IA

Reclaiming the Wellbeing Room

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Design for Belonging is an IA collective of changemakers championing and safeguarding inclusive design practices.

AIRIA

AIRIA leads IA's responsible adoption of AI, expanding creative, operational, and research possibilities while preserving the essence of human curation, creativity, and originality.

Reclaiming the Wellbeing Room: New Frontiers in Embodied Design

In the past 20 years, wellbeing rooms have become common features in contemporary offices globally. Their arrival seemed to symbolize an era of interest in employees as people, and a recognition that productivity is significantly influenced by our ongoing physical and emotional health. Despite this, many wellbeing rooms remain underused or undervalued, often doubling as storage or ad hoc meeting rooms. They rarely receive the same level of investment as other spaces in workplace environments, leaving them disconnected from the needs they are meant to support.

In the midst of an increasing appreciation for the importance of attending to wellbeing in the workplace, evidenced by certifications such as WELL, it seems our understanding of wellbeing has evolved beyond the expectation that a single room can solve all problems. At the same time, stress remains one of the dominant workplace experiences in 2025. In a workplace landscape defined by volatility, uncertainty, and persistent stress, organizations face the continued challenge of supporting employee wellbeing by addressing the nervous system itself.

Our research asks what these spaces could become if treated not as functional leftovers, but as essential tools for human performance.

We explore a new model for the wellbeing room as a multi-configuration, multi-sensory platform that adapts to diverse users and supports interoception, proprioception, and exteroception. Grounded in neuroscience, environmental psychology, and human-centered design, we propose a future in which wellbeing rooms are dynamic, responsive spaces. Applying principles of embodied design, these rooms can support emotional regulation, nervous system health, and meaningful reconnection to self.

1990s

Mother's Room
First Aid
Multifaith
Occupational Health

2010s

certification driven

WELL AP
Employee Experience
Mindfulness
Neurodiversity Needs

2020s

competition driven

Hybrid Decompression
Workplace Magnet
Competing with Home Environment

2030s & beyond

transformation driven

A responsive, human-led space that extends bodily sensitivity and emotional intelligence.

Workplaces still have a long way to go to support employee wellbeing.

Recent Gallup data underscores a persistent challenge in employee wellbeing worldwide. Despite expanded flexibility and significant investment in workplace improvements following the shift to hybrid work, overall levels of employee happiness remain stubbornly low. This gap points to a critical opportunity for design to intervene more meaningfully.

Notably, 51% of employees report experiencing stress on a regular basis. Stress has become a dominant, ongoing condition of work, with direct implications for health, performance, and quality of life.

51%

the number of employees who feel stress in the workplace on a regular basis.

40%

the number of employees who feel worried in the workplace on a regular basis.

40%

the number of employees who feel actively engaged in the workplace.

21%

the number of employees who feel that their workplace supports their wellbeing.

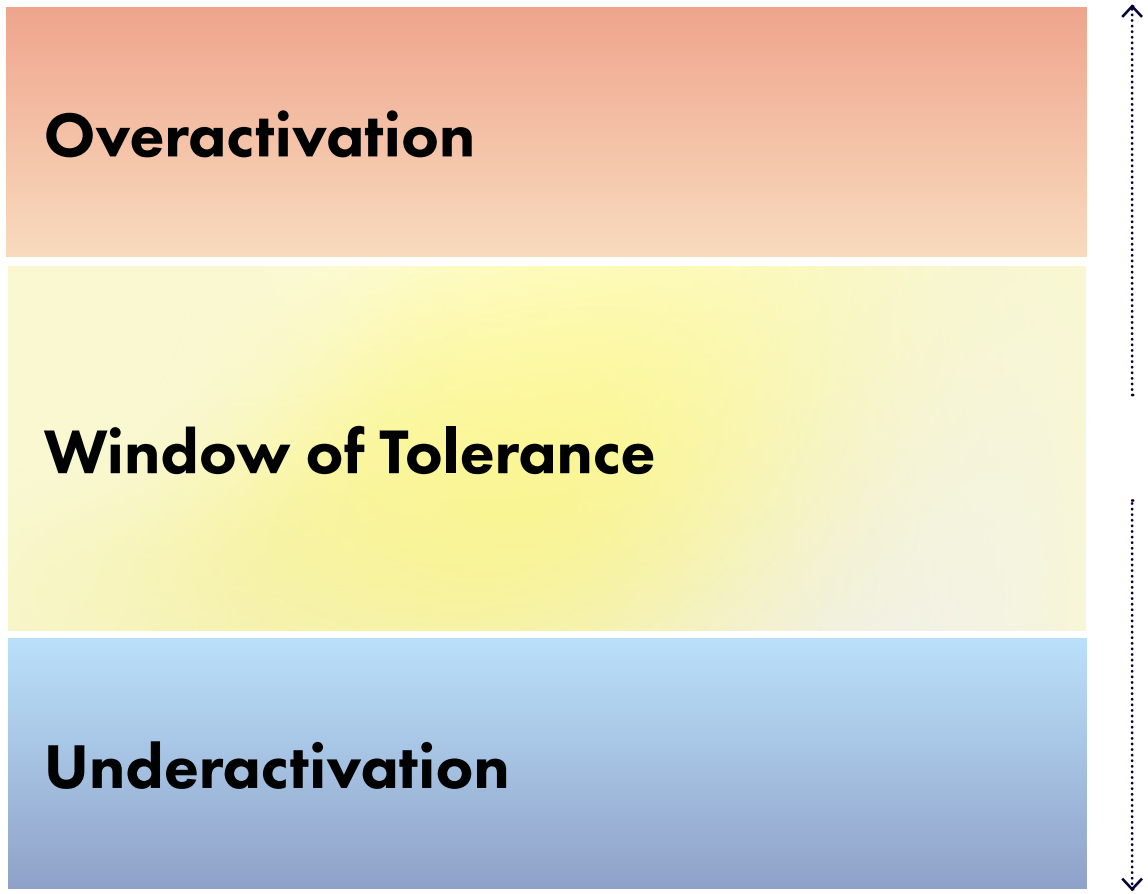
Gallup. "State of the Global Workplace 2025."

Stress is the health epidemic of the 21st century. World Health Organization

According to the World Health Organization*, stress is the health epidemic of the 21st century. It affects blood pressure, metabolism, digestion, and mental health. Stress is not merely an emotional state. It is a physiological response that triggers cascading effects throughout the body.

In the workplace, stress undermines creativity, innovation, and sound judgment. At an organizational level, chronic stress contributes to absenteeism, disengagement, and diminished retention, while negatively impacting performance and decision-making.

*Fink, George. "Stress: Concepts, Definition and History." In Reference Module in Neuroscience and Behavioral Psychology, edited by John Stein, 1–9. Elsevier, 2017.



What can neuroscience teach us about how the body responds to stress?

Polyvagal Theory is a powerful framework for understanding how stress impacts our bodies, and how spaces like wellness rooms can support regulation.

Coined by Dr. Dan Siegel, the 'Window of Tolerance'* concept describes the optimal zone of nervous system functioning where a person can:

- Think clearly
- Regulate emotions
- Engage socially
- Respond flexibly to challenges

These theories explain how any perceived threat, real or imagined, can trigger our nervous systems to switch into a defensive response. When we move outside of our window of tolerance, we lose the ability to process our feelings, be creative, and connect with other people.

Siegel, Daniel J. The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience. New York: Guilford Press, 1999.
Porges, Stephen W. The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Overactivation

SYSTEM RESPONSE

A hyperactivating response (or up-regulating response) can cause people to feel anxious, restless, angry, overwhelmed.

EMBODIED RESPONSE

Employees who are hyperactivated may experience increased heart rate, sweaty palms and widened pupils. In the workplace they may become overly confrontational and reactive to others.

Window of Tolerance

When we are in our window of tolerance, we feel present, grounded, flexible, open-minded and connected.

Employees who are in their window of tolerance may feel calm but alert, relaxed without being overly sluggish. They can make eye contact and tolerate others' experiences as different to their own without feeling attacked or rejected.

Underactivation

In a hypoactivating (or down-regulating response), individuals may seem shut-down, withdrawn, with low energy.

Employees who are underactivated might seem quiet, unsure and shy. They may be feeling slow and numb, and they may seem disconnected from other people. They may seem zoned out with minimal expressions.

Siegel, Daniel J. The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience. New York: Guilford Press, 1999.
Porges, Stephen W. The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Design Challenge

How might we design wellbeing experiences to respond to bodily states, in order to enable employees to do their best work?

Our Vision

A network of physical and virtual spaces to bring people back into relationship with themselves and each other, through sensory presence and embodied awareness

Base

A series of virtual experiences (pulse, flow, wave) mirroring the physical experience to support employees working remotely.

Pulse

a tranquil, low-stimulation sanctuary for individuals seeking to regulate their nervous system through stillness, soft sensory cues, and solitude.

low sensory input
individual experience

Flow

an enclosed space that invites users into a state of embodied presence and mental clarity, supporting flow through sensory attunement, movement, and mindful restoration.

variable sensory input
small group experience

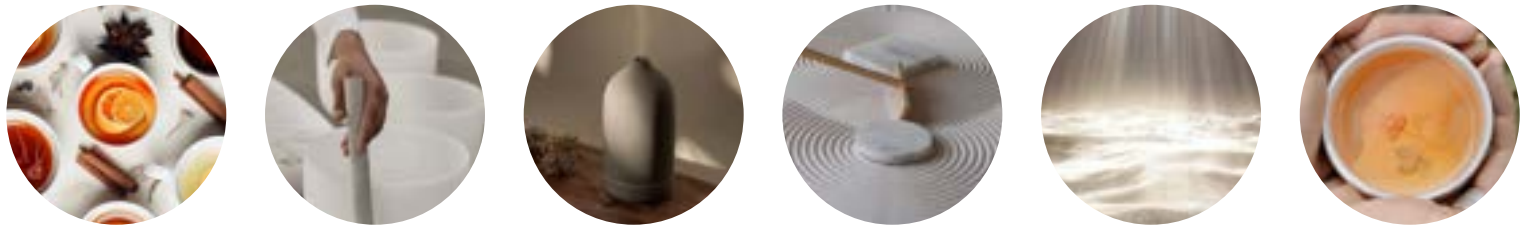
Wave

a dynamic, multi-sensory wellbeing space designed to immerse groups in rhythmic, interactive experiences that stimulate connection, creativity, and collective restoration.

high sensory input
collective experience

Neuroscience shows that engaging with the full spectrum of sensory experience can help restore a sense of safety and bring us back into our window of tolerance.

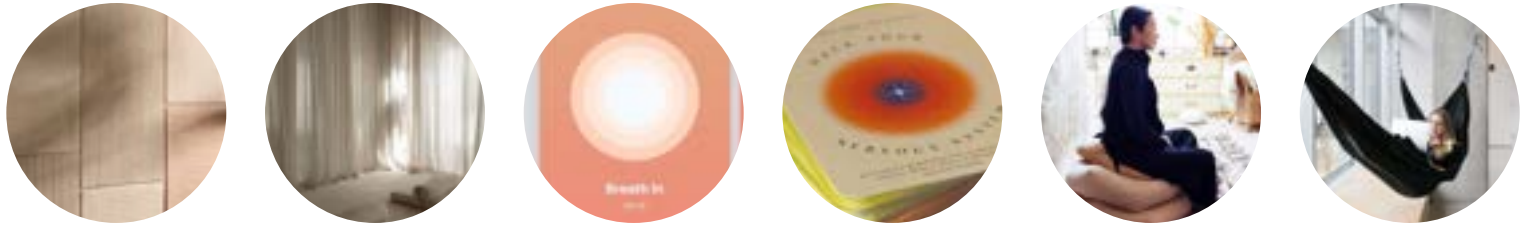
DESIGN LEVERS



HUMAN SENSORY INPUTS

Exteroception

Engaging with the external environment through sound, sight, smell, touch and taste.



Proprioception

Engaging with our sense of body in space through movement, orientation, and position.

Interoception

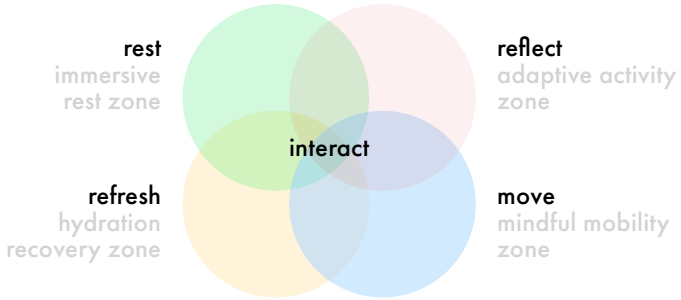
Our internal bodily experience of sensations such as temperature, tension, breath, and energy level.

Fogel, A. (2009). The psychophysiology of self-awareness: Rediscovering the lost art of body sense. W. W. Norton & Company.

Flow Room

Spatial Strategy

A flexible, enclosed room that adapts to the user's wellness needs and sensibility. Various zones can be combined to create a customized experience and which may include optional AI filters through lighting, sound, and virtual assistant experiences.



Aura Fabric

Spatial Intelligence

Aura Fabric is a hypothetical concept exploring future possibilities for spatial intelligence in wellbeing environments

It imagines diffuse light as a responsive, ambient, multimodal AI interface, translating biometric signals, behavioral preferences, and environmental cues into a living gradient of light, tone, and motion.

The concept is not a deployable product, but a prompt for discussion about how emerging technologies might support more emotionally resonant, human-centered experiences.

More human than digital.

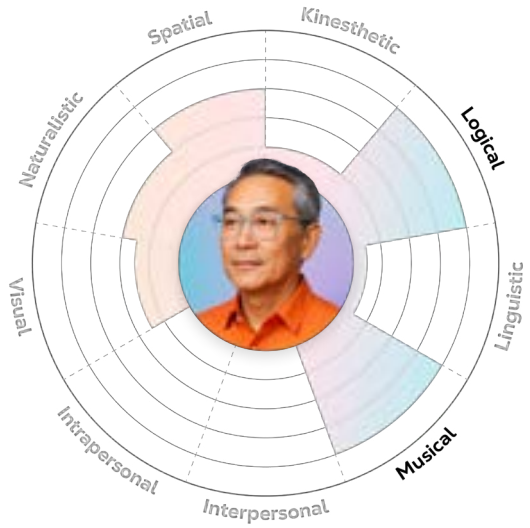
Voice Assistant

Sound System

Tunable Lighting

Biophilic Feature

Image Mapping



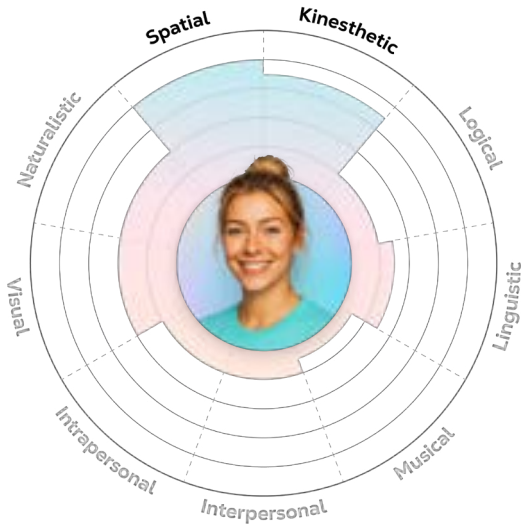
Paul

63 years

Neurodivergent systems thinker with a gift for spatial reasoning and technical creativity. Benefits from low-stimulation, high-control environments to support focus and emotional regulation.

> **Sometimes I just need five minutes of stillness to reboot my brain. The sound controls and musical affordances help me reset without losing momentum.**

exteroception interoception proprioception



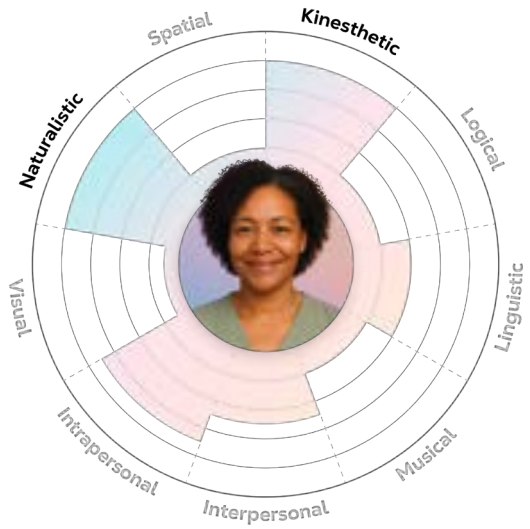
Lucy

24 years

A dynamic communicator and team motivator who thrives on interaction and shared energy. She needs accessible spaces that balance movement with restorative peer connection.

> **This room gives me space to move, stretch, or breathe. Knowing I can still connect or talk to someone, my virtual coach, makes all the difference.**

exteroception interoception proprioception



Angela

52 years

A high-energy leader rooted in nature and movement. Seeks tangible, purposeful wellness tools that integrate physicality, efficiency, and sensory engagement for full-body restoration.

> **I love being able to move, feel texture, and change the vibe with light or scent. It keeps me connected to my body even indoors.**

exteroception interoception proprioception

Core Design Pillars for Wellbeing Rooms in the Future

Biophilic

Design that reflects processes and experiences inherent in the natural world.

Inclusive

Design that supports marginalized characteristics such as neurodiversity, menopause and physical impairments.

Flexible

Designing for multiple uses and configurations to support different needs throughout the day.

Tunable

A space that can be tuned to the users' needs and internal experience using technology.

Embodied

Design that engages the full spectrum of sensory awareness—external, internal, and spatial.

Soft Wired

Technology embedded gently into the environment—supportive, optional, and secondary to human presence.

Reframing the Wellbeing Room

Our research reframes the wellbeing room as a latent opportunity to help organizations navigate uncertainty in today's workplace. Drawing on concepts from neuroscience, psychology, and embodied cognition, wellbeing is understood as a regulatory state shaped by how people interact with their environment.

Central to this approach is the concept of the window of tolerance: the zone in which individuals feel calm, focused, and able to do their best work.

Our learnings suggest that wellbeing rooms can support pathways back into this state by engaging:

- The five senses
- Interoception, or awareness of internal bodily states
- Proprioception, or awareness of the body in space

This acknowledges that people regulate in different ways and require choice, adaptability, and agency. By reimagining the wellbeing room as flexible, multi-sensory, and inclusive, it can move beyond a compliance requirement or crisis response to become an anchoring space within a broader ecosystem of wellbeing.

EXTENDING THE CONCEPT HOLISTICALLY ACROSS THE WORKPLACE AS A WHOLE

Considering the room itself within a broader context, this approach raises questions about how wellbeing is distributed across the workplace. Key considerations include:

LOCATION: Whether wellbeing rooms are hidden at the periphery or positioned as accessible parts of everyday work life shapes how they are perceived and used.

DIVERSITY OF SPACE TYPES: There is a need for multiple expressions of wellbeing space, ranging from individual, low-stimulation environments to shared, collective settings that support connection, movement, or group regulation.

BEYOND THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE: Technology offers an opportunity to extend wellbeing beyond the office, using digital tools to mirror and complement embodied experiences for remote or hybrid workers.

Together, these considerations suggest a more expansive wellbeing ecosystem that operates across spaces, scales, and both physical and virtual environments.

Reframing the Wellbeing Room

CONTINUING CHALLENGES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL WELLBEING
Alongside the opportunities posed by this way of considering wellbeing, challenges remain for organizations considering how they can expand their reach. Challenges include:

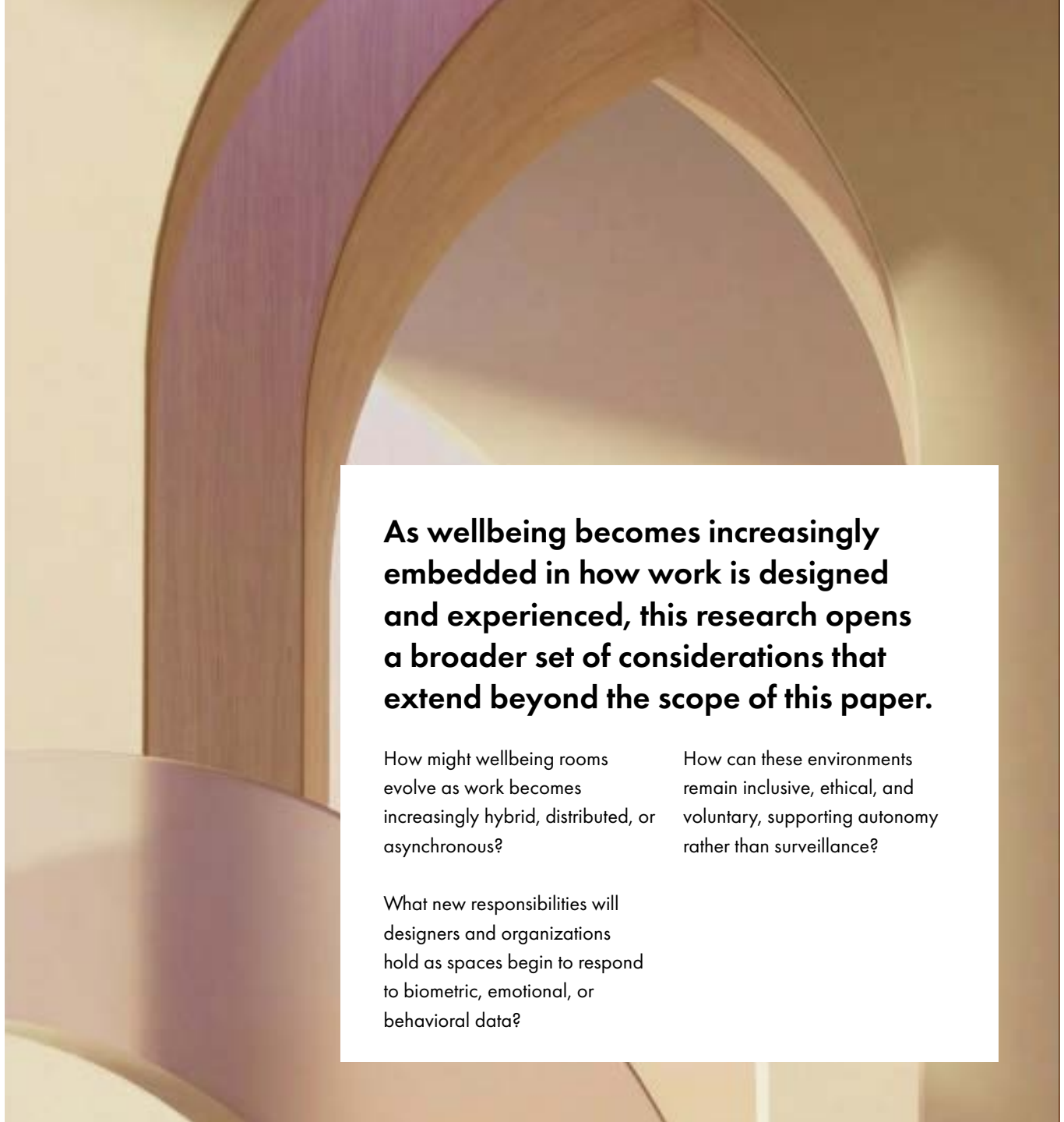
ACCESS GAPS: Hybrid and remote work leave many employees without access to shared spaces for regulation or connection.

CULTURAL BARRIERS: Questions of permission, visibility, and productivity continue to shape whether people feel able to step away, rest, or engage in wellbeing practices during the work day.

SCALE AND CONSISTENCY: Large, distributed organizations face the challenge of creating wellbeing spaces that are consistent yet adaptable, replicable yet locally responsive.

INTERDEPENDENCY AND TECHNOLOGY: As digital and AI-enabled systems become more embedded in wellbeing environments, new questions emerge around how far individuals should rely on these systems to regulate, and where the line sits between support and dependency.

Addressing these tensions requires more than design alone. It calls for an integrated approach in which space, culture, technology, and organizational systems evolve together.



As wellbeing becomes increasingly embedded in how work is designed and experienced, this research opens a broader set of considerations that extend beyond the scope of this paper.

How might wellbeing rooms evolve as work becomes increasingly hybrid, distributed, or asynchronous?

What new responsibilities will designers and organizations hold as spaces begin to respond to biometric, emotional, or behavioral data?

How can these environments remain inclusive, ethical, and voluntary, supporting autonomy rather than surveillance?

biophilic.
inclusive.
flexible.
tunable.
embodied.
soft wired.

Authors

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