

A close-up photograph of green, rounded leaves with prominent veins, positioned on the left side of the slide.

# Designing for happiness: How the built environment can support better mental health

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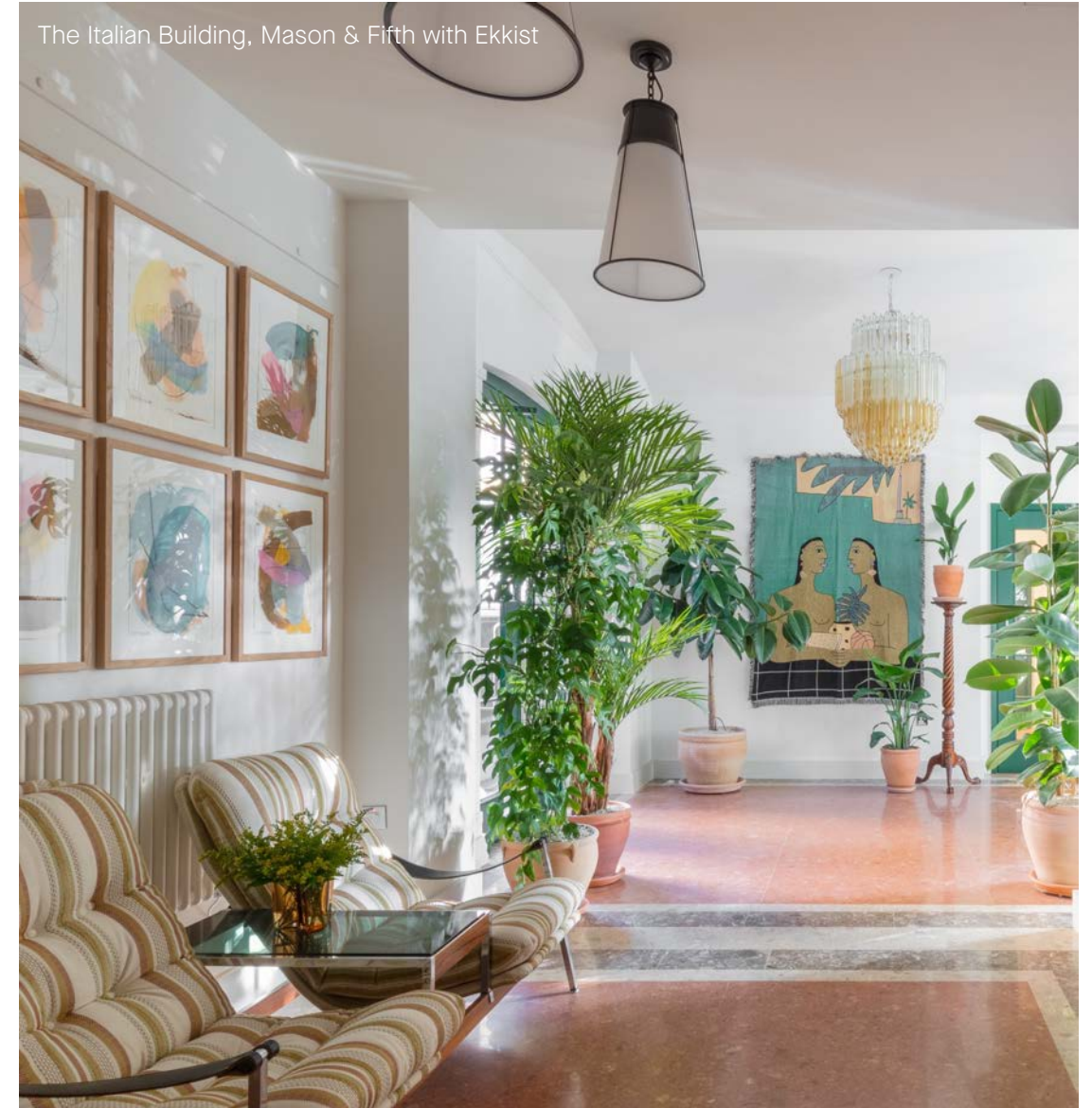
# About me

- Architect and WELL Accredited Professional
- Director at Ekkist, wellbeing design consultancy
- Author of Happy by Design (RIBA Publishing)
- WELL Mind Advisory Panellist
- Co-founder, Architects' Mental Wellbeing Forum
- Mental health advocate, TEDx speaker



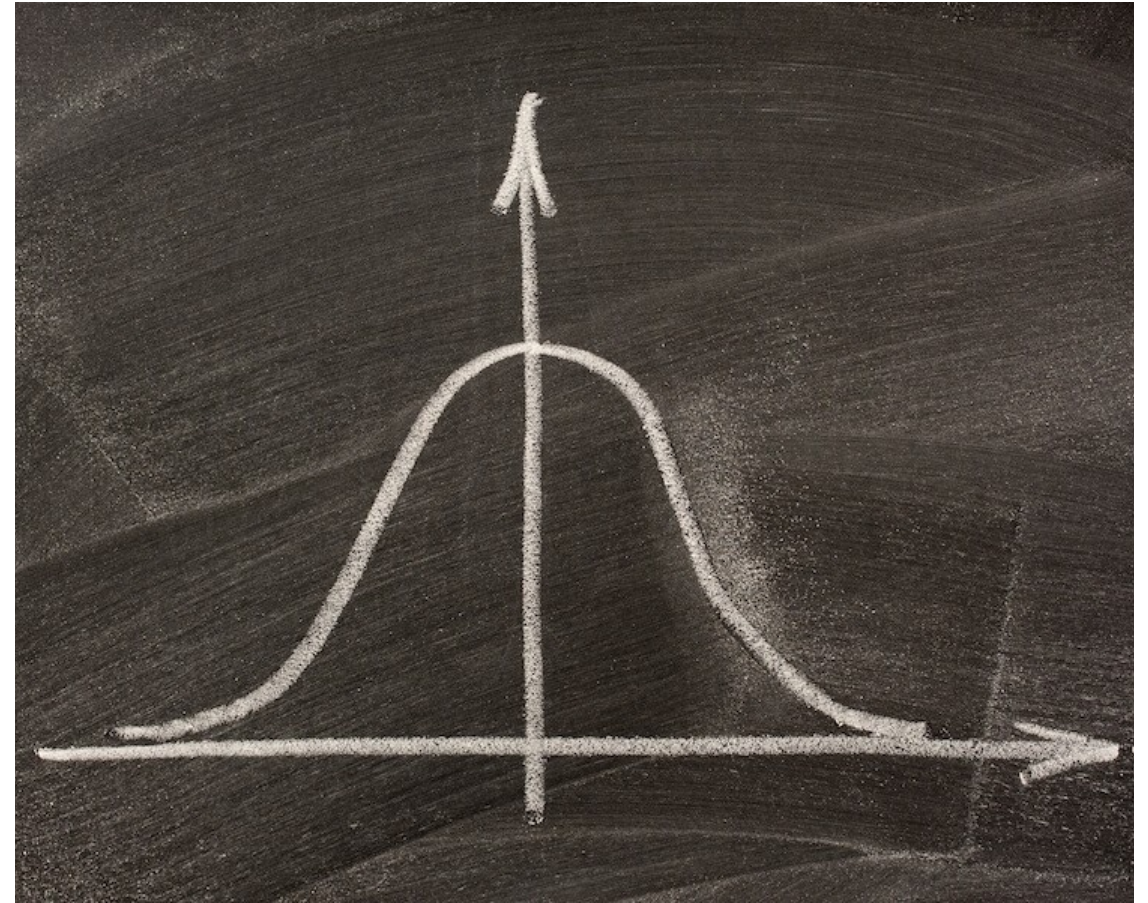
# Why think about mental health in building design?

- 1 in 4 people will suffer from a mental health problem each year
- Mental health costs the UK economy an estimated £105.2 billion each year
- Even before COVID-19, we were spending 90% of our time in buildings
- 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas – set to rise to nearly 70% by 2050
- We can now prove scientifically that our environment has an impact on how we feel and behave
- Scientific case, ethical case and business case



# How much difference can buildings make?

- Buildings alone unlikely to cure serious mental health problems
- However, can contribute to making everyone's daily lives better and less stressful
- Many mental health problems a result of preventable factors: poor sleep, physical ill health, social isolation etc
- Good design can help address many of these issues
- We all have mental health, and sit somewhere on a bell curve
- Better buildings can shift us up this bell curve on any given day (and bad ones can shift us down!)



# Do our modern lifestyles best support our mental health?

- Let us consider early homo-sapiens first:
- Very active!
- Living as a part of nature
- Following natural rhythms
- Highly social
- Engaged with all their senses
- Wired for danger and aware of surroundings

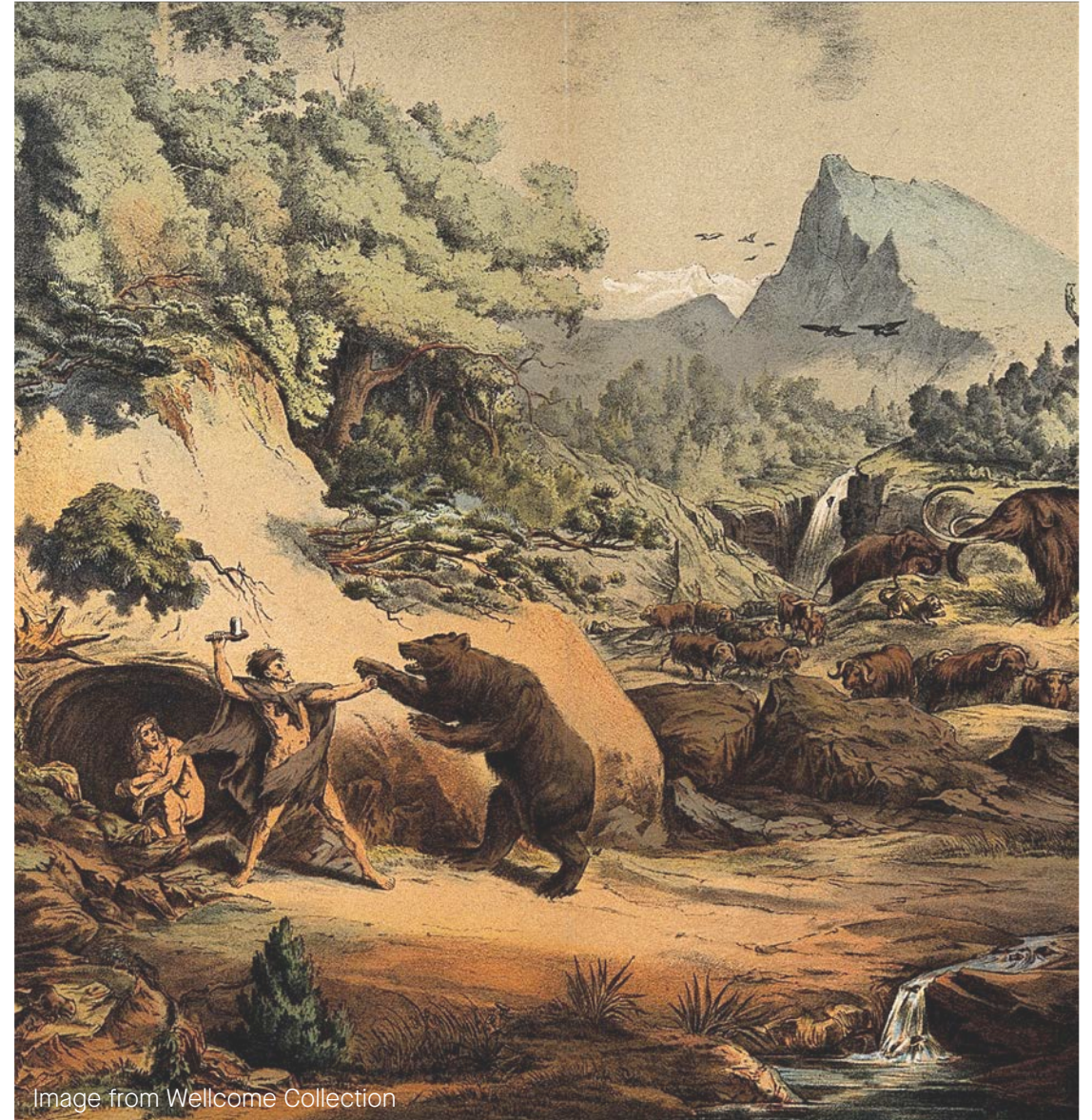


Image from Wellcome Collection

# Do our modern lifestyles best support our mental health?

- Compare this to modern humans:
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Cut off from nature inside buildings
- Ignoring natural rhythms
- Often very solitary / lonely
- Primarily visual, other senses less important
- Still wired for danger (fight or flight mechanism) but less immediate threats, resulting in anxiety / worry
- How can the design of buildings address our needs better than they are currently?

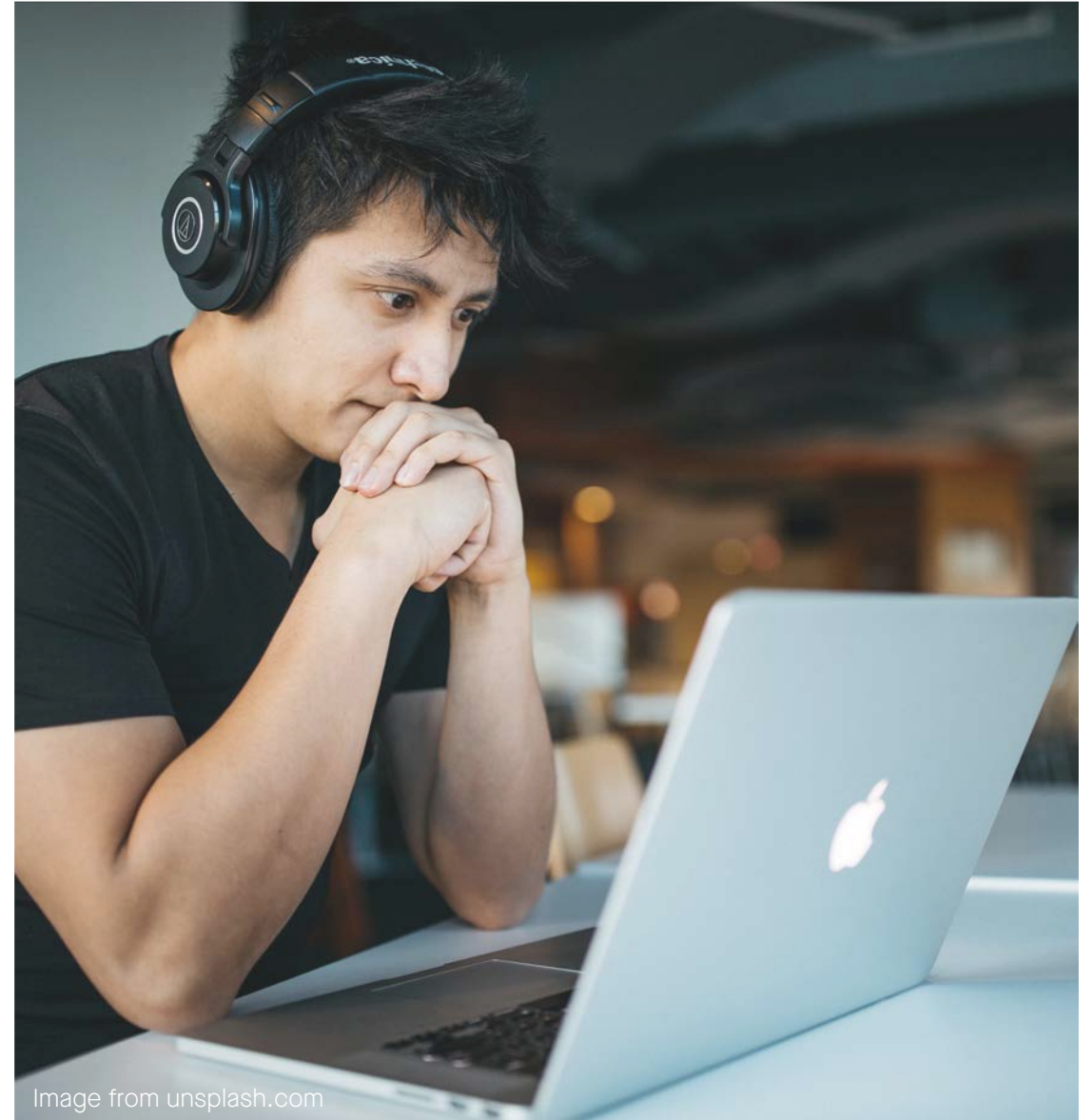


Image from unsplash.com

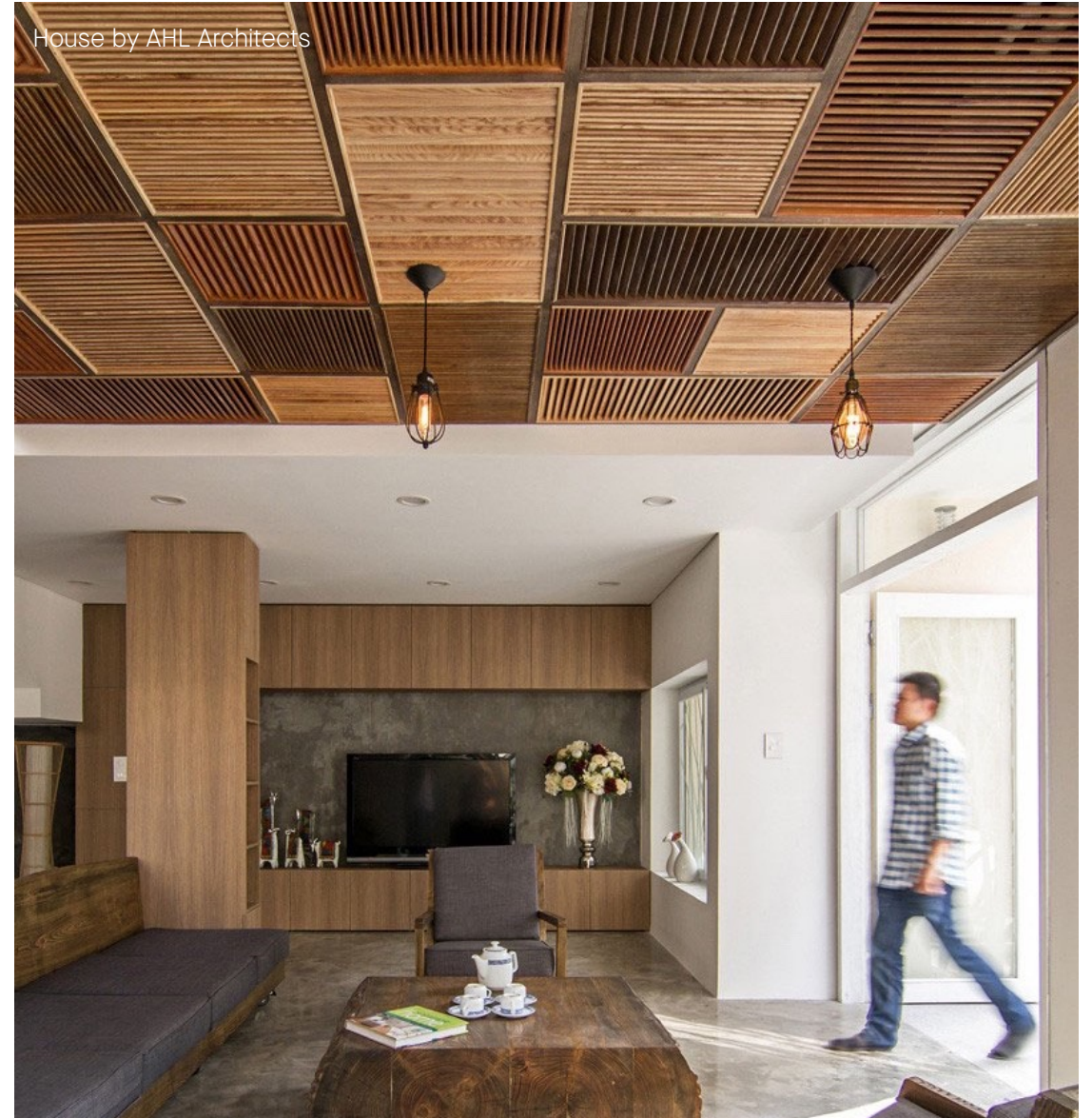
# Natural and artificial light

- Plays a key role in sleep and wake cycles (circadian rhythms)
- Can affect mood-regulating hormones like serotonin
- Important to consider across all design changes – from orientation of building on site to final fittings
- Consider quantity, quality, temperature, glare, flicker, spatial proportions, and balance with privacy / overheating



# Comfort and materials

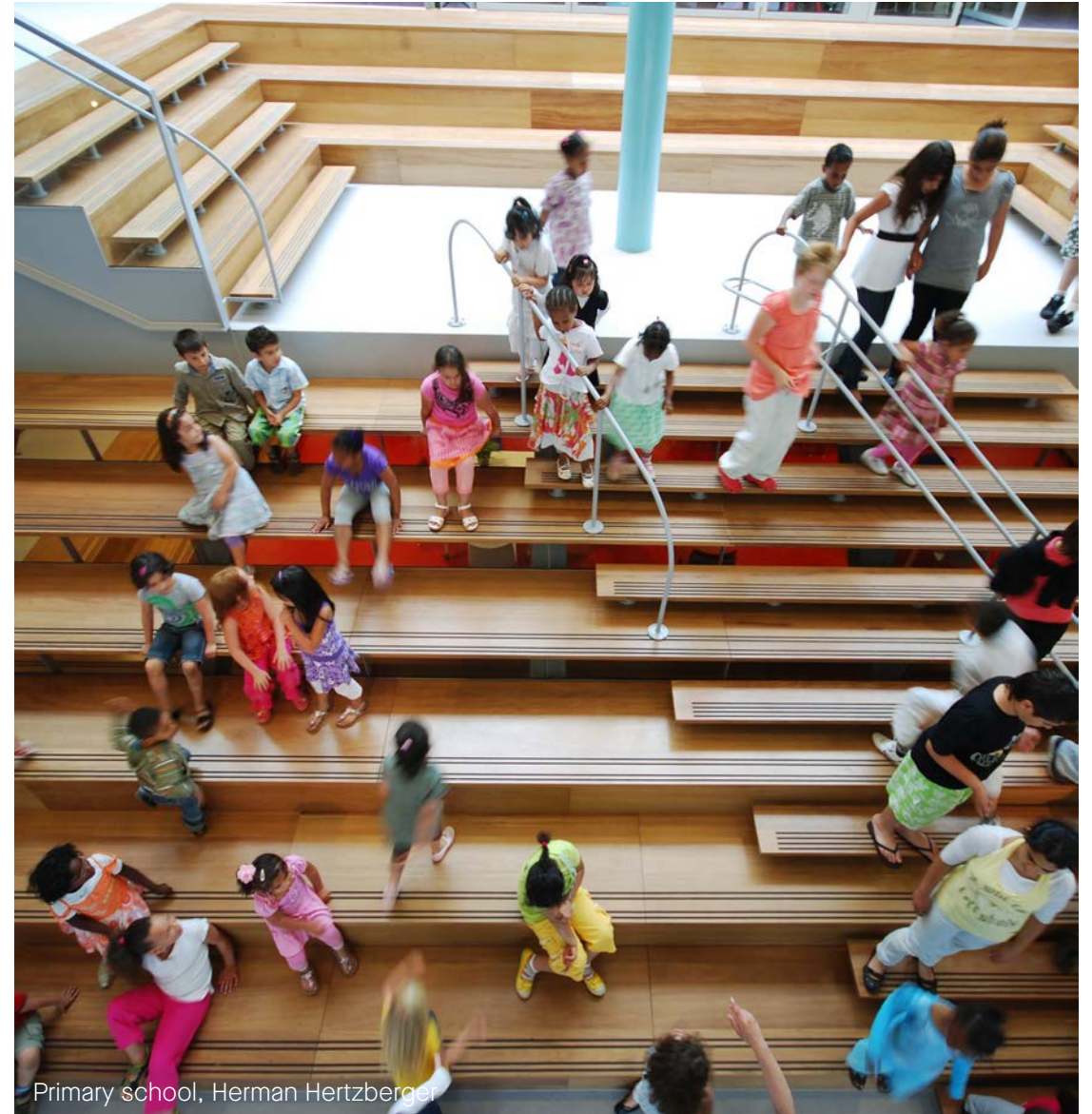
- Our physical comfort can affect our mood, stress levels and physical health too
- Not simply about ergonomic comfort, also encompasses thermal and acoustic comfort (among other issues)
- Material choices can affect our mood as well as air quality (therefore physical health too)
- Consider ventilation strategy, insulation, acoustics, ergonomics, natural material benefits, physical senses





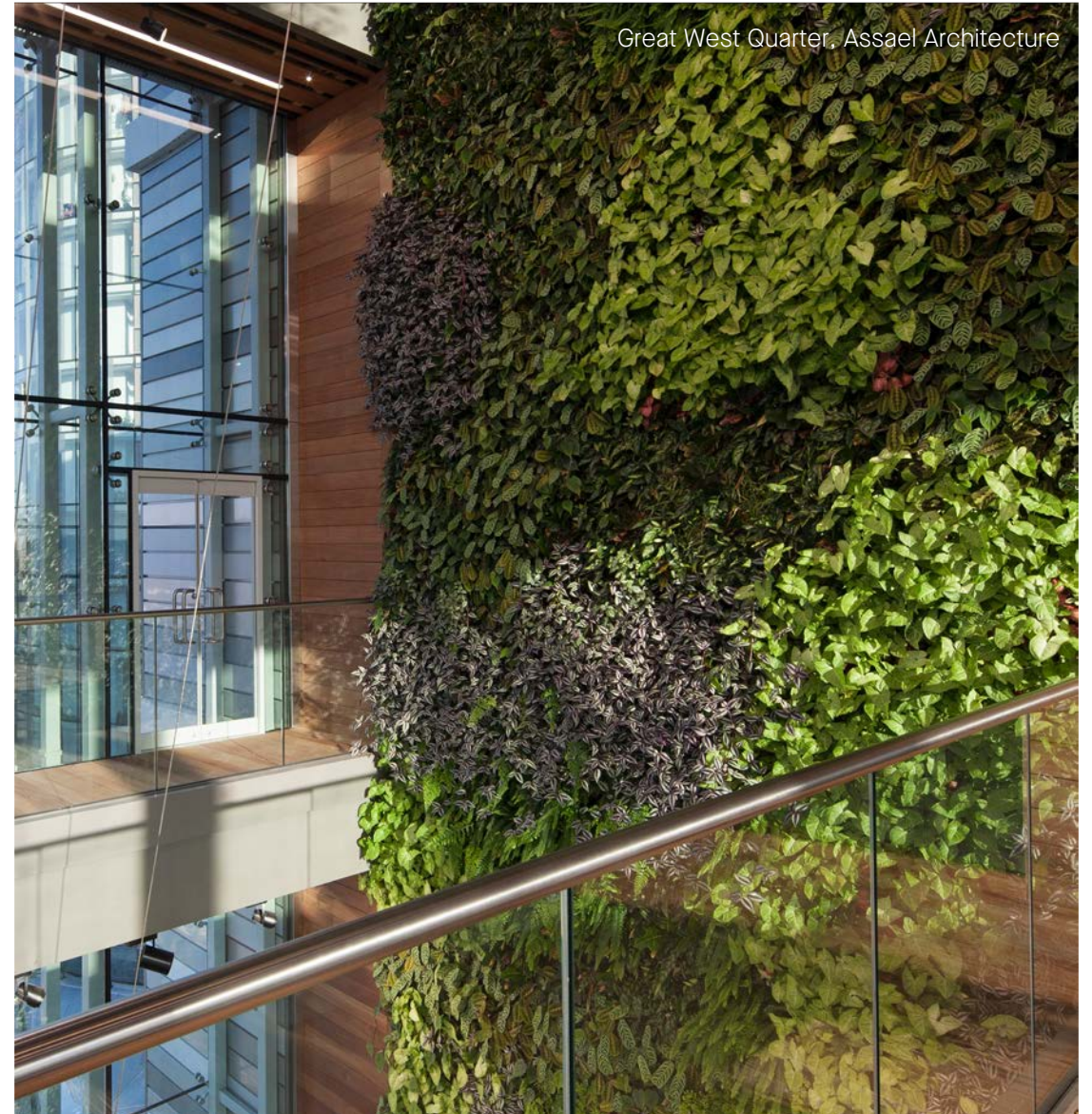
# Control and autonomy

- A sense of control plays an important role in good mental wellbeing
- People are shown to be less happy when control or choice is taken away from them – although too much choice can cause problems!
- Even a perception of more control can be beneficial to our state of mind
- Consider choice, adaptability, privacy, personalisation, range of environment types



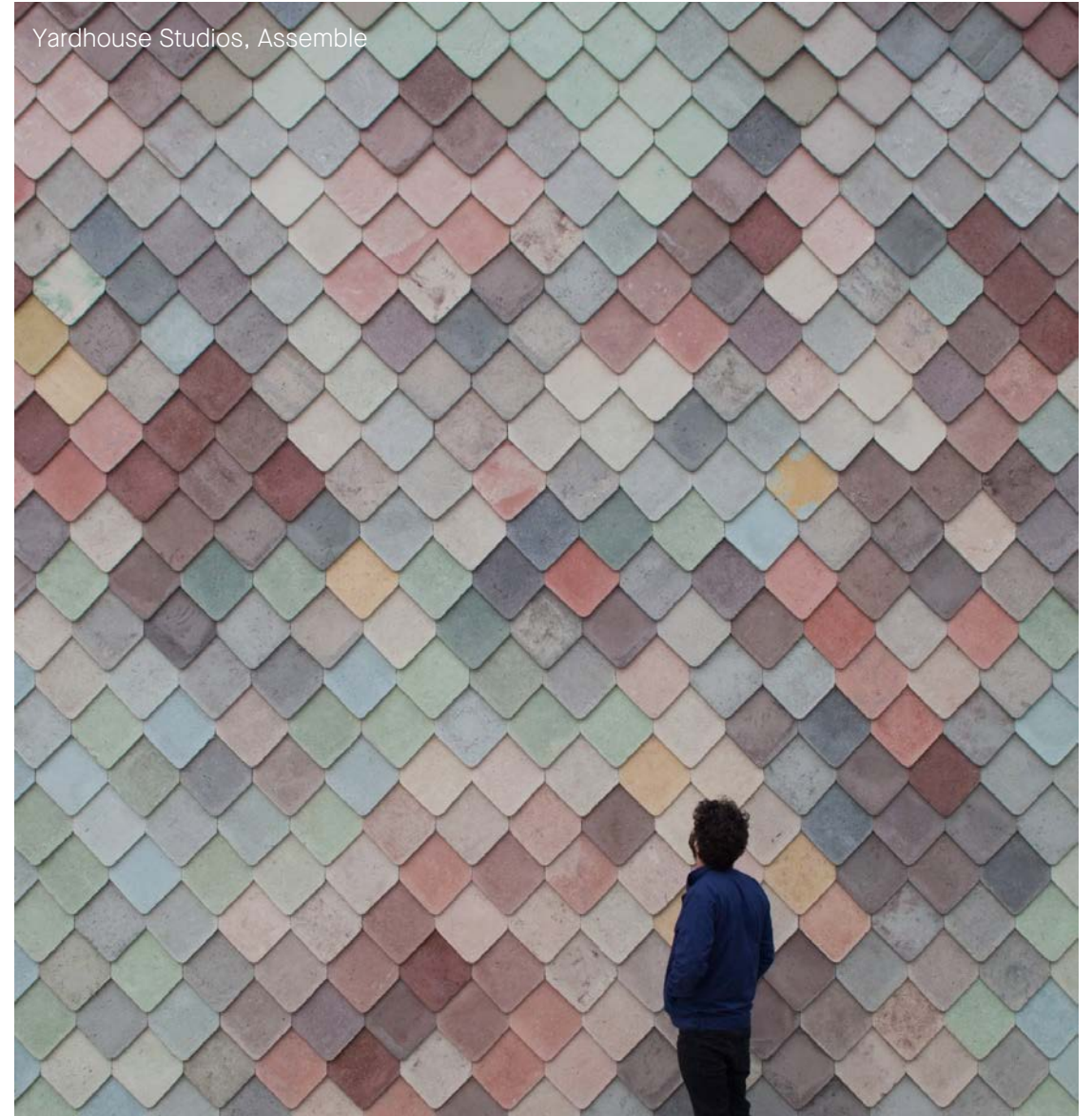
# Nature and biophilia

- One of the most researched areas of environmental psychology – vast amount of evidence
- Concept of 'biophilia' an inherent need for humans to interact with nature
- Has been shown to increase productivity, reduce crime and even increase perceived sales values in retail units
- Consider nature both inside and out, views of nature, education or community opportunities, and other forms of biophilia such as water or animals



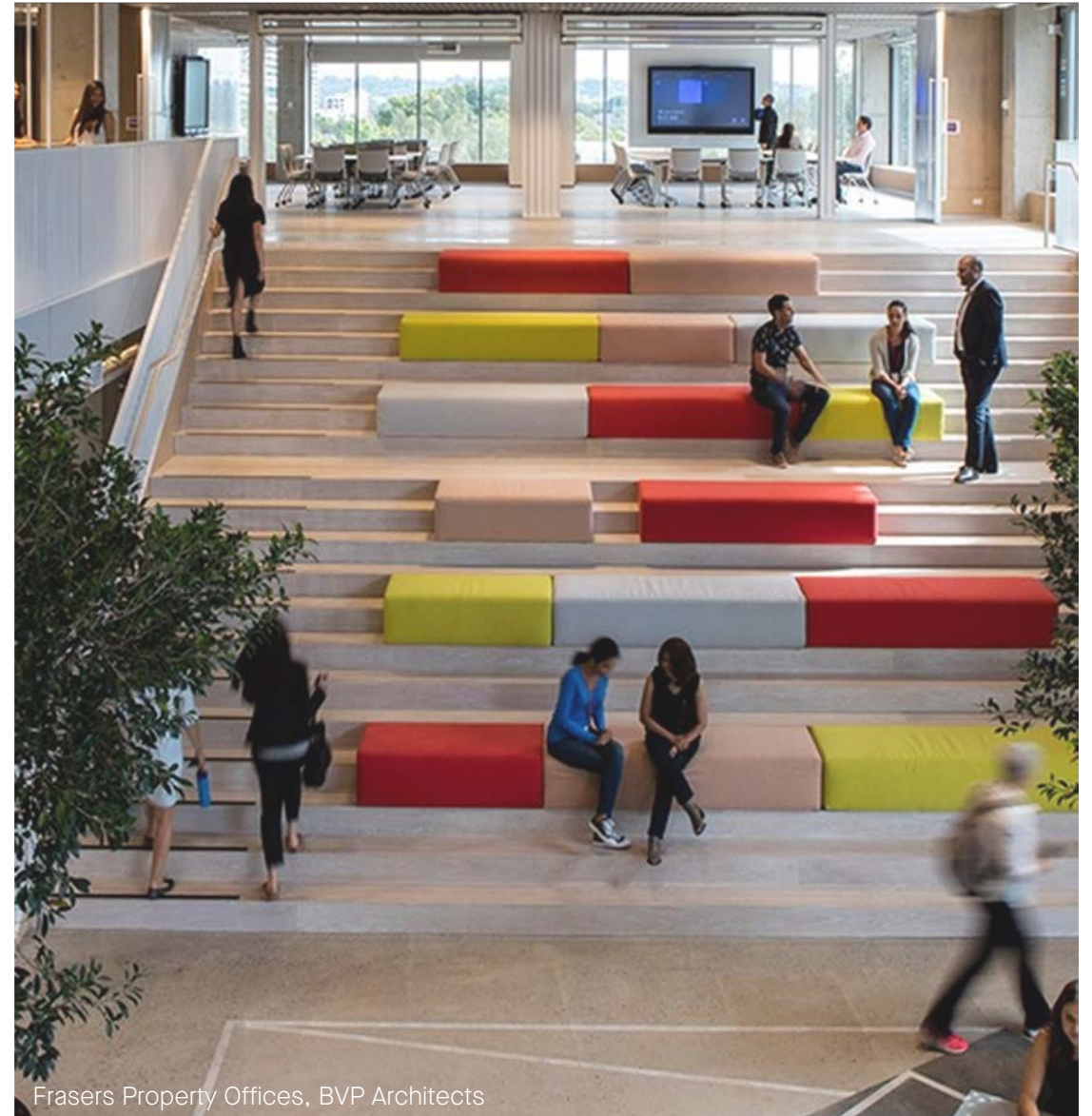
# Aesthetics and legibility

- A subjective topic due to personal taste, but some evidence and research is available
- A clear correlation has been shown between more attractive places and resident happiness
- Legibility plays an important role in how we use and understand buildings and cities
- Consider use of visual cues and navigation strategies, use of colour, pattern, organic shapes, and power of joy!



# Activity and exercise

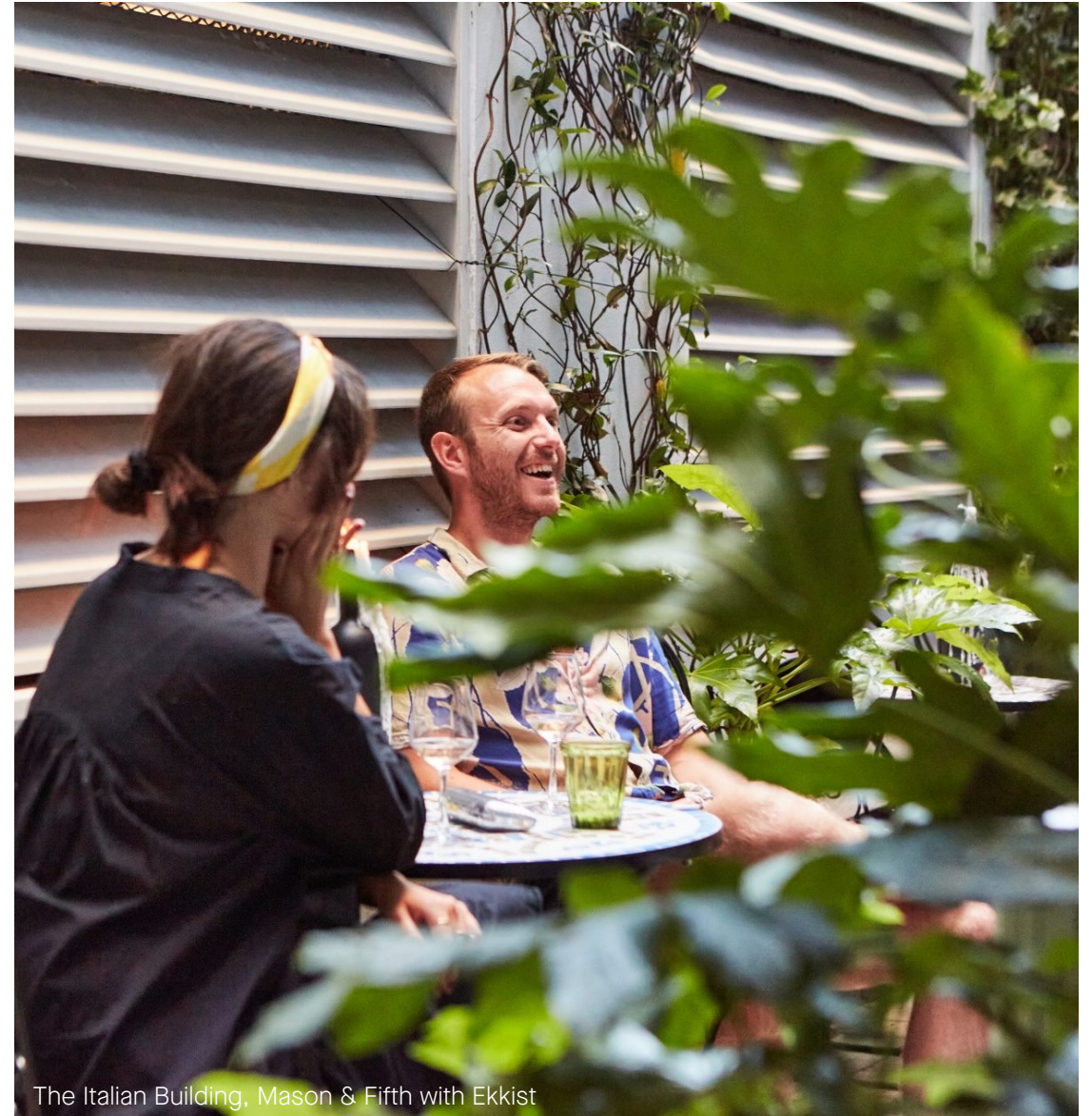
- Not just important for our physical health – can release endorphins that make us feel better for hours
- Can also help people to be more social and support a sense of community
- Building design can ‘nudge’ or encourage people to be more active, as well as supporting activities (e.g. cycling)
- Consider active commuting facilities, active circulation, dedicated activity spaces, and spaces for rest too!



Frasers Property Offices, BVP Architects

# Social interaction and community

- Social interaction plays an incredibly important role in both our physical and mental health
- Loneliness is shown to increase mortality rate by 26%, similar to obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Buildings can provide opportunities for more community activities and encourage people to socialise more
- Consider open plan vs cellular design, social furniture and layouts, chance interaction spaces, spaces for communal activities, accessibility for all



The Italian Building, Mason & Fifth with Ekkist

## In summary:

- Designing for mental wellbeing in buildings is a holistic approach, not a trend or an add-on
- Offers financial as well as social benefits
- Many ways to integrate wellbeing into projects, and every project will require different strategies and approaches
- The key is to always design with a human-centric approach, and to make design decisions based on evidence, not taste or anecdotal experience



# Ekkist

# Thank you!

Sources:

UK Department of Health

Mind

Delos

UN.org

Build Well to Live Well report 2018

UKGBC Healthy Homes Report 2016

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