

THE OFFICE AS ECOSYSTEM

5 STRATEGIC SHIFTS FOR A THRIVING WORKPLACE



THE OFFICE AS ECOSYSTEM

5 STRATEGIC SHIFTS FOR A THRIVING WORKPLACE

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction page 5
- II. The Office Gets Personal page 6-7
- III. The Commute-worthy Workplace page 8-9
- IV. The Not-so-office Office page 12-13
- V. New Ways to Meet page 16-17
- VI. Culture-first Employee Eengagement page 18-19



The Office as Ecosystem

Archivist Capital, Portland, Oregon

Introduction

If the pandemic taught us anything, it was that work can happen anywhere (we see your pajama pants and raise you a ring light). But what 2+ years of Zoom meetings have also taught us is that collaboration, culture, and even careers can only grow so much within a grid on a screen. They need physical places and spaces to thrive.

While it's tempting to think that a magic combination of amenities and incentives will encourage employees to return to the office en masse, a more sustainable

approach asks, *'How can we cultivate an ecosystem of engaged, motivated, successful employees...in our office and beyond?'*

This kind of "ecosystem thinking," as we like to call it, looks at the workplace as an interconnected environment, where the well-being of one lifts the prospects of all. It acknowledges that fostering connections between people is the primary function of the office, and believes that productivity is a by-product of belonging.

THE KEY TENETS OF OFFICE AS ECOSYSTEM:

1	2	3
The well-being of one lifts the prospects of all	Fostering connections between people is the primary function of the office	Productivity is a by-product of belonging

STRATEGY 1:

The Office Gets Personal

The whole is greater than the parts
(but the parts really matter).

The first step in approaching the office as an ecosystem is shifting the paradigm from the office in service of a business function to an office in service of individuals, each of whom brings different needs as well as gifts to the ecosystem.

This means that rather than expecting employees to adapt to their environment, evolving the environment to adapt to the employees. This is no easy task since a workforce is always changing and evolving, but that's the point, really. Rather than designing in response to the existing (or often, past) employee base, it's designing for continuous improvement and ever-increasing perspectives and experiences. This requires abandoning the one-size fits all approach, and embracing custom solutions, curiosity, and resourcefulness.

It begins with knowing current employees well and gaining clarity on the types of employees desired for the future. Smart organizations can achieve this simply by inviting more voices to the table at the outset of design, representing a more diverse array of experiences and interests. These organizations often find that once they know who they are designing for – really

know them – inclusive, people-first design feels less like an obligation and more like an awesome challenge worthy of the effort involved. Because when people feel seen and heard, and their changing needs met, loyalty is the natural outcome.

STRATEGY 1 IN ACTION

People-first design doesn't have to mean a complete overhaul of your office. Every small step matters. For example, a reception desk that is designed with accessibility as the baseline, rather than as an alternative experience. Specifying office furnishings and fixtures with a variety of body types and sizes in mind. Or incorporating neuro-inclusive elements that create a more comfortable visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile environment, such as chairs that gently rock and swivel, or "quiet domains," designed with a calming palette, soothing scents, softer textures and sound-absorbent materials. When we ask the simple question, 'Is this working for you?' with curiosity and a willingness to do something with the answer, a world of possibility opens up.

People-first design isn't the most expedient, but it is the most equitable. It's not always the most intuitive, but it is the most inclusive.



STRATEGY 2:

The Commute-worthy Workplace

What could be better than working from home? A lot, actually.

Now that the veil has been lifted and office employees know they can do their work from home, many employers are scrambling to make their offices more enticing. The results have been mixed, namely because many employers don't understand what people missed about the office when it was closed.

It's a short, but easy-to-overlook answer:
Their employees missed each other.

They missed their co-workers in general, and their closest work friends, specifically. Turns out when given the choice to work at home or in the office, free lunch and foosball aren't commute-worthy, but friends are. (Perhaps free lunch and foosball with work friends are the best incentives of all).

The new, commute-worthy workplace takes human connection seriously and prioritizes the experience of working with others over the seclusion of home.

Community-building programming is designed in, rather than layered on. Opportunities for systematic and spontaneous interactions are part of the larger plan, and curated surprises give employees shared experiences and a sense of belonging to an organization that is creative and ever-changing. Amenities such as gyms and cafeterias become table stakes, and touchpoints for deeper connection are prioritized: outdoor spaces for walking meetings, juice bars and cafes for impromptu collaboration, maker studios, and even pickleball courts for friendly co-worker competition. The communal energy of the office becomes irreplicable at home, and worthy of weathering a little traffic to feel it.

STRATEGY 2 IN ACTION

The proverbial water cooler is the main attraction of the commute-worthy workplace. But instead of one central spot, connection and communication are integrated into the workday and woven throughout the workplace. Socialization hubs are central within each floor or department, as are large group activity spaces and more intimate 2- and 3-person seating groups. Desks are grouped for collaboration and interaction, and barriers are minimized.

Originally designed for a fast-growing biotech firm's new corporate offices, this cube-like structure acts as a centerpiece of the headquarters, and enables planned moments of surprise and delight, as well as team building programming such as pop-up collaboration zones, juice bar, seasonal activities like pumpkin carving, a virtual reality lounge, and more. Even those who aren't participating feel like a part of the action.



According to a recent global survey conducted by Microsoft and surveying 20,000 office workers, 84% of employees said they would be motivated to go into the office by the promise of socializing with co-workers, and 85% would be motivated by rebuilding team bonds.



STRATEGY 3:

The Not-so-office Office

Sometimes you just need to get away. To the office.

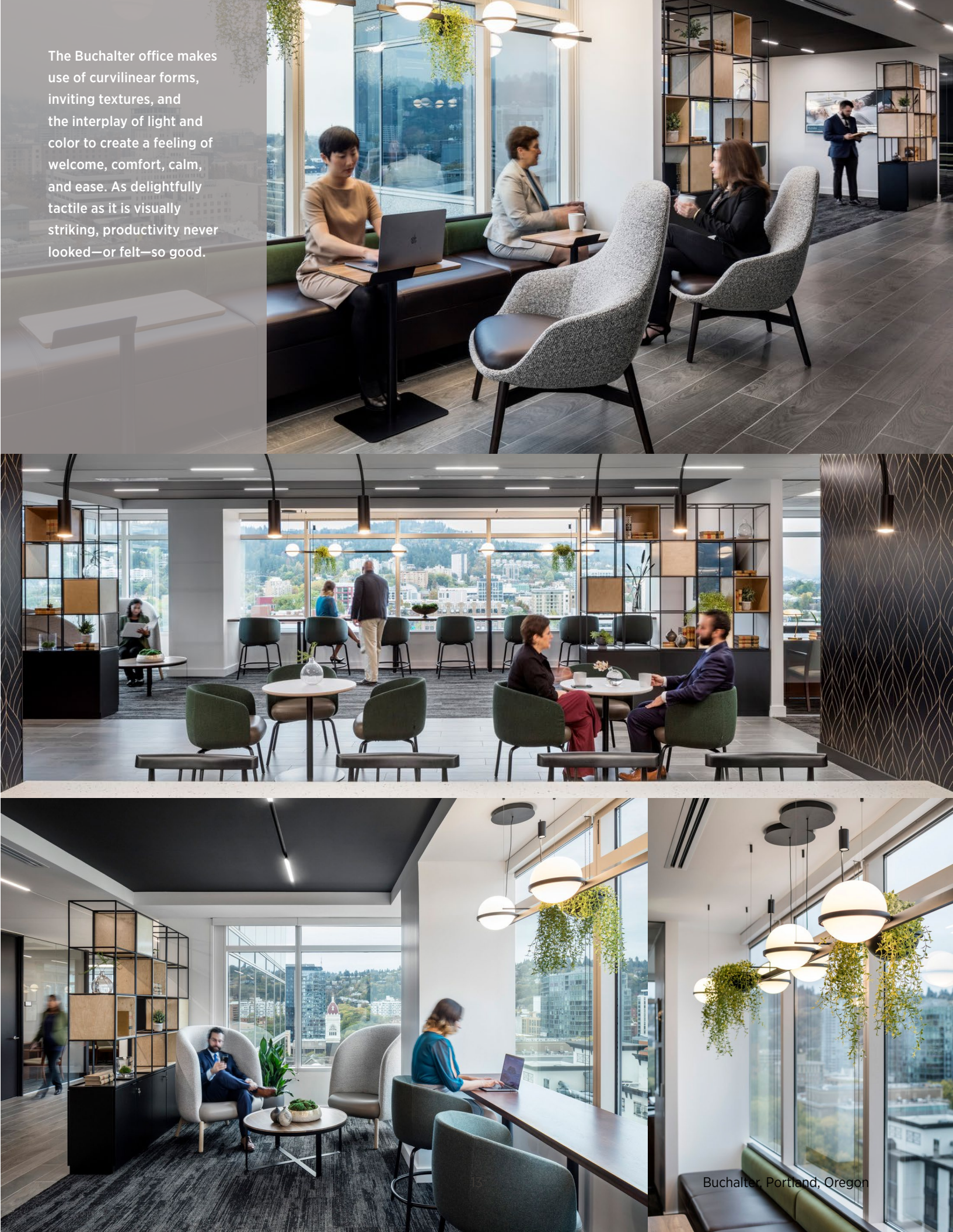
For the last two decades, the office has been in competition with an increasing array of alternative settings (basically anywhere with strong wifi and coffee). Then the pandemic encouraged employees to invest in their at-home work setups, in many cases ensuring the home office had all of the functional bells and whistles of a traditional office with all the comforts of home. Suddenly, out of a long list of options, the actual office was the least appealing place to spend a workday.

One of the big reasons for this is that last decade's office design trends just don't resonate anymore. The bright colors, slick surfaces, and branded environmental graphics that were bro-friendly hallmarks of tech-sector headquarters are out. What's in are environments that are: intuitive, nurturing, inclusive, and sensorially pleasing. In short, they are more like the places we go when we want to escape work: inviting hotel lobbies, comforting casual restaurants, enveloping residential living rooms.

These not-so-office environments build in seamless function as a baseline amenity, prioritizing the emotional experience of the employee, and the communal experience of the ecosystem as the true goal. This makes the office not just the most productive place to work, but also the most inspiring.

STRATEGY 3 IN ACTION

The specialties of interior design have often been siloed by end-use, with hospitality, retail, residential, food and beverage, and workplace design teams all working separately. For the not-so-office office, Ankrom Moisan's design and planning teams routinely cross-pollinate, bringing principles and techniques from non-workplace settings to design offices that meet the high standards of a workforce with a multitude of choices.



According to a 2022 survey from Dialpad, a majority of professionals spend up to one-third of their work weeks in meetings.



STRATEGY 4:

New Ways to Meet

Just say no to mediocre meetings.

Let’s face it, the corporate approach to meetings needed an overhaul long before the pandemic. Meetings had become ubiquitous, bloated, and in some extreme cases, a drain on morale.

The rapid rise of remote work upended the meeting equation, in some ways for the better. But both the all-in-person and all-remote meeting models were reactions to circumstances and surroundings rather than strategic choices.

With the move to hybrid work, companies have an opportunity to consider how meetings can actually be additive to the ecosystem, driving productivity, satisfaction, and investment in the greater good among those in attendance.

Changing the meeting dynamic for the better will require a cross-disciplinary collaboration to identify how office environment, technological tools, and company policy can work in harmony toward the shared goal of a better meeting experience for all.

It sounds like a lofty ambition, but if the data is true and most professionals spend at least one-third of their work week in meetings, it seems a worthy endeavor to undertake.

STRATEGY 4 IN ACTION

Some small moves can have a big impact in making hybrid meetings additive for all attendees, no matter their geographic location.

Some design tactics that companies can establish now include:

- Reconfiguring table layouts into horseshoe shapes to give remote attendees a view of all participants.
- Camera-friendly backdrop and lighting choices.
- Specifying non-glare table surfaces.
- Dividing large rectangular conference rooms into smaller square-shaped spaces to create more intimacy between in-person and remote attendees.
- Planning ahead for meetings in the metaverse, with VR capabilities designed into conference rooms.
- Designing around desired meeting etiquette and agreed-upon meeting norms. For example, designating a Meeting Anchor role to ensure the meeting experience is equitable for all participants, both remote and in-person. Conference rooms could include a Meeting Anchor seat, with the most expansive view of in-person and on-screen participants.



STRATEGY 5:

Culture-first Employee Engagement

On-site is the new offsite.

Workplace design has long been used as a tool to convey company culture and values. Oft-cited are Google's slide-based stair alternatives, letting employees and visitors know that the company takes fun seriously. Other companies just paint their mission statements on a feature wall and call it a day. Both approaches, we would argue, make company culture something to be consumed, rather than lived.

Ecosystem-thinking requires a thoughtful exploration of company values and how they relate to employee behaviors and emotions. It can yield a more fruitful embodiment of company culture—one that doesn't just announce what you're about, but authentically encourages employees to experience and contribute to it meaningfully.

Culture-led workplace design prioritizes the everyday experience of culture over the offsite or occasional company event. The point is that employees should feel most immersed in and aligned with the company culture when they are at

work. A culture-led work environment sets the tone, so that employees can then build on it and make it their own.

STRATEGY 5 IN ACTION

Culture-led employee engagement requires getting clear on company values, and then translating those values into design strategies. For instance, if transparency is valued, executive offices and conference rooms should be easily seen and accessed by employees at all levels. For companies with an authentic sustainability focus, design should transcend eco-friendly materials and LEED certifications, and encourage earth-friendly employee behaviors, such as energy and resource conservation.

In addition to values, the "vibe" also matters. Is lighthearted energy or cool tranquility desired? Should people feel awed or enveloped when they arrive? What's the first thing you want people to see when they arrive, and what tone should it set for their time in the office?





The design of the Community Transit headquarters in Everett, WA, began with a question:

‘What do we want employees to feel when they are in this space?’

The answer yielded four statements:

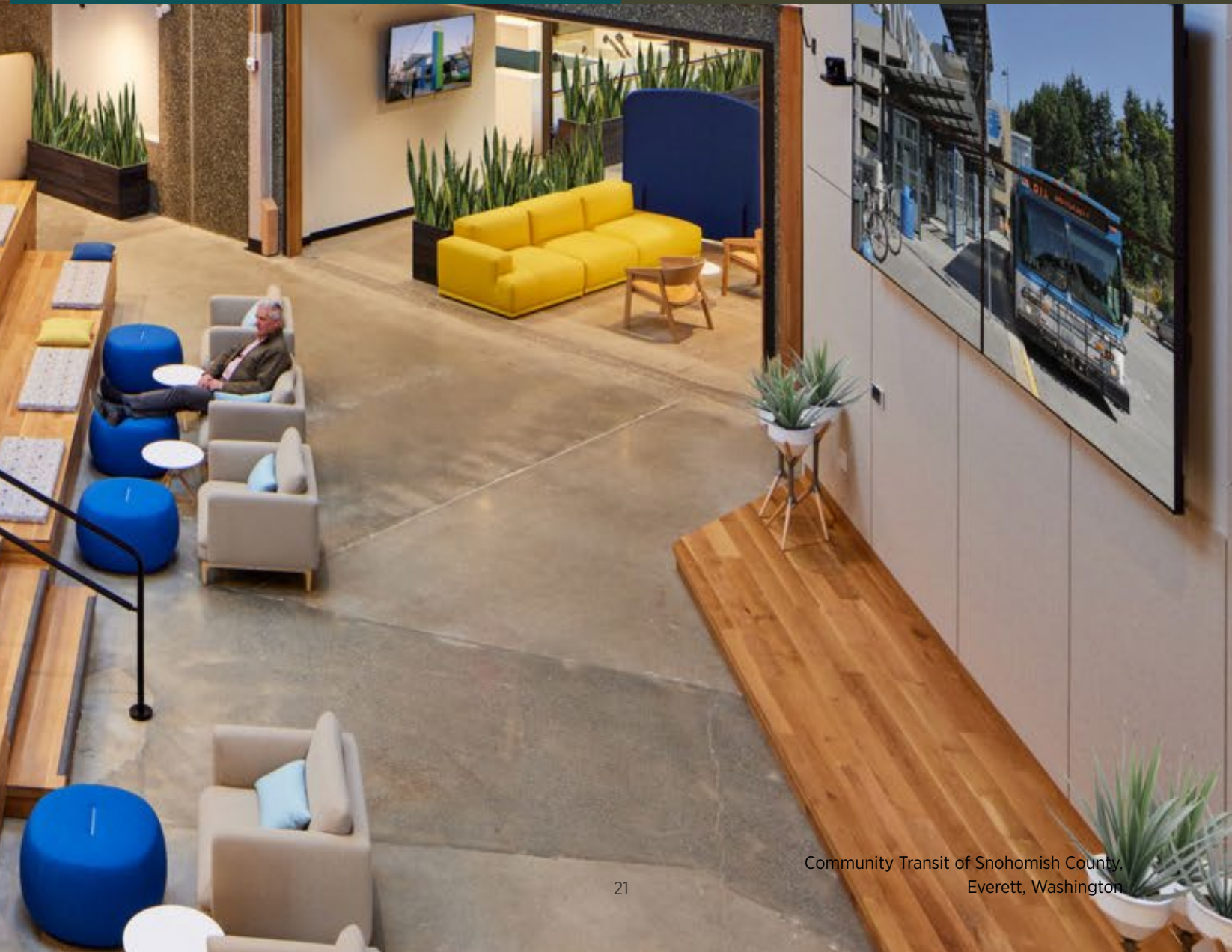
“I am valued.”

“I am learning.”

“I am caring.”

“I am well.”

Those statements became the driving force behind the transformation of an abandoned warehouse space into the local transit authority’s bustling new HQ. For instance, *“I am valued”* led to the design of a beautiful and expansive foyer that would greet employees, from bus driver to executive, with a sense of welcome and regard. An on-site library delivers on *“I am learning,”* while an auditorium space for company meetings, fitness classes, and community use (the local City Council meets there) fulfills all four tenets depending on its use on any given day.





A thriving workplace awaits.



Bethanne Mikkelsen

Managing Principal NCIDQ, LEED AP ID+C

bethannem@ankrommoisan.com



Michael Stueve

Principal, UX Strategy AIA

michaels@ankrommoisan.com



Erica Buss

Senior Associate, Research & Insights

ericab@ankrommoisan.com