Designing for Wellbeing in Education

'There is no health without mental health'

We're all growing more aware of just how common mental illness is, and many will already be familiar with the statistic that 1 in 4 of us will suffer from it during our lives. What might come as more of a surprise is how early these issues can start. Half of mental health issues are established by the age of 14, and – shockingly – 10% of 5–16 years olds suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder.

It's also not just about diagnosable mental illness. The numbers above tell their own story; but mental health is more than a diagnosable illness; it is about whether we are genuinely thriving and happy. We all experience day-to-day changes in mental health, just as we feel physically different. It's not without reason that the WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing – rather than just the absence of disease or infirmity.

These sorts of statistics call for deeper scrutiny, and we've spent the last year researching how something as simple as design can have a surprising impact on mental health in schools and universities. And it's not just about students: staff and visitors can benefit hugely from better designed spaces.

Cover Image: *Epsom College* **Top:** *Birkdale Pre-Prep Sheffield*
Left: *Stansfeld Park Science Oxford Centre*

How do we look after our mental wellbeing?

'The Five Ways to Wellbeing'

Image: *Laidlaw II Atrium*

In 2008, the government-appointed New Economics Foundation (NEF) took on the task of creating a clear, simple message that would help everybody to improve their mental health and wellbeing. The result was the Five Ways to Wellbeing: a set of actions that can be applied in almost any situation, and at any age and that are useful anchors for a more complex set of definitions. The themes are:

CONNECT	To other people, and to the places we live and work
BE ACTIVE	Keep moving and stay fit with sport and incidental movement
TAKE NOTICE	Practise "mindfulness", be in the moment, and observe your surroundings
KEEP LEARNING	Throughout your lifetime, and including the creative arts
GIVE	Research suggests that this provides a sense of self-worth and purpose

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY BIOPHILLIA?

Biophilia is "the innate tendency [in human beings] to focus on life and lifelike process"

E. O. Wilson. Biologist and originator of the biophilia hypothesis

Biophilic design looks at how we can bring the natural world into our environments. It aims to address all the senses, incorporating textures, sound, smell and visual cues, and going beyond the simple addition of a pot plant.

From churches to GPs, a vast number of groups have since put these ideas into practice to focus on individual interventions. There is a wide body of research supporting the idea that "upstream" interventions – targeting the root causes and environments where behaviours occur – are generally more effective than "downstream" interventions, which try to mitigate problems on an individual basis. What better place to start than with the way we design those "upstream" environments? As architects, we've looked carefully at how we can design these sorts of activities into our buildings, creating spaces which encourage them throughout.

There are two key strategies here. We can design spaces that make it easier to make better choices, such as by adding bicycle racks. We can also try to constrain behaviours by making certain actions more difficult. Taken together, these strategies form an idea known as "nudge theory": the theory that we can "nudge" people into making better choices, using small but significant changes in the way we make our world.

Relating this back to the Five Ways to Wellbeing, we can think of each one as a goal, and then look at small, localised means of achieving that goal. Those means could include lighting, comfort, control, biophilia, aesthetics, layout, organization of space, sustainability, safety and accessibility. Biophilia in particular is a powerful tool, and we've seen it used effectively to achieve all five goals.

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CONNECT	→	**PLACES** TO CONNECT
BE ACTIVE	→	**ENCOURAGING** ACTIVITY
TAKE NOTICE	→	**THINGS** TO TAKE NOTICE OF
KEEP LEARNING	→	**SPACES** FOR LEARNING
GIVE	→	**ENVIRONMENT** FOR GIVING

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01

Places to Connect

Image: *Epsom College*

To feel connected to a place, it's important to understand how the connections already work within that place: how objects, locations and spaces relate to one another. In other words, we need a sense of direction, and landmarks to help orient ourselves.

Some ways to achieve this are:

+ Including adaptable spaces without a prescribed use, such as benches along routes.

+ High-quality, usable green space (no "keep off the grass" signs).

+ Social learning areas such as break-out spaces, and the elimination of hidden corners.

+ An intimate café (as opposed to a large dining hall), to bring a flavour of the outside world into school.

+ Attractive spaces for students, and a place where staff and students can mix.

+ Well-designed acoustics as you progress through the building: an echoey hallway and stairwell can help signal when people are gathering.

+ Intelligent layout of offices: staff need to feel supported and have locations to go for a contemplative moment.

+ Shelter amongst foliage, such as indoor pergolas or seating areas under tall trees.

+ In residential accommodation, locating living areas so that you can move through them, rather than at the end of a corridor – making sure it's hard to hide in your room. This helps give students social tools to take into life and thrive at university.
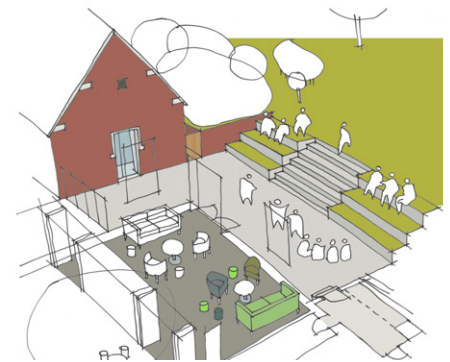
Images from top: *Haddenham St Mary's Church of England School, St John's School sketch, Heavers Farm Primary School* **Left:** *Durston House School*

02

Encouraging Activity

Image: *Pimlico Primary*

Encouraging activity outside of programmed sports and exercise is important for good mental health. Stairs and routes through the school that encourage walking or cycling should be encouraged, with a focus on making the journey easy and enjoyable.

There are many ways to encourage indoor physical activity – not least:

+ Separating key spaces with stairs (while providing for those with mobility requirements). Stairs provide the most intense personal energy expenditure and encourage movement, so we need to make them as inviting as possible – not hide them away.

+ Making circulation an enjoyable experience and providing rewards. This means avoiding boring corridors, while aiming for good natural light, views, spatial variation and opportunities for encounters.

Allow students to walk towards daylight and a view, up to an interesting balcony level, and include artwork en-route – both internally and externally.

+ Bringing the outdoors indoors.

+ In your landscape design, considering nature trails and trim trails, and providing secure cycle storage – making it both easy and inviting to be active.

Images from top: *St. John's School, Wolfson Centre for Applied Health Research, Table Tennis via The University of Sussex* **Left:** *Riverhead Infants' School*

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Things to Take Notice of

Image: *The Henry Dawes Centre, St John's School*

Designing a rich and varied environment helps staff and students to be present in the moment – and this, in turn, aids their wellbeing. So what can they take notice of?

+ The external environment, provision of art, planting and landscaping, and wildlife features (e.g. insect boxes) are examples of the kind of interventions that significantly increase the number of people who stop to take notice.

+ People are strongly affected by building façades. If the façade is complex and interesting, it affects people in a positive way; monotonous façades have the opposite effect.

+ Highlight interesting historic buildings and features, and think about making structure visible.

+ Frame views of the campus and nature and try to create views on tight urban sites: low windowsills and openable windows are valuable aspects.

+ Use natural materials with interesting textures, such as timber, metals, stone, cork, and bamboo.

+ Consider random arrangements and species of plants to reflect nature.

+ Horizons are important. Views towards landscape features give a sense of perspective, and help us to look across a space.

+ Think about light – such as the shaft of sunlight in a recessed window seat, combined with a glimpse of nature and soft, acoustically absorbent seat materials. Our wellbeing is intimately linked with these little moments of delight.

+ Introduce the sight and sound of water – external or internal. Sound effects are a useful way to create relaxing spaces.

+ One study showed that curved forms are perceived as pleasant: most people feel better in rooms with curved edges and rounded contours than in sharp-edged rectangular rooms. It's perhaps telling that the design students taking part in the study preferred the opposite!

Images from top: *Riverhead Infants' School, Lyons House Harrow School, Old Chapel Extension St John's School* **Top Left:** *Knop Law Primary School*

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04

Spaces for Learning

Surprisingly, research suggests that while learning improves when comparing a poorly maintained, run-down environment with one that is simply adequate, adding more extravagant facilities can often have little effect. The key, then, is getting the basics right. This includes thermal environment, acoustics, lighting, and reduced glare, and such simple measures as placing whiteboards at the right height for the age group.

Just as design can strongly influence teaching methods, the pedagogy of a particular institution can place constraints on what sort of designs are appropriate – or even possible. Giving staff and students greater control over their environments helps with this. For example, spaces are more satisfying when we have personal control over the amount of daylight we work or study in.

Even ceiling heights can make a difference. Low-ceilinged spaces are ideal for focused tasks such as studying or reading, while more generous spaces give us a sense of freedom – encouraging more abstract styles of thinking. This can help with forming shared

goals, making higher ceilings a good choice for social gathering spaces.

Spaces should encourage a wide variety of learning, from music and arts to practical skills. Green, outdoor spaces are perfect for these hands-on activities: dipping ponds, bug hotels and wildflower meadows are all great examples. Thoughtful landscaping can allow access to the outdoors throughout the year, from sheds, canopies and outdoor auditoriums to tree stumps that can be used as seats. Swales and rain gardens can support wider learning, and have the added advantages of boosting biodiversity and helping with rainwater attenuation.

Images from top: *Stansfeld Park Science Oxford, Claires Court School, St John's School science lab*
Left: *Oldfield Primary School*

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05

An Environment for Giving

The relationship between altruism and design is especially tough to observe and measure. However, people are more likely to self-report altruistic behaviour in neighbourhoods that incorporate particular design characteristics.

Here are some ways to encourage pro-social behaviours, rather than self-centred ones:

+ Include allotments in your landscape design to help people connect their food to its origins. There is evidence that people are less altruistic in urban than in rural environments, suggesting that the green space and contact with nature can be valuable tools for boosting empathy.

+ Encourage staff and students to engage in the design of their environment, and promote passive, sustainable design.

+ Incorporate a range of positive environmental and physical characteristics. Look beyond the boundaries of the school, and provide access to community assets off site; and access for the community to assets on site

Images from top: *Chesham Teardrop Garden, Old Chapel Extension St John's School, Chesham Teardrop Garden* **Left:** *Chesham Teardrop Garden*

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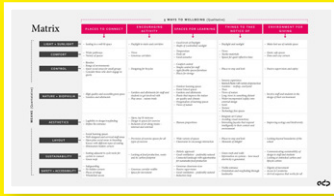
THE FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING MATRIX

Our matrix breaks the Five Ways to Wellbeing down into a wide range of simple, practical actions we take when designing our schools. It forms part of our ongoing research into supporting wellbeing through design, and we're pleased to share it with you.

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