people – from Germany and around the world – acting as a powerful reminder of the purpose of government and to whom they are in service (social and psychological element).

It's a compelling, humanising and energising space that at its core, beautifully interweaves the four dimensions of wellbeing -the physical, psychological, social and ecological. It creates a unique space that genuinely moves people - creating a pulse of hope for the whole nation, and arguably the world. No rating tool or bolt on wellbeing feature can create a unique and elevating space like this. It's only possible by attending to, and unifying the unique potential of people and place.
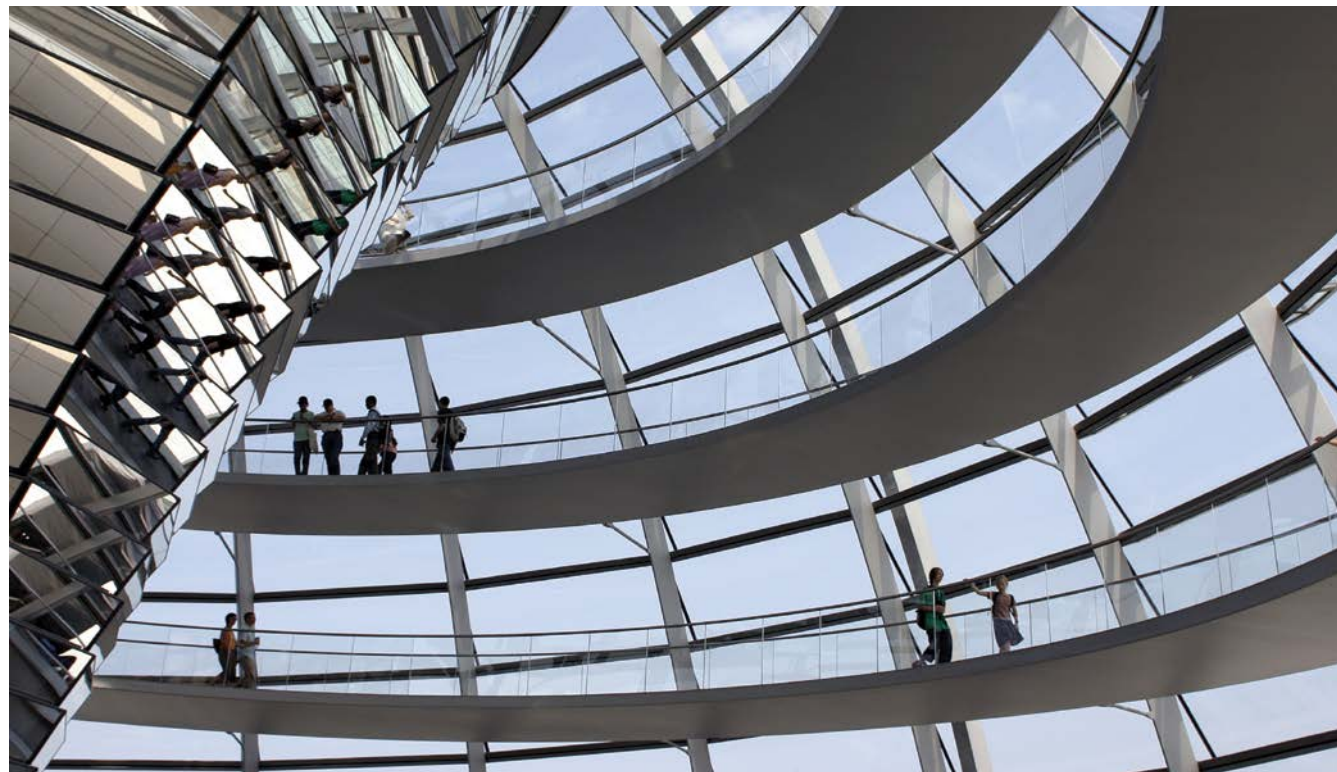
Commonground

Commonground is a social change community that supports social justice, environmental, disadvantaged and community groups.

It was established in 1980 by a small group of activists exploring how they could best contribute to the creation of a just and sustainable world.

The founding members saw a need to better resource, train and support groups working for social change. In 1984 the group purchased a property near Seymour, in Victoria, Australia to bring this vision to life. They built a building (physical element) in a naturally rich environment (ecological element) for use by both residents and guests. Alongside this, they learned the art of living in community (social element), as well as the human qualities that brought out the best in each other (psychological element).

Today, Commonground provides its conference and retreat venue at subsidised rates for social change groups. It provides education through its training organisation, the Groupwork Institute of Australia. Its Intentional Community runs the Commonground Social Change Festival.

Commonground is a special place that elegantly unites the four dimensions of wellbeing. And by learning how the community and venue can play a valuable role in society, it creates a pulse of hope for Australia and the world.

The Business Case

Is there a case to be made for being a future making pioneer - aspiring to integrate human flourishing into everything your business does?

The simple answer is – yes there is. Even when you strip away all of the physical, psychological, social and ecological reasons for promoting wellbeing, it still makes bottom line business sense. More specifically:

- **Unwellness is Costly.** Global Wellness Institute research suggest that in the United States, the cost of unwellness is 12% of GDP. This includes the cost of chronic disease, work related injuries and illnesses, work related stress and disengagement. Therefore, unwellness at work can be thought of as being akin to paying extra tax.

- **Health and Wellbeing is Valuable.** A study found that award winning US companies nurturing a culture of health, wellbeing and safety outperformed the stock market by a factor of 3:1 from 2000-2014. Therefore, health and wellbeing at work can be thought of as being akin to unleashing whole business potential

This research highlights just how valuable wellbeing can be in business - especially when adding all of the human reasons to do it. In the next few years will we start to see the rise of the Chief Flourishing Officer?

Final Thoughts

How well does your approach to wellbeing correlate with our findings? Here is a quick recap of our main points:

- **Wellbeing is a multidimensional quality.** It's useful to think about it as being made up of four interwoven and irreducible dimensions – the *physical, psychological, social* and *ecological*.

- **The design process used is a critical consideration.** Rather than treating wellbeing as a problem to be solved, designers best use future orientated approaches that are up to the task of tackling its *simple* and *complex* elements.

The fact these ideas are being explored implies we are entering an exciting new design paradigm, where we shift from designing in one dimension, to thinking about how the design process can elevate the potential of our humanity in multiple dimensions.

Imagine what would be possible if more designers broadened the boundaries of design - *physically, socially, psychologically* and *ecologically* – for life to thrive. Imagine if more design projects put wellbeing at the heart of their development process? Imagine living in buildings and working in organisations that were a rich source of human flourishing?

That's a world we'd like to live in.

References

Four Dimensions of Wellbeing Framework is informed by Integral Theory. Integral Theory is concerned with organising and bringing into useful relation, fragmented pieces of knowledge between different areas of speciality. Refer to A Brief History of Everything, Ken Wilber, 1996

Example Intervention - Physical Dimension

- Active – The WELL Building Standard, International WELL Building Institute, 2014
- Nourishment – The WELL Building Standard, International WELL Building Institute, 2014
- Comfort – The WELL Building Standard, International WELL Building Institute, 2014
- Urban Design – Happy City, Charles Montgomery, 2013
- Multisensory – Healing Spaces, Esther Sternberg, 2009

Example Intervention - Psychological Dimension

- Mindfulness – Flourish, Martin Seligman, 2011
- Gratitude – Flourish, Martin Seligman, 2011
- Kindness – Flourish, Martin Seligman, 2011
- Engagement – Flourish, Martin Seligman, 2011
- Learning – 5 Ways to Wellbeing, New Economics Foundation, 2008

Example Intervention - Social Dimension

- Purpose – Reinventing Organisations, Frederic Laloux, 2014
- Wholeness – Reinventing Organisations, Frederic Laloux, 2014
- Culture – Reinventing Organisations, Frederic Laloux, 2014
- Development – Deliberately Developmental Organisations, R. Kegan& L. Lahey, 2016
- Dialogue – Community, Peter Block, 2008

Example Intervention - Ecological Dimension

- Green Spaces – Biophilic Design, Stephen R. Kellert, et al, 2008
- Daylight – Biophilic Design, Stephen R. Kellert, et al, 2008
- Water – Biophilic Design, Stephen R. Kellert, et al, 2008
- Air – Biophilic Design, Stephen R. Kellert, et al, 2008
- Biomimicry – Biophilic Design, Stephen R. Kellert, et al, 2008

Future Making Design Processes

- Social Labs - The Social Labs Revolution, Zaid Hassan, 2014
- Design for Social Innovation - Design, When Everybody Designs, Ezio Manzini, 2015
- Transition Design - School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University, 2015

The Business Case

- Unwellness is Costly – Future of Wellness at Work, Global Wellness Institute, 2016
- Wellbeing is Valuable – Future of Wellness at Work, Global Wellness Institute, 2016

Notes