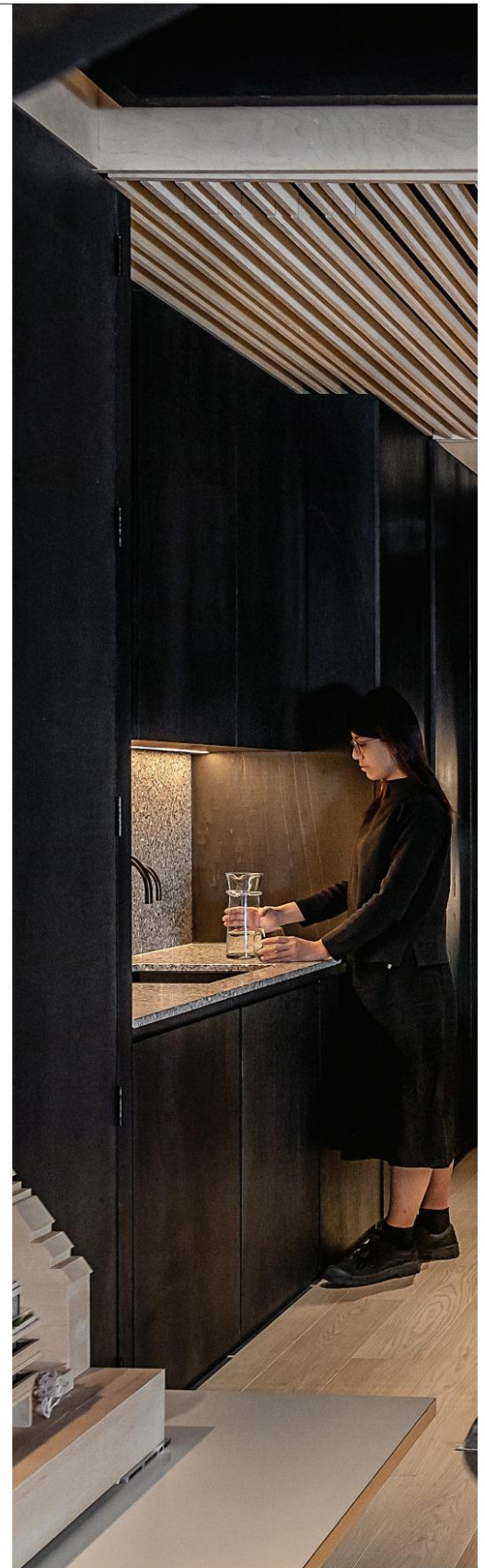


Nature trail

WORDS - JOANNA KNIGHT

Designers and occupiers are constantly challenged by the quest for the 'perfect' workplace. The aspiration is to develop a space which reflects organisational culture, creates a 'commute worthy' destination, inspires greater productivity, creativity and collaboration whilst also embracing diversity, inclusion, and wellness. The pursuit for the 'utopian office' is being tackled in the current climate of economic and operational uncertainty whilst also recognising the imperative drive for greater environmental responsibility. >





Conran and Partners
UK studio in the
heart of Clerkenwell
is a transformed two-
storey workspace
and new creative hub
in London's key
design district

An increasingly acknowledged contribution to the 'workplace design' debate is the potential learning from embracing concepts from nature. Mention the word 'biophilia' to many people and they will think plants. Certainly, there is an increasing use of plants within the office – from neglected pot plants to grand-scale feature 'green walls'!

The Cambridge Dictionary defines biophilia as "love of living things and nature, which some people believe humans are born with". Biophilic or bio design embraces far more than plants. It offers the opportunity to create a connection between people and nature within our working environment.

In 2014, US based sustainability consulting firm, Terrapin Bright Green published a white paper, The 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design – Improving Health and Well-Being in the Built Environment. The publication categorises the different relationships between natural elements and humans. A truly interesting read, the paper highlights

how inspiration from nature can be adopted within interior design and applied to improve health and wellbeing.

Architect and design practice, Conran and Partners has applied the principles of biophilic design to the fitout of its own studio in the heart of Clerkenwell. The project lead was Anja Schellenbauer, Associate Director and Head of Sustainability. "We were designing our new space in the middle of the Covid crisis," explains Anja. "It was essential that we created an environment that colleagues would want to return to. By improving our spatial surroundings to be enjoyable and comforting, our goal was to create a space where people would want to be and benefit from being in."

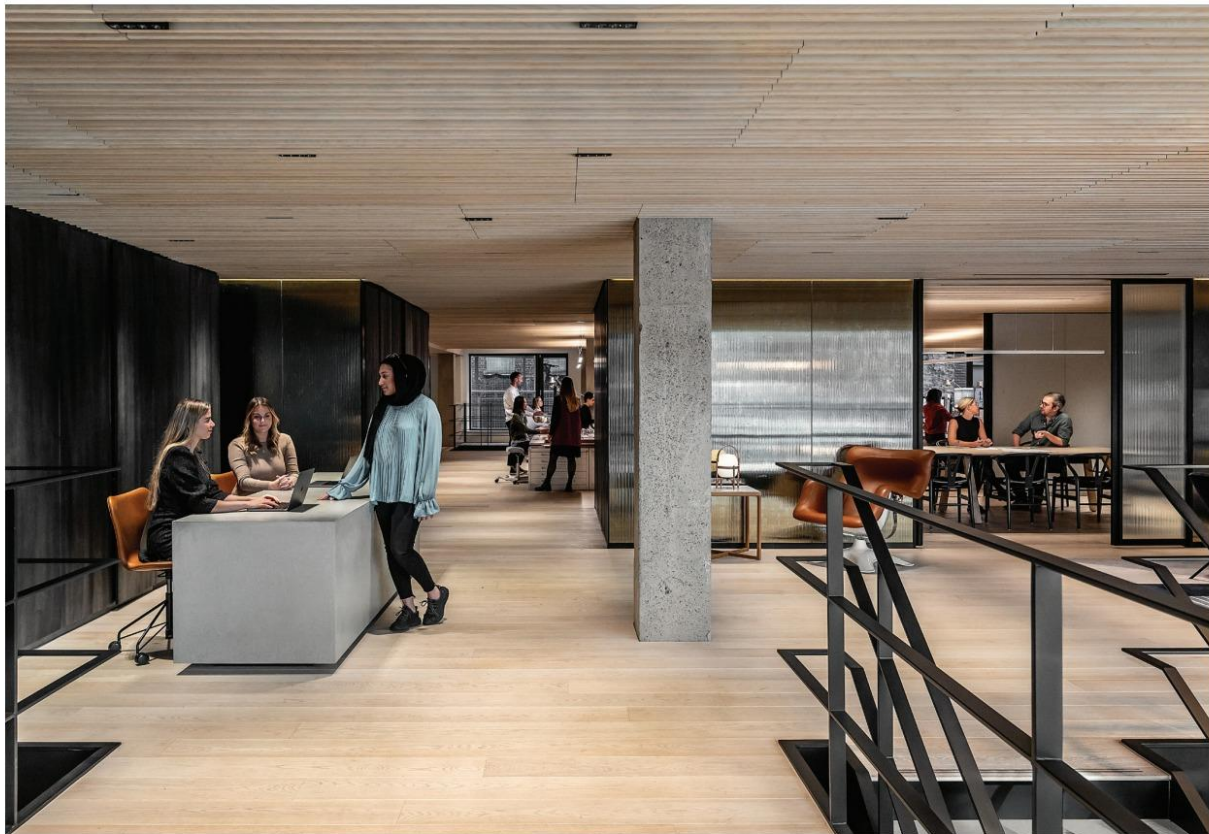
The principles of the '14 Patterns' include Direct Experience of Nature embracing visual and non-visual connections; Natural Analogues through natural forms, patterns, and materials; the Experience of Space and Place replicating emotions generated by natural environments such as mystery, refuge, risk, and peril.

Visual connections through views to nature are shown to reduce heart rate after being exposed to a mental stressor. Similarly, sights of flowering plants and calm animals, indications of human habitat, and bodies of clean water all have a positive effect.

Non-visual connections should include stimuli for the senses - auditory, gustatory, olfactory and haptics (touch and proprioception). These can be achieved through the selection of surface finishes, furniture, lighting.

The influence of 'Space & Place' is an interesting concept. Open spaces, such as atriums, are very common and probably designed without recognising the link to human evolution, and the open 'savannah'. We also gravitate to areas of 'refuge' – smaller, enclosed spaces which reduce perceived vulnerability and create an increased sense of safety.

The use of curves and corners introduces elements of mystery and exploration. As well as adding interest, these features provide anticipation and compel people to investigate further.



Many gardens and parks incorporate these themes though the use of winding paths and areas of shade and shadows to enhance a 'mystery' experience. The exposure to perceived risk and peril is seemingly counter intuitive. That said, many people spend hard-earned money to experience the strong dopamine and pleasure response from extreme sport or theme park rides.

There is instantly a sense of space on entering Conran and Partners' studio. There are direct, albeit distant, views into the offices as well as the open staircase down to the lower level, automatically inspiring intrigue.

Physical and visual continuity is enhanced by organising the space 'enfilade' with as few barriers as possible. Meeting spaces that span across the width of the floors, are formed out of large, fluted and antiqued mirror glass panels, with wide full height sliding doors that maintain the sightlines through the depth of the spaces when open and appear as translucent screens when closed. The integration

“ There is instantly a sense of space on entering Conran and Partners' studio

Below left

The practices' new studio has been designed to reflect changing life and work styles and offer a contrast to working in isolation at home

Below

Whilst natural light penetrates from both ends of the studio, a great deal of attention has been given to the lighting landscape as a whole

of acoustic materials and ceiling design ensures privacy and sound management throughout all areas of the offices.

Natural light is maximised by using full height glazing across the front of the premises. Whilst natural light penetrates from both ends of the studio and to the lower ground level, attention has been given to the studio-wide lighting landscape. Natural and artificial lighting, designed in collaboration with Into Lighting, is used to generate intimacy and flat light is avoided. Areas of shade and shadow are supplemented with practical task lighting.

The entrance area emphasises the material selection. The choice of timber, with blond oak flooring with birch ply ceiling battens, is contrasted with the hard surface finishes of the existing concrete pillar and reception desk. Within the wider office space, the flank walls and shelving are constructed using dark stained poplar ply, whilst the fluted bronze glass panels and screens add texture but lift the space through light reflection. >



The open aperture to the lower ground floor creates an atrium as well as inspiring nuances of ‘risk and peril’. The two floors are connected at each end by double-height spaces offering a perspective of height to the area below. The slim profile rails of the crafted steel staircases, whilst completely safe, evoke a feeling of ‘risk’. The design not only physically connects the spaces but also enhances the fluidity and connectedness within the building whilst creating a landscape of discovery.

The varying height space, together with the visibility available through the ‘openness’ of the balustrades, has also been cleverly utilised to create a ‘theatre style’ area for collaboration. Team members can participate in the seating at the lower level or stand in the ‘balcony’ area above.

“Designing for Life’ sums up our approach,” explains Anja. “We don’t, however, use ‘Biophilic’ as a label to attach to our designs. Over the past few years, there has been a renewed interest in wellbeing and a more people-centric

approach. The requirement to focus on efficiency and productivity still exists, but it has become more widely understood that these factors can be much more successfully achieved by considering a wide range of issues influencing an individual’s perception of their workplace.”

“Biophilic design has a broad and more subtle approach. The obvious introductions of planting and water features, for example, can often be ‘value engineered’ out during the design process. They might also prove costly to maintain in the long run.”

“I really enjoy the more integral measures that set out the experience of space and place. By arranging the workplace three dimensionally in layouts and sections, design can tease engagement of body and mind, with all the biophilic patterns of prospect, mystery, refuge, risk, and peril. Being integrated within the design, they cannot be taken away or poorly maintained. It is really pleasing to see how, if designed well, spaces change and

“

Over the past few years, there has been a renewed interest in wellbeing and a more people-centric approach

Below

The acoustics of the space have been designed in such a way that a creative buzz is always present, without being overbearing

Opposite

Oak flooring with birch ply ceiling batters, softly reflect light and highlight the sense of unity and fluidity throughout the space



affect human behaviour for the better.”

Some people might be sceptical about this design approach and question whether outcomes can be measured. Acting as the ‘client’ for the project, Tim Bowder-Ridger, Partner and Principal at Conran and Partners, is an advocate for the tangible benefits.

“For us as employers, the pandemic highlighted the importance of a place of work that entices people away from the home-working default and provides a workplace people actually want to be in,” Tim explains. “After years of lockdown that kept us apart, we wanted our office to create a sense of belonging and stimulate creative collaboration.”

I asked Tim whether the design approach has been explained to his team. “Biophilic design is a very subtle approach and deliberately so,” he continues. “It engages subliminally - explaining the design approach rationally would lose its magic! It is far better to see how people react, both individually and as a group, and observe how they use and engage with the space.”

“Our new office has been a watershed moment for us. It has been really rewarding to see how well it has been received, how much pride our team takes in the space they work in, and how the concept has achieved exactly what the designer has set out to accomplish.”

“The new studio is showing a tangible return in terms of supporting recruitment and, more importantly, staff retention. For us, the new space has been massive success and clearly has had measurable benefits.”

In the current climate, workplace designers have a responsibility to focus on ‘People and Planet’. Can a biophilic approach embrace environmental responsibility? Being PlanetMark certified, Conran and Partners is committed to GHG emissions reduction too. “Biophilic design largely focuses on mental and, by extension, physical wellbeing,” continues Anja Schellenbauer. “Whilst it does not, as such, seek to reduce emissions, it actually does through improvements in indoor air, sound and light quality. Similarly, the

increased use of low carbon materials, such as timber finishes, also reduces carbon impact.”

“The biophilic approach can create spaces that are more timeless as well as practical and so, ultimately, less wasteful. Our office is measurably being used more frequently and we don’t believe will require physical changes in the longer term. Having designed the studio as an enfilade of distinct spaces, the studio suits a very wide variety of requirements for now and, hopefully, the future.”

As Head of Sustainability, Anja suggests that a ‘pairing’ of this approach with another certification, such as BREEAM, can have a more holistic approach adding equal focus on environmental performance too ●

Joanna Knight has over 30 years in the office & contract furniture sector. She is now a marketing consultant focussed on sustainability; Council member at FIRA and FISP; and Co-Founder of the Sustainable

