Adaptable Workspaces:
The First Insight Book on Adaptable Office Architecture

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Modern offices must find ways to meet ever-evolving needs while staying sustainable. At Mute, we believe that adaptable office architecture is the solution. Our mission is to transform office design by placing adaptability at its core.

With innovations like the Mute Modular system, we aim to revolutionize traditional office design, shifting from fixed solutions to flexible, modular spaces where size and function can be easily adjusted to meet changing needs.

As innovators, we are committed to supporting and educating stakeholders – architects, designers, real estate managers, and investors – on the principles of adaptable office architecture and its incredible possibilities. The document we proudly hand over is an example of our commitment to engaging in a dialogue with the market and, as far as we know, the first comprehensive publication focusing on this subject.

On the following pages, we examine adaptable office architecture's influence on workers' well-being and analyze its potential gains for investors, landlords and real estate companies. Finally, we check how it can make architects' work smoother and easier.

We hope you will find plenty of exciting insights that will inspire you to create spaces that not only meet today's demands but are also prepared for whatever comes next.

Happy reading!

Szymon Rychlik
Mute CEO

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The Journey of Office Design: From 1906 to the Era of Adaptability

Office spaces have constantly changed, adjusting to new ways of working. Why is adaptability the next big thing in neverending office (r)evolutions?
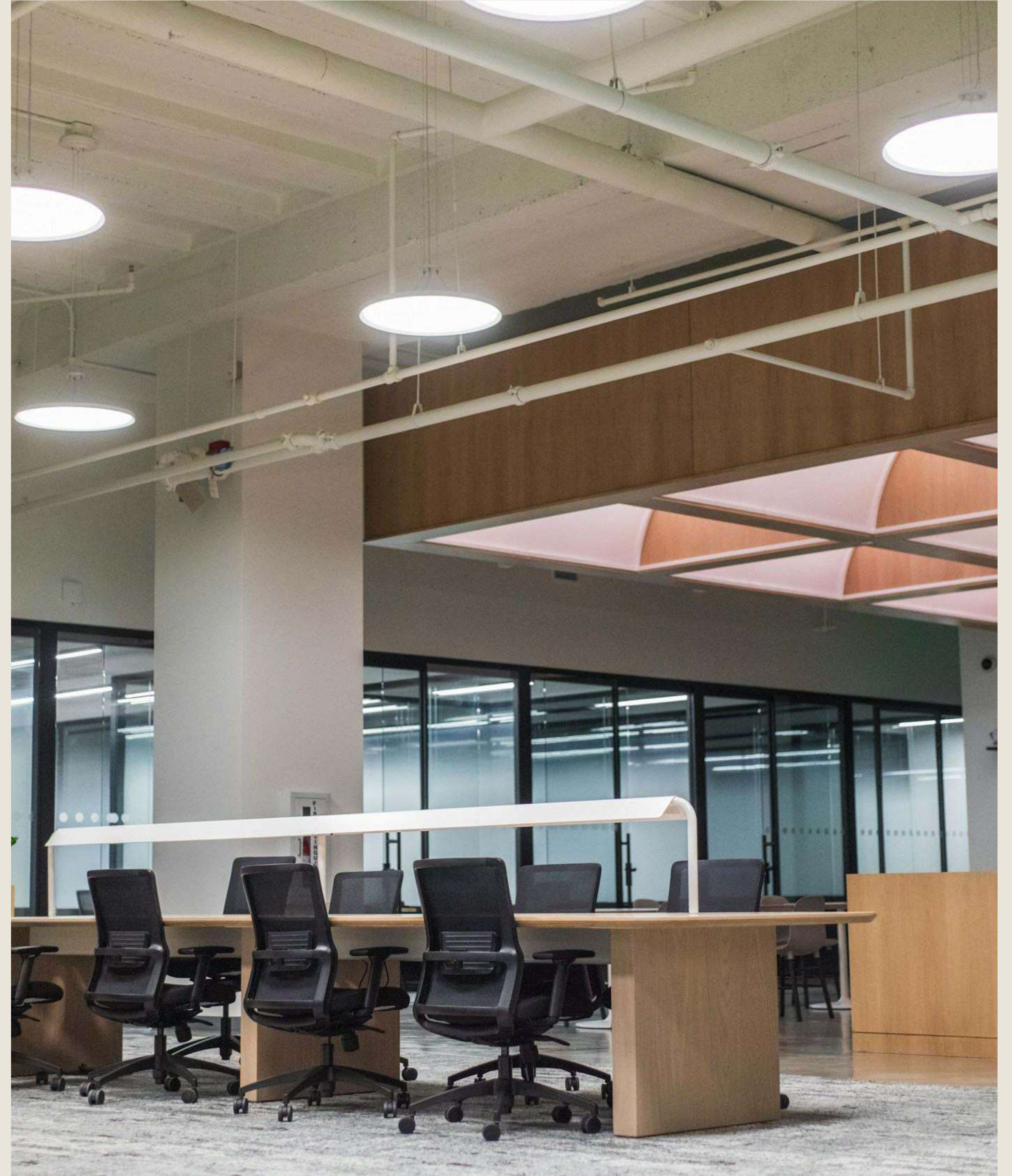

Photo: Unsplash

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1906 was a turning point in the history of work. The Larkin Administration Building, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and considered the first "modern" office, opened. Since then, office spaces have never stopped evolving.

The idea of the contemporary workspace, in function and design, has been regularly redefined to meet the demands and trends of the day. In Wright's project, the Larkin Administration Building, workers sat side-by-side in lines of desks which were then surrounded by managers. This idea was soon replaced by the "Burolandschaft" ("Office Landscape") concept, where team members were placed in more organic patterns without evident hierarchism to foster cooperation and communication. The "Office Landscape" provided a sense of equality, but caused trouble with noise and lack of privacy. Cubicles were introduced to address these issues, but this resulted in isolating office workers inside a depressing and monotonous maze of identical cubes.

> The idea of contemporary workspace, in function and design, has been regularly redefined to meet the demands and trends of the day.

To disrupt the monotony and claustrophobia of the cubicle, the open-plan office concept emerged. Extensive, borderless spaces became all the rage and made cubicle-filled offices feel dull and obsolete. The open plan was perceived as an inspirational space for short time, especially after tech companies like Google and Facebook reinvented their HQs this way. Yet, the old, well-known issues of noise and lack of privacy came back and became especially troubling when people got used to a particular level of calm and focus they enjoyed with remote work.

With hybrid work becoming the new trend, people now visit the office only a few times a week, mainly to meet, chat, and collaborate. Hybrid meetings, often with virtual participants, are also on the rise. These shifts have made privacy and well-being more critical than ever, rendering noisy, chatty open floor plans as outdated as cubicles were a decade ago.

The interior of Larkin Administration Building, Source: The Buffalo History Museum

Herman Miller's Office Cubicles, Source: Getty Image

Famous architect, Carl Elefante famously said "the greenest building is... one that is already built." The same is true with offices. The keyword that defines what the office needs to be today and in the future is "adaptable."

Predictions for the Office's Future

So here we go again, looking for a new modern office concept that finally caters to today's needs and the challenges of tomorrow. What will the modern workplace look like? First of all it needs to reflect recently evolved lifestyles (like working from home and the growing importance people associate with their well-being), technological trends (growing number of video calls), and business needs (downsizing offices). Secondly, It will always continue changing. Changes will be more frequent, more radical, and even unexpected. Who would have thought five years ago that today 22 percent[1] of the American workforce (32.6 million employees) would work remotely? Finally, It has to be more sustainable and adaptable. When 40 percent of waste worldwide and 38 percent of CO_2 emissions come from the construction industry[2], and 90 percent[3] of the United States' young workforce is concerned about climate change, the office design industry has to reinvent itself.

Key Principles of Adaptability

Famous architect, Carl Elefante famously said "the greenest building is... one that is already built." The same is true with offices. The keyword that defines what the office needs to be today and in the future is "adaptable." Offices must be able to respond to changing needs and circumstances over time and adapt to their users promptly and with little effort.

This concept emphasizes flexibility, resilience, and sustainability in architectural office design. Adaptable architecture can involve various elements such as modular construction, movable partitions, flexible layouts, and smart technologies that allow spaces to be reconfigured or repurposed as required. What are the key principles of adaptability?

Flexibility involves designing spaces that can be quickly reconfigured to meet different needs and requirements.

Modularity refers to the design principle that breaks a system into smaller, interchangeable components or modules, often prefabricated. This approach allows for easier modification, scaling, and maintenance of a system.

Sustainability is about creating buildings that can adapt to changing conditions while minimizing environmental impact and resource consumption over their life cycle.

> Offices must be able to respond to changing needs and circumstances over time and adapt to their users promptly and with little effort.

What Does It Mean the Office is Adaptable?

Adaptability refers to a space's ability to effectively accommodate its evolving needs and maximize its value for users over time.
A genuinely adaptable office must meet five specific conditions: adjustable, versatile, convertible, scalable, and moveable. These conditions are proposed by Robert Schmidt and Simon Austin in their book *Adaptable Architecture: Theory and Practice*. Schmidt and Austin applied these conditions to buildings, but majority of them can also be applied to office architecture[5].

Adjustable means the furniture, equipment and space is easily and frequently transformed to accommodate changing tasks. For example, an open lounge area can be transformed into a brainstorming room thanks to moveable walls and detachable elements.
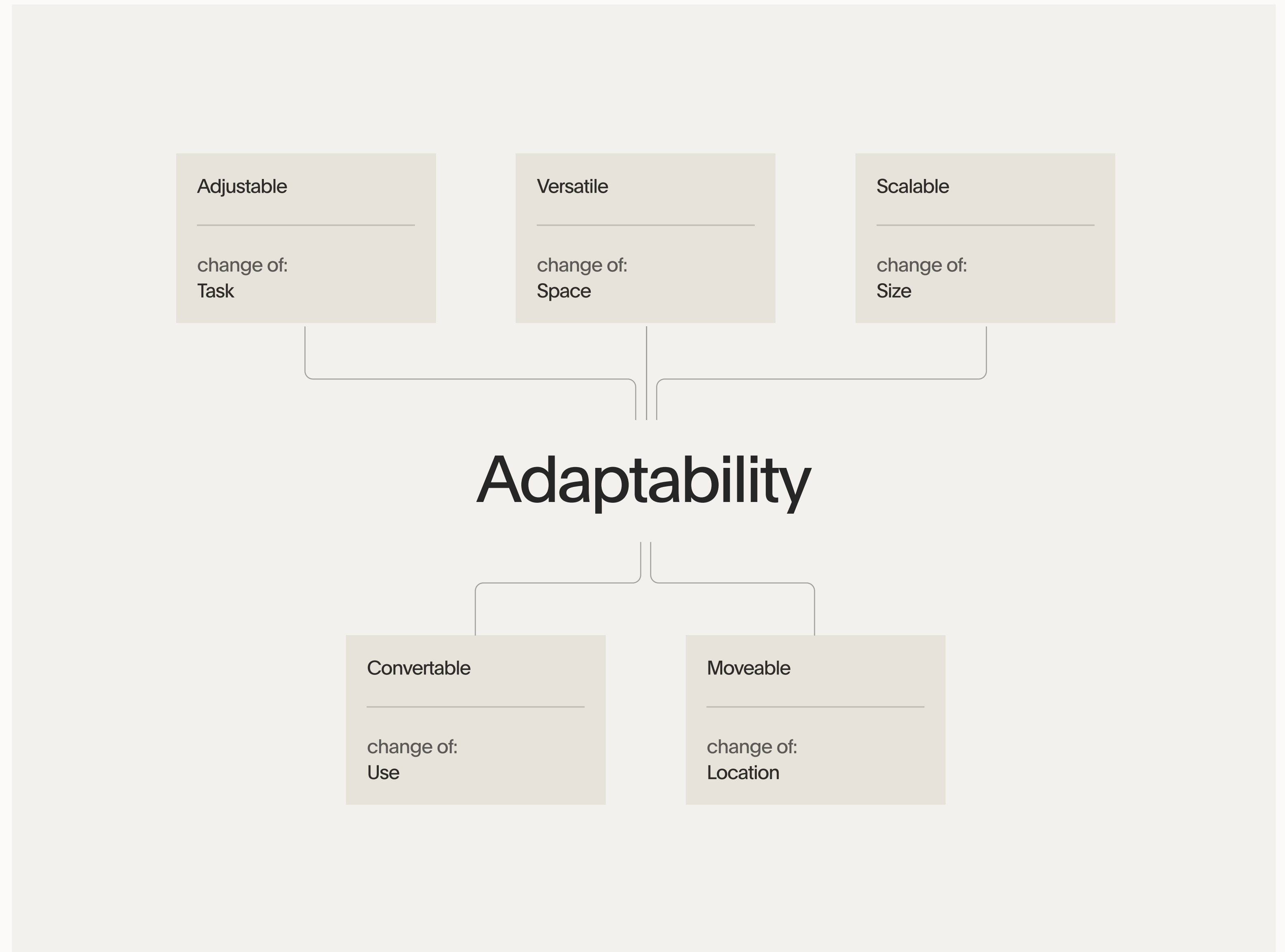

Adjustable	Versatile	Scalable
change of: Task	change of: Space	change of: Size

Adaptability

Convertable	Moveable
change of: Use	change of: Location

Chart 1.   The Dimensions that Define Adaptability

Source: *Adaptable Architecture: Theory and practice,* Robert Schmidt III and Simon Austin, 2016

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Versatile relates to the capacity to change the spatial layout to allow for variations in activities, teams, organisational approaches, etc. For example, the conference room could be expanded by merging with other spaces to host more people at once. Or it can be divided to host several smaller meetings at the same time.

Convertible refers to the ability of a space to be repurposed and permanently modified to serve different functions.

Scalable relates to changing size: adding or taking away space horizontally or vertically. It means some office fit-outs can be expanded, reshaped, or shrunk with ease. For example, modular office furniture systems allow users to reconfigure their dimensions using the same components simply by adding or taking away modules.

Moveable assumes office fit-out is easy to disassemble, transport, and reassemble in another place thanks to durable but lightweight components and an easy assembly system.

> (…) the less time and cost it takes to adapt the office to users' needs, the more frequently they can be transformed and, therefore, more accurately respond to current expectations.

As Schmidt and Austin write, "Every building is adaptable – but to what end and what cost?" With offices, it's similar: the less time and cost it takes to adapt the office to users' needs, the more frequently they can be transformed and, therefore, more accurately respond to current expectations. More traditional solutions like drywalls are often not economically viable. Therefore we need to do what we can to popularize solutions, and ways that makes adaptability both sustainable and profitable.

3D visualisation: Adam Szpil

Modular | MUTe.
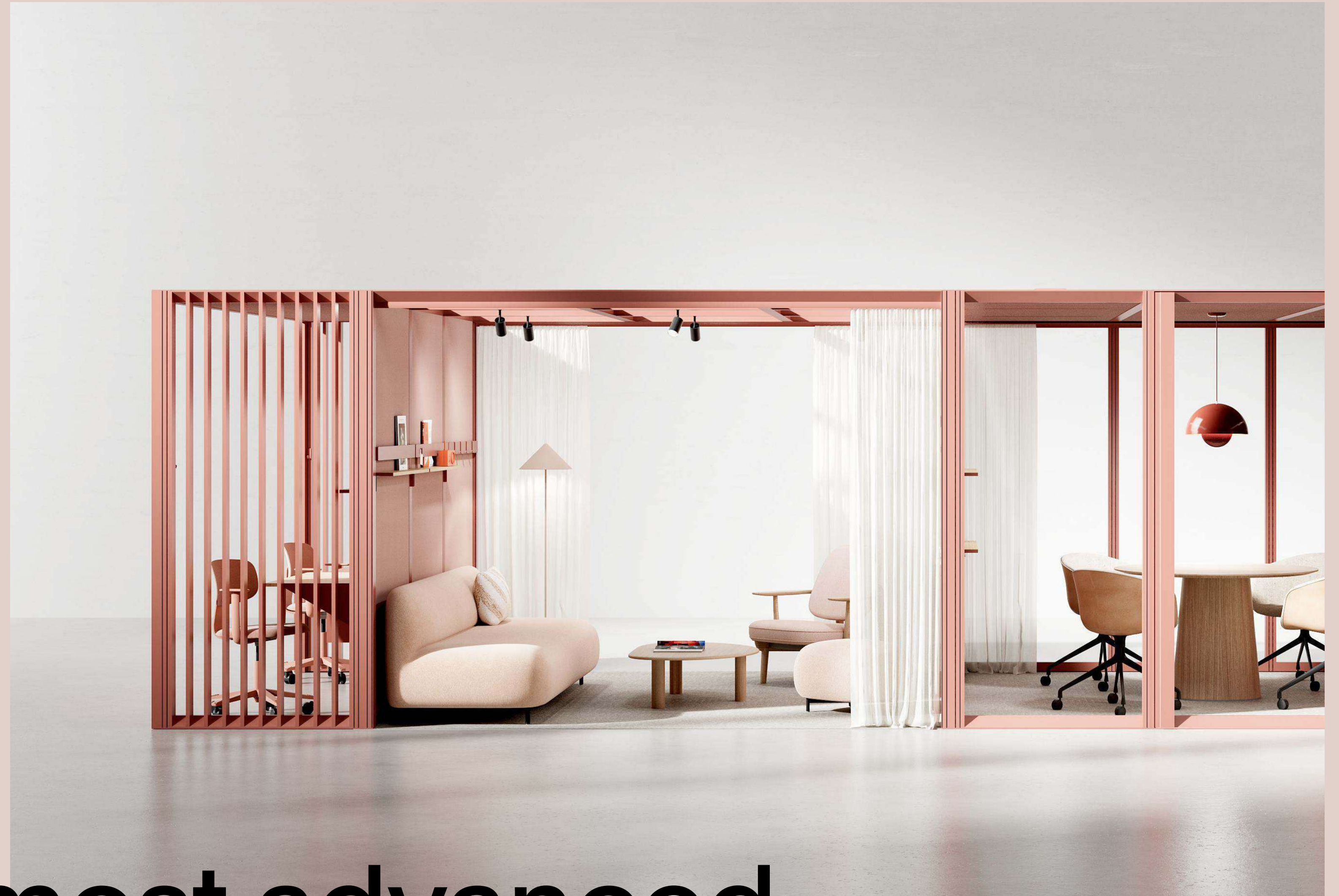
The world's most advanced adaptable room-in-room system

Modular | MUTE.

Mute Modular is an adaptable room-in-room system that offers a new level of flexibility and sustainability in office design. Universal, reconfigurable, and comfortable, this system serves as a bridge between traditionally built rooms and conventional office pods, incorporating the best features of both.

With Mute Modular, you can create soundproof pods, conference rooms, lounge areas, or copy points. You can choose from over 50 ready-to-use presets or design a tailor-made configuration. Pods and rooms can be placed separately or combined into multifunctional hubs. Each Mute Modular is equipped with high-quality lighting, efficient and quiet automatic ventilation, and superior acoustic properties.

Thanks to our patent-pending click-in system, you can build an office in hours, not weeks. Additionally, each Mute Modular can be modified freely – the same modules can be used to create various structures of different shapes and sizes. In the event of relocation, the modular room can be easily disassembled and rebuilt in a new location. Agile and durable, Mute Modular results in less waste, and lower CO2 emissions.

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Future-Proofing Properties: Adaptability in Commercial Real Estate Market

In extraordinarily challenging times, adaptable office designs can help landlords lower property construction, renovation and maintenance costs, attract new tenants, and become more sustainable.
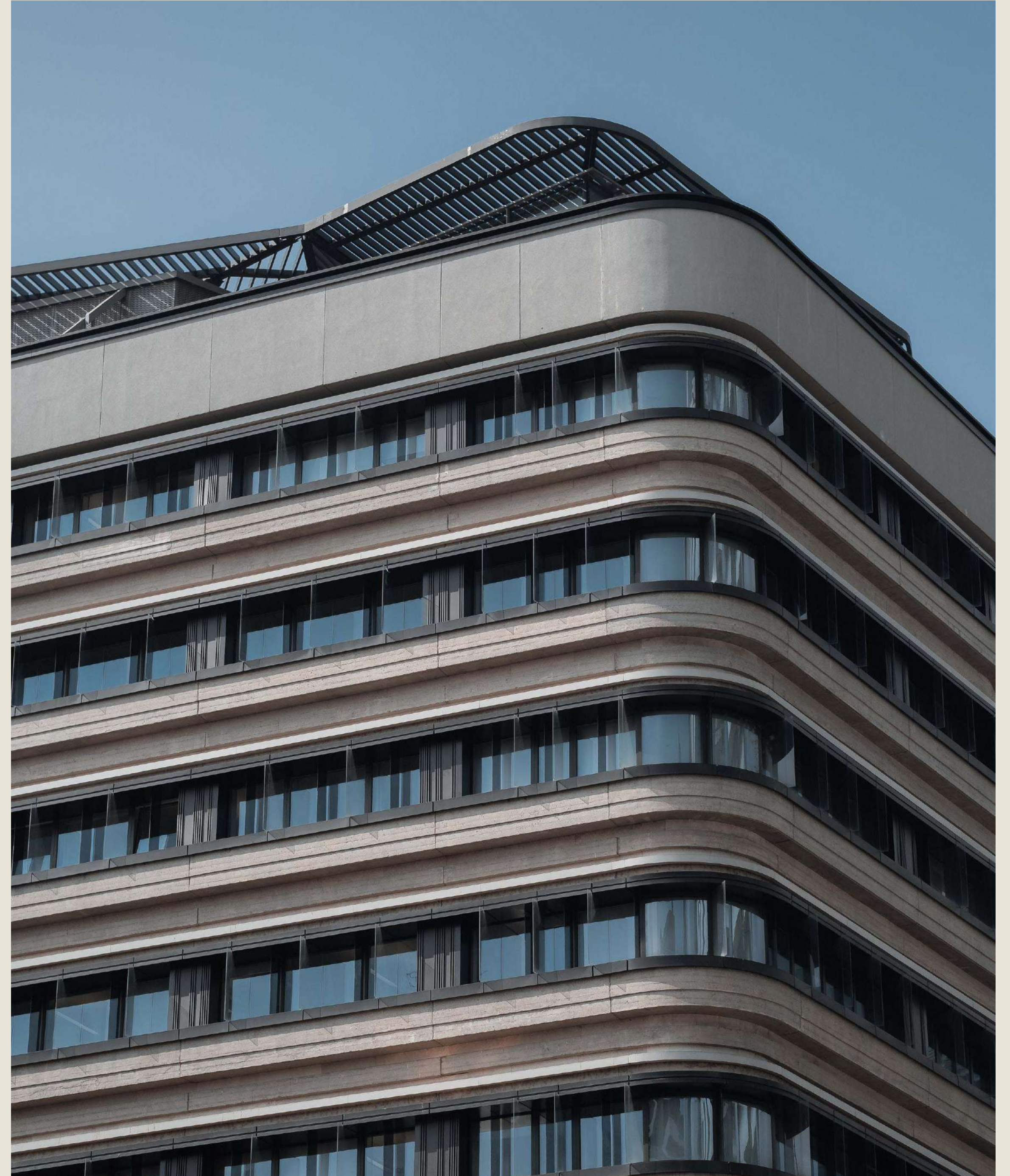

Photo: Unsplash

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Property owners encounter a unique set of challenges in today's rapidly changing work landscape. Due in part to the enduring post-pandemic hybrid work model, many companies are hesitant to sign long-term leases as they seek to protect themselves from unnecessary costs and potential market changes.

This has resulted in a major problem for landlords: high vacancy rates. According to Moody Analytics, nearly 20 percent of offices in the U.S. are sitting empty – some of the highest levels in recent decades[5].

These high vacancy rates and tenants' understandable hesitation to commit to office arrangements, makes it even more critical for property owners to attract potential tenants. The Moody Analytics report highlights how tenant requirements have shifted in response to the changing world of work in recent years, writing that "properties which offer flexible or smaller configurations are particularly attractive to tenants who decided to keep the physical office footprint for branding, purposeful gathering, training, and collaboration purposes." Adaptable office architecture is therefore becoming a fundamental design element of property owners' portfolios.

Adaptable office architecture includes implementing solutions like premade rooms, hubs, and spaces that prioritize flexibility and therefore make for economical and sustainable offices. Any relocation, updates, and reconfigurations become quick and easy.

Smaller Offices, Higher Standards

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath left organizations turning to hybrid work models and downsizing offices[6]. In fact, 50 percent of the world's largest businesses (50,000 employees or more) expect to continue to shrink their global workspaces[7].

Despite the trend to downsize, the form and quality of workspaces matter more than ever. According to a recent Deloitte study on the 2024 commercial real estate outlook, "Newer, high-quality assets continue to significantly outperform the rest as the flight to quality accelerates.[8]" The rush for designs that accommodate hybrid work
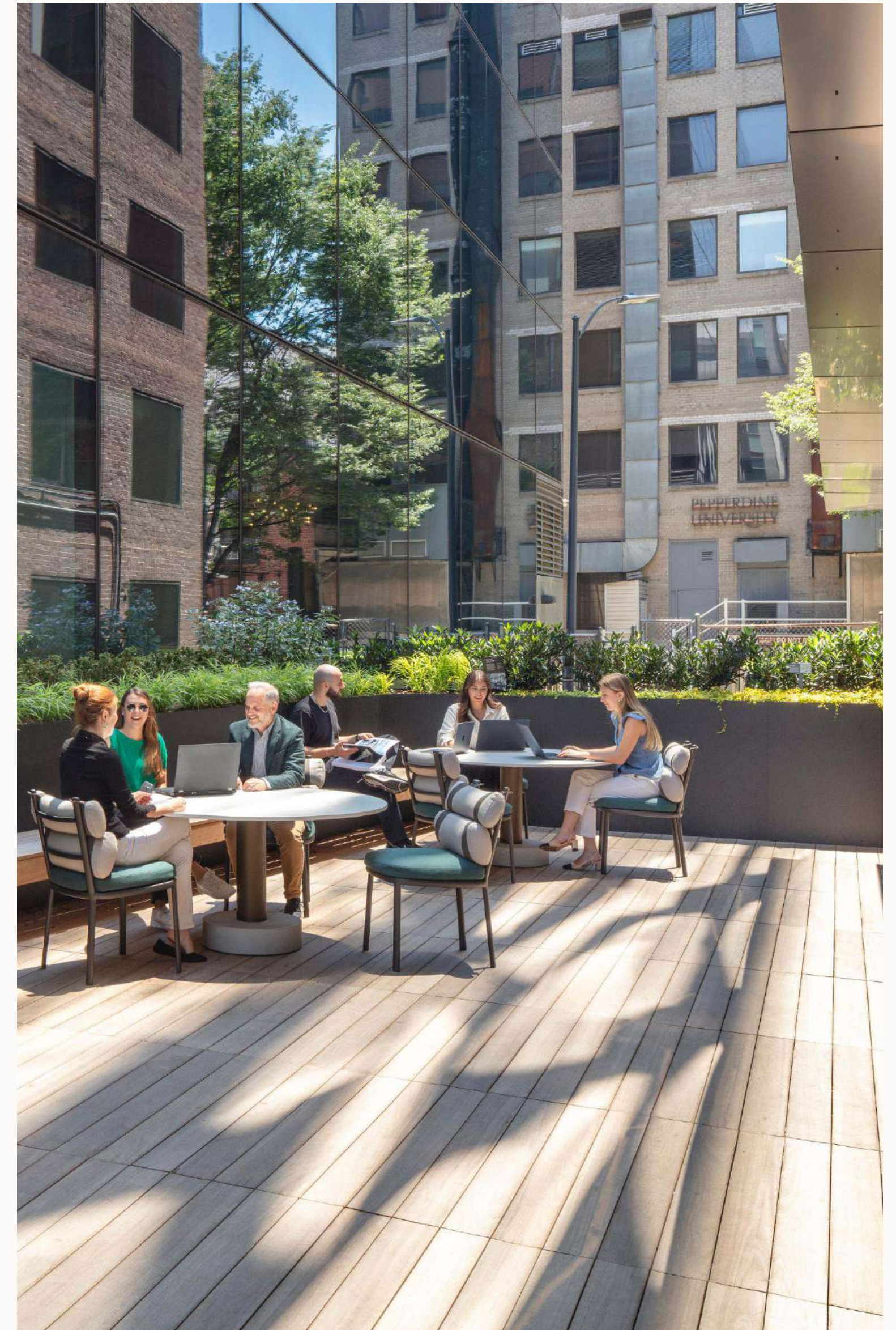

Photo: HGEsch Photography

strategies has also contributed to the absorption of over 100 million square feet of unused space. That means the function of workspaces and how they lend themselves to workforce needs matter to tenants more than ever too.

> Implementing adaptable architecture solutions, allows landlords to offer spaces that fit not only tenant's unique specifications, but also provide a way for them to adapt quickly in changing times.

Employees come to the office to focus, but also to socialize and collaborate in ways they simply cannot at home. According to a Gensler Research Institute survey, employees say they want to come to the office "to focus on my work.[9]" This is quickly followed by reasons like access to certain technology, meeting spaces, materials, and other resources employees might not otherwise have at home. This requires that offices offer a variety of spaces that each lend themselves to the unique needs of one task or another and deliberately design areas for focus, collaboration, lounging or quiet work, and more casual socializing. As Gensler notes in their U.S. workplace survey, "Employees [83 percent] say they would come to the office more often for their ideal mix of experiences."

Property owners must pay attention to a growing demand for workplaces that offer this ideal mix of diverse experiences and therefore match the new needs of hybrid work. Implementing adaptable architecture solutions, therefore allows landlords to offer spaces that fit not only tenant's unique specifications, but also provide a way for them to adapt quickly in changing times. This kind of flexibility incentivizes clients to stick to their leases, even as they evolve.

The office vacancy rate rose to a record-breaking 19.6% in 2023 Q4.
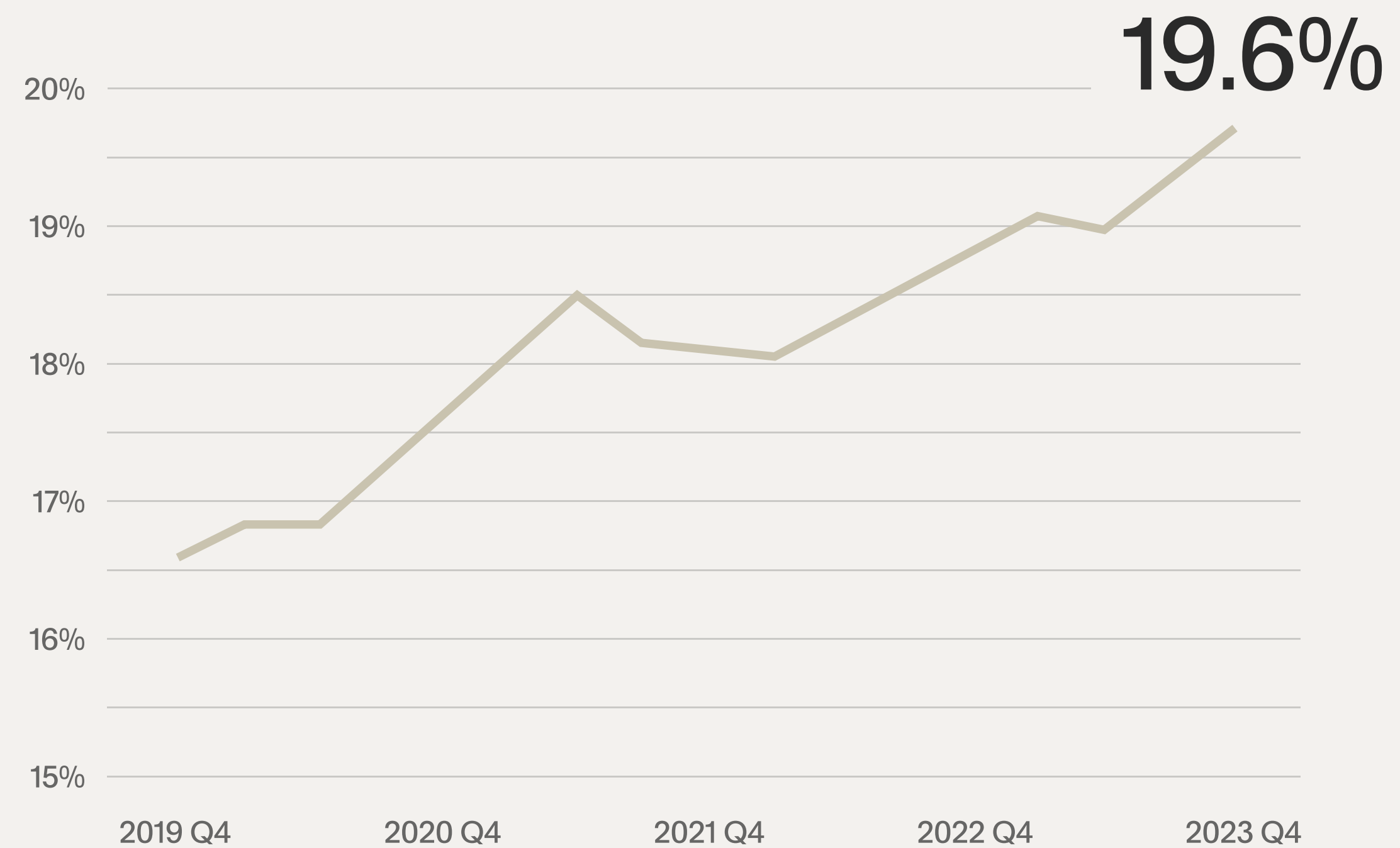

19.6%

Chart 2. The Office Vacancy Rate in Q4 2023

Source: *Q4 2023 Preliminary Trend Announcement*, Moody's, 2023

Flexibility Means Economic Efficiency

According to the Financial Times, in the UK almost half of office leases are made out for less than a year. Since 2019, long-term leases (10 or more years) have dropped by 70 percent. And short-term leases increased significantly. Leases of 12 months or less accounted for only 15% of all office leases in the UK in Q2019. However, by Q1 2023, this figure had tripled to reach 48%[10].

For a property owner, that's a frightening prospect, especially considering almost every new tenant requires refurbishment that average costs hundreds of dollars per square foot. And construction costs are not expected to go down anytime soon[11]. In today's commercial real estate landscape, it's becoming more imperative that property owners can move quickly to fill available space. To encourage potential tenants to commit to longer leases, they must feel that they have the flexibility to change with the times. That means property owners should be able to demonstrate adaptability: spaces are easy to reconfigure and time and money won't be lost to lengthy and expensive constructions or remodels.

> Property owners can make up for shorter rental periods and high building costs by implementing solutions that allow them to simply rearrange, rather than refurbish, rental spaces.

Property owners can make up for shorter rental periods and high building costs by implementing solutions that allow them to simply rearrange, rather than refurbish, rental spaces. By using adaptable architecture solutions landlords can quickly adjust available office space for new tenants or offer new configurations to existing tenants.

The top reasons employees come to the office are to focus on their work, get access to tech, and meet with their team personally.

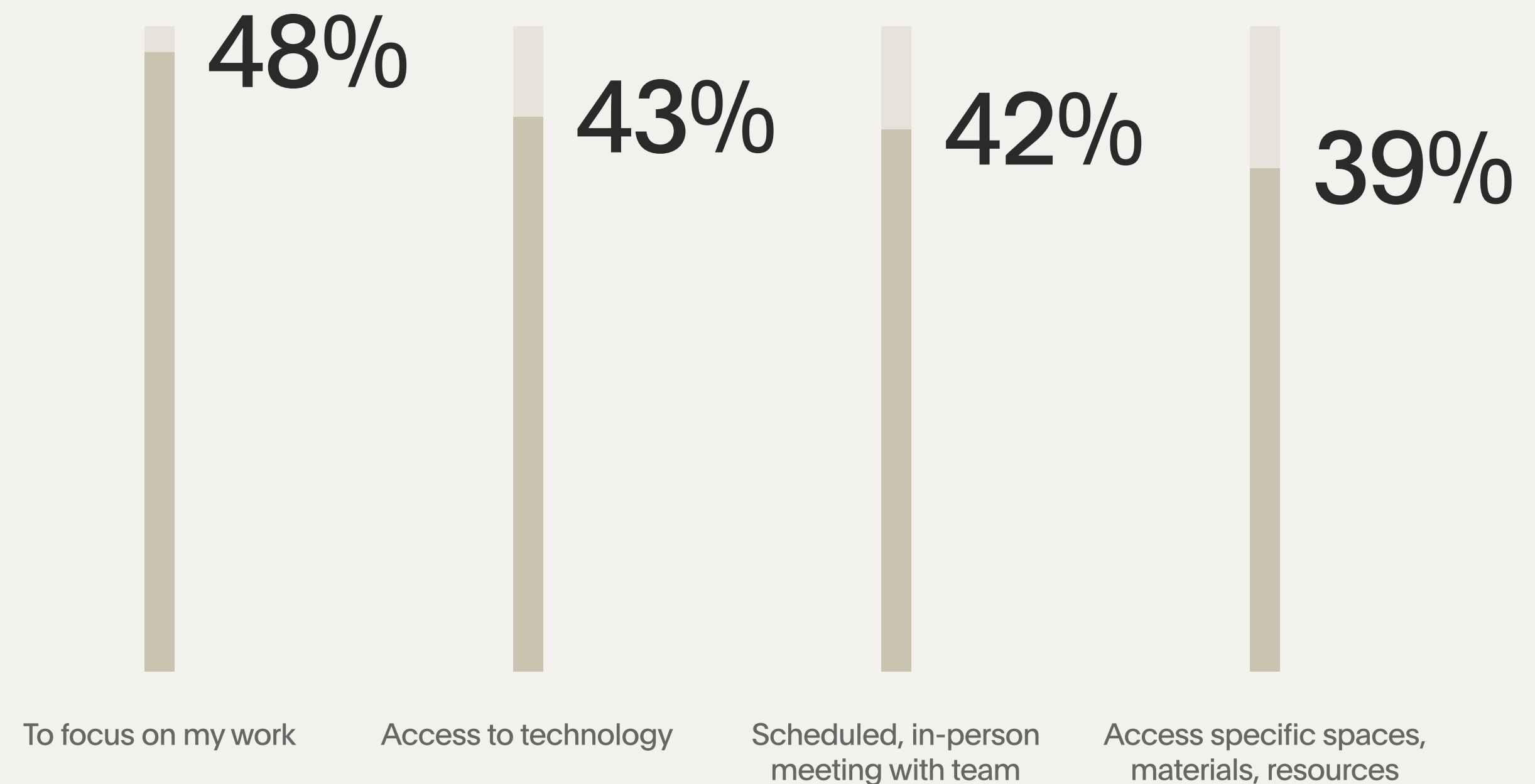| 48%	43%	42%	39%
To focus on my work	Access to technology	Scheduled, in-person meeting with team	Access specific spaces, materials, resources

Chart 3. The Top Reasons Employees Come to the Office

Source: *U.S. Workplace Survey 2022,* Gensler Research Institute, 2022

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The average fit-out process of traditionally constructed offices runs between 8 and 14 weeks and costs even 2,500€[12]. That's months of lost rental income – even before factoring in the remodeling cost. Adaptable architecture can significantly reduce the amount of time a space sits empty, so property owners can move in new clients with fewer costs while maintaining or increasing occupancy rates.

Sustainability is a Must

Employees have started demanding and expecting sustainability from employers, but they're not alone in joining the green revolution. According to Jaime del Alamo, ESG Value and Risk Vice President at JLL, a global real estate firm, "Expectations around sustainable buildings are growing at a time when companies are also downsizing and opting for higher quality spaces.[13]" JLL further reports that tenants are, therefore, becoming more sustainability-conscious, as they aim to act in accordance with their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) guidelines and improve reporting. By paying attention to sustainability, owners and investors both save on costs and "attract eco-minded tenants."

And there's research to demonstrate that companies will pay more for these greener offices. According to "Tenant Preferences in the UK Office Market," 41 percent of UK tenants would pay 14 percent more for green offices. 49 percent noted a property's "environmental and overall sustainability would 'very much' influence their choice of office.[14]" These statistics signal that landlords need to pay attention to their property's sustainability factors and a space's green characteristics to attract quality tenants.

To persuade green-conscious clients to favor commercial property, it's important to advertise the benefits of reduced CO_2, waste, and

The average fit-out process of traditionally constructed offices runs between 8 and 14 weeks and costs even 2,500 EUR.
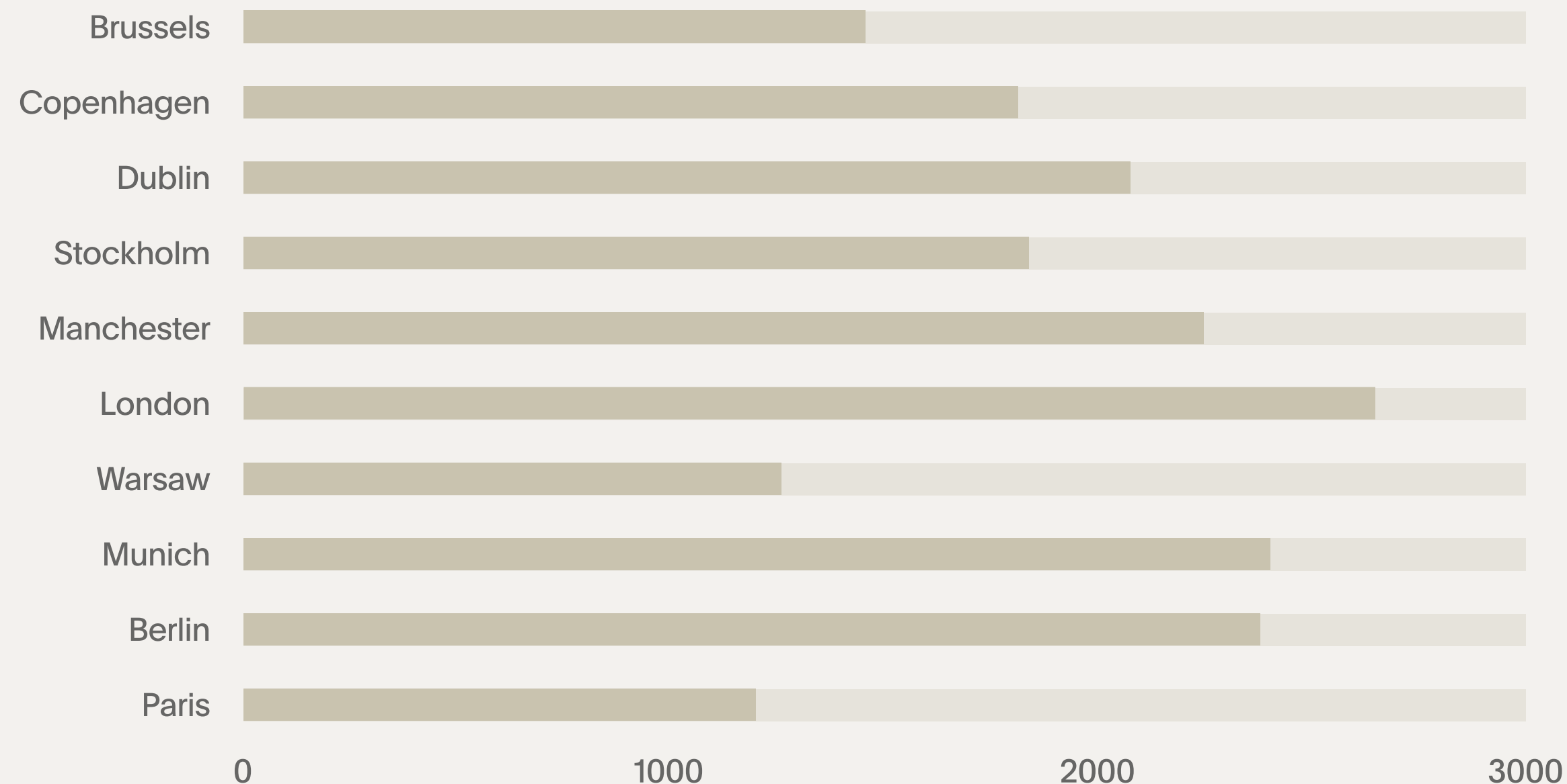
Chart 4. The Average Fit-Out Costs in Selected European Cities Per m²

Source: *Cushman & Wakefield Fitout Costs Guide EMEA, 2024*

Traditional Model

Build   Demolish   Get rid of

Circular Model
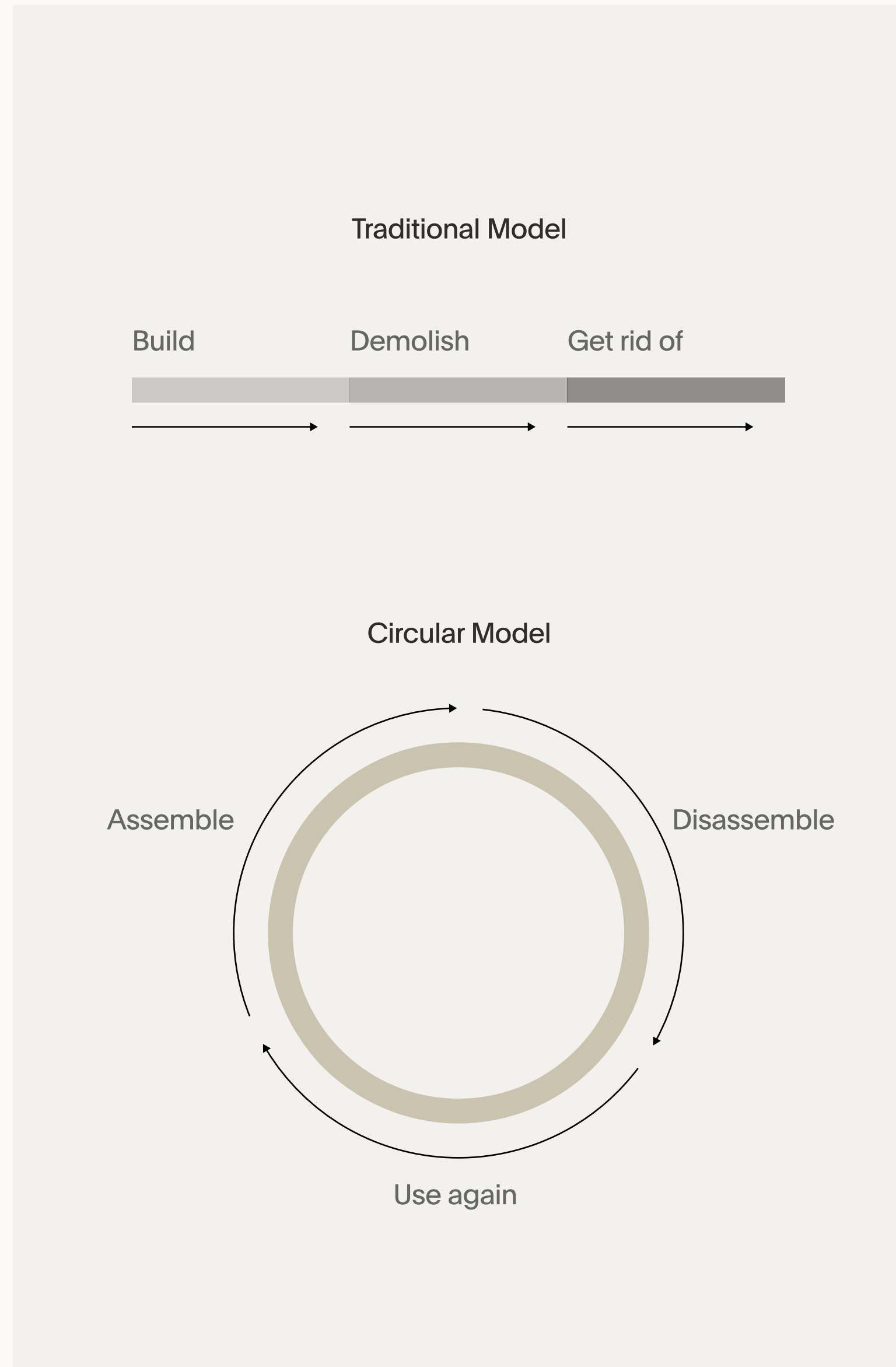
Assemble   Disassemble

Use again

Chart 5. Traditional Model vs. Circular Model

other environmental harms that come from refurbishment and traditional constructions. Because adaptable architecture solutions limit the need for costly and environmentally harmful traditional construction, properties that implement them will stand out for efficiency and sustainability. An adaptable office environment can also help with acquiring green certificates like BREEAM or LEED, as they take the long-term lifecycle of the entire building into consideration. Adaptable office solutions mean less waste, CO_2, and energy generated by refurbishments.

> An adaptable office environment can also help with acquiring green certificates like BREEAM or LEED, as they take the long-term lifecycle of the entire building into consideration.

Users' well-being and comfort (both mental and physical) are also decisive factors in obtaining these important certifications. Adaptable office solutions are often built with employee well-being in mind and, therefore, make for smart solutions in sustainability efforts.

Adaptable Architecture Save Owners Money and Serve Tenants

Adaptable architecture can feel like an overwhelming departure from the traditional constructions and remodels that were the centerpiece of office design for so long. But these up-and-coming solutions make office refurbishments faster, easier, more sustainable, and more cost-effective. Since modular rooms, hubs, and spaces can be reconfigured and rearranged without costly labor and materials, they're easy to adapt both to changing client needs or to a new tenant's specifications.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the world of work towards hybrid set ups and new employee expectations from their workplaces. While this certainly puts employers in a position to reconsider how they design offices and ensure the well-being of employees, landlords have an equally important role to play by offering solutions that attract and retain tenants. Adaptable architecture, which includes pre-constructed modular rooms and hubs, offers property owners a cost-saving alternative to traditional constructions and an attractive offering for tenants who need to evolve alongside ultra-dynamic workforces.

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Adaptability Checklist:
Read and Evaluate Available
Room-in-Room Solutions

"Adaptability" and "adaptive" are two of the most overused terms in the industry – but what do they really mean? This checklist offers critical criteria for evaluating different features of space arrangement solutions regarding adaptability. Use it to assess the products you're considering and ensure they can effectively respond to challenges and changes.

Most information required to fill the checklist can be found in official product descriptions and technical sheets. For other details, you may need to contact the manufacturer. That said, we believe this toolkit will help you make the best, most informed decision.

Room-in-Room solution	Yes	No
Is applicable for multiple office functions (e.g., phone booths, conference rooms, lounge areas, and back-office functions like storages or copy points).	○	○
Offers open, semi-open and closed configurations.	○	○
Offers large variety of sizes.	○	○
Offers small acoustic pods for 1-4 people.	○	○
Offers a comfortable conference room for up to 10-12 people.	○	○

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Room-in-Room solution	Yes	No
Each space is accessible for people with disabilities without the need for additional equipment.	○	○
Offers bespoke configuration of the construction (configuration of walls).	○	○
Offers the ability to reconfigure the construction multiple times, including adjustments to size.	○	○
Offers individual configuration of the interior (arrangement).	○	○
Offers easy rearrangement of the interior multiple times.	○	○
Is free-standing with no anchoring to the building, allowing for easy relocation.	○	○
I believe it will meet my company's changing needs over the next 10 years.	○	○
I believe it will make our company's operations more environmentally friendly.	○	○

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Gensler's Headquarters:
A Case Study in Adaptability
with Mute Modular

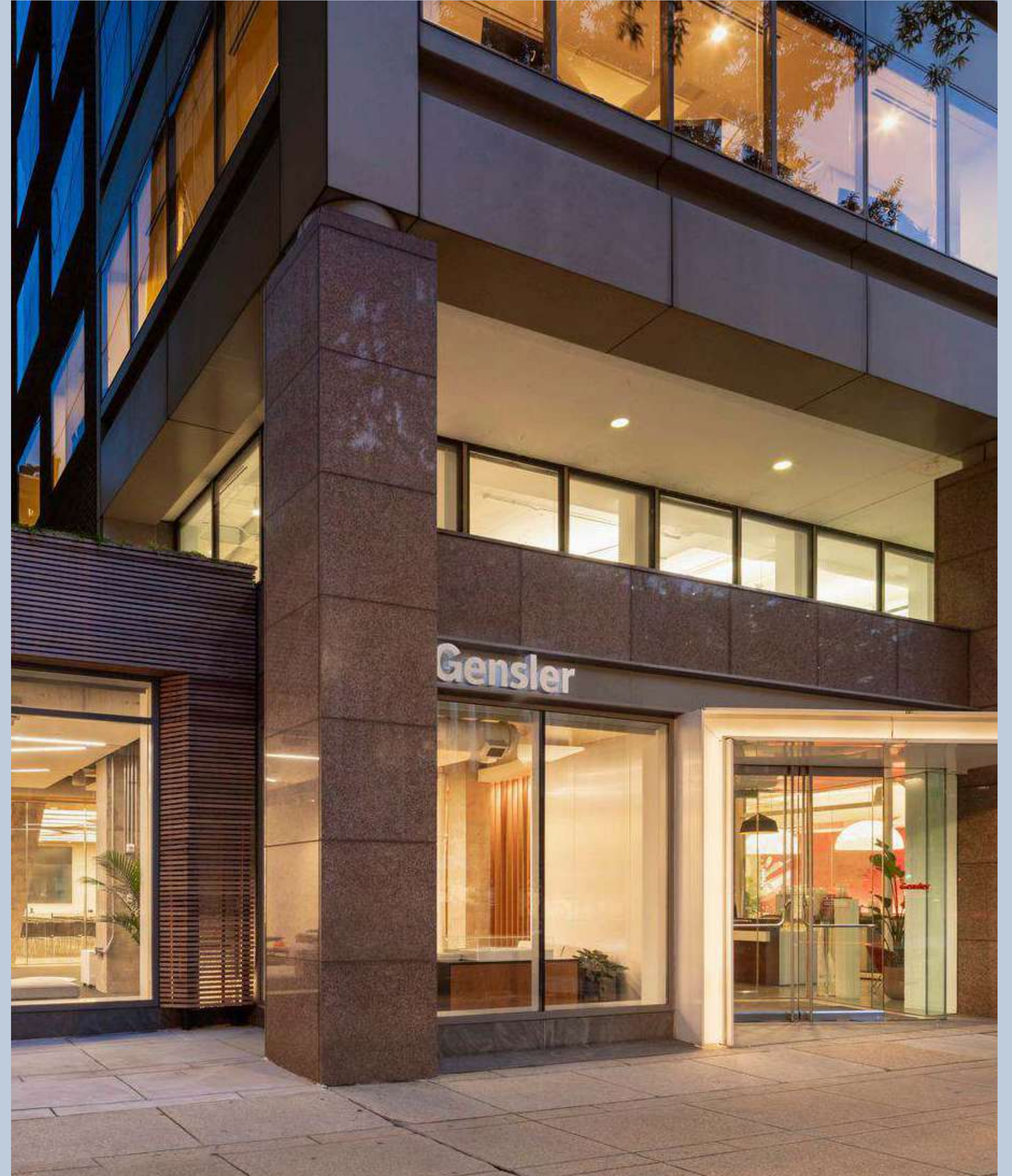|	
Client	Gensler
Location	Washington, D.C., USA
Year	2024

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Photo: HGEsch Photography

What does adaptable architecture look like in practice? Let's visit the D.C. office of one of the world's most renowned design companies and see how an adaptable room-in-room system reshaped their workspace.

The World's Most Influential Design Firm

For those interested in office architecture, Gensler needs no introduction. Founded in 1965, Gensler quickly became one of the world's most influential design companies. With offices in over 50 cities worldwide, the architecture, interior design, and planning firm has become a global leader. Gensler has been involved in a huge number of remarkable and groundbreaking projects, including the Shanghai Tower (the world's third-tallest building), the CityCenter complex in Las Vegas, and the main headquarters of tech giants like Meta, Microsoft, and Airbnb.

> To enhance space ergonomics, the Gensler team needed complete flexibility in customizing the dimensions, set up, style, color and the equipment.

Gensler's Washington, D.C. office serves not only as an inspiring place for creative work but also as a showcase of the latest workplace design innovations. Mute Modular is now one of the newest ground-breaking workplace innovations to be found here.

A Modular System Instead of Acoustic Pods

While renovating its Washington, D.C. office, Gensler designers envisioned a spacious "creative zone" filled with custom-sized spaces for different functions: meeting rooms, collaborative work areas, and lounge spaces for spontaneous meetings. These spaces needed to be more flexible than traditional acoustic pods and far more sustainable than traditional drywall construction.

To enhance the space's ergonomics, the Gensler team needed complete flexibility in customizing the dimensions, style, color, and
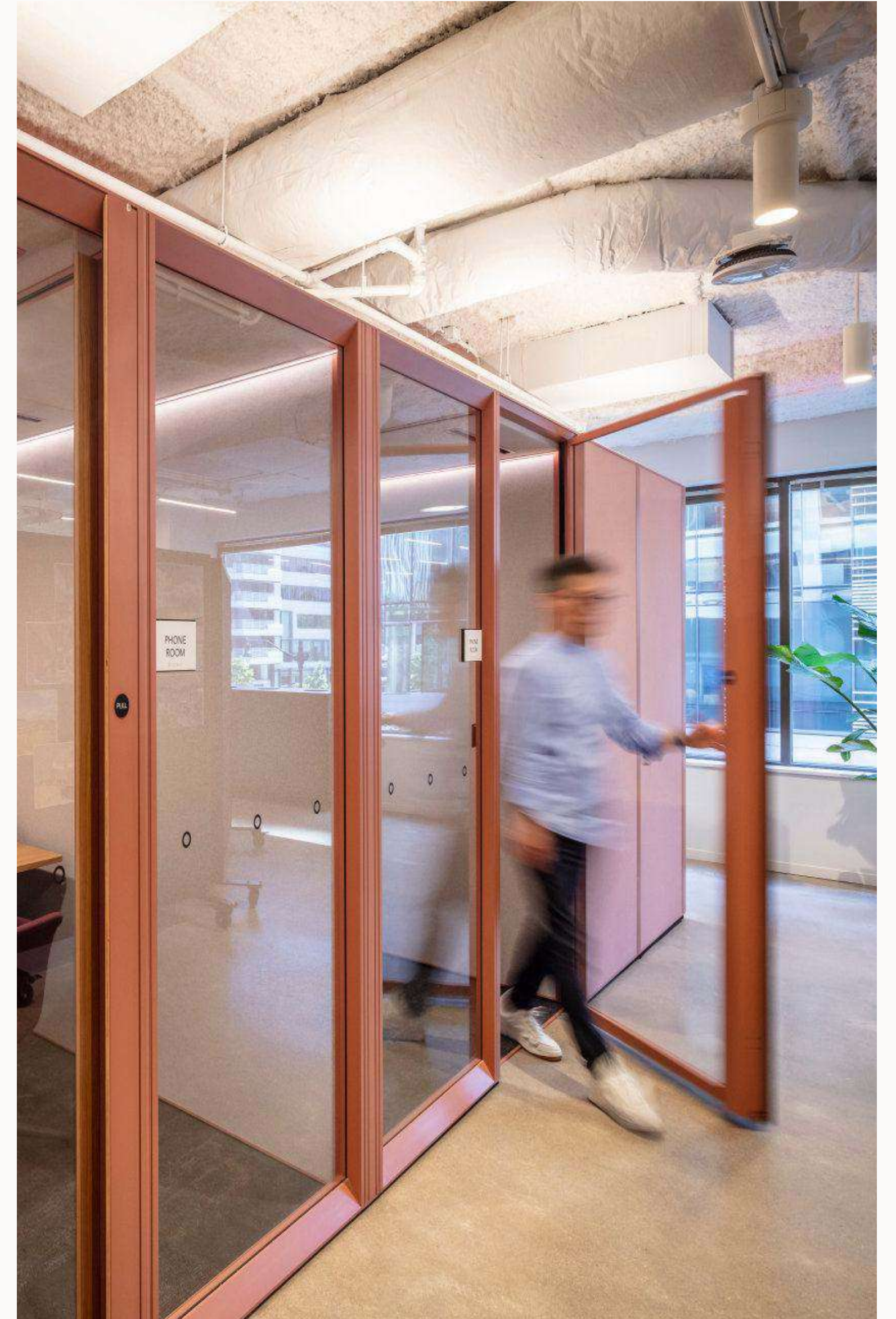
Photo: HGEsch Photography

Photo: HGEsch Photography

Photo: HGEsch Photography

equipment. The spaces also required perfect acoustic insulation, since this creative zone would be set up near a no-phone focus work area. With these requirements in hand, our adaptable, fully modular room-in-room system was a perfect match.

12 Mute Modular Units: All Sizes and Functions

After a series of consultations with Mute Studio architects, the Gensler team chose the solution for their new creative zone: a mix of 12 Mute Modulars. The system's modular structure allows clients to devise units that perfectly fit their needs and vision.

The set is divided into two parts: one part for private phone booths and other for multifunctional purposes. The phone booth area include four spacious acoustic pods, each designed for up to two people. They serve as video call pods or private phone call zones.

> Gensler's team ensures that their office meets the highest safety and accessibility standards, and the same is for products they use.

On the other side of the phone booths zone, Gensler envisioned a huge multifunctional hub of eight integrated areas. It offers two meeting spaces for five people each, two spacious collaborative spaces, two spacious open lounge areas, and two one-person rooms for individual work. So far, this is the biggest Mute Modular unit ever built.

The vast combination of functions and purposes allows Gensler team members to quickly choose the type of workspace that suits whatever task may be at hand. Thanks to a wide selection of colors and finishings, the style and vibe of Mute Modular adaptable office spaces blend seamlessly into the Gensler's vibrant workspace.

Photo: HGEsch Photography

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By incorporating Mute Modular, with it's one-of-a-kind flexibility, Gensler signals the shift in office design towards more adaptable spaces.

A Sustainable Choice

Mute Modular's reusability was one reason Gensler opted to use it in their office redesign. Gensler is known for its unwavering commitment to sustainable design. Interior Design gave the company the top slot on their 2024 Sustainability Giants list. Thanks to the lightweight construction of prefabricated, compatible modules that can be easily reconfigured many times over, Gensler can modify the set using the same elements in step with the company's changing needs – all while saving on the environmental costs associated with traditional refurbishment.

Accessible Office Design

Gensler's team ensures that their office meets the highest safety and accessibility standards, and the same goes for the products they use. Every detail of Mute Modular is thoroughly designed to comply with the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) protocol standards and provide the best possible experience for every user. Among accessibility solutions are no-threshold entrances, full-length door handles, and adjustable heights for each essential piece of furniture. Additionally, all modular rooms are integrated with the office's air distribution system and fire safety system.

Quality Recognized by the Experts

Gensler is known and celebrated for always being ahead of the curve in office design, and for its commitment to exceptional quality and sustainability. These characteristics have made the company into the industry leader it is today. By incorporating Mute Modular, with it's one-of-a-kind flexibility, Gensler signals the shift in office design towards more adaptable spaces.
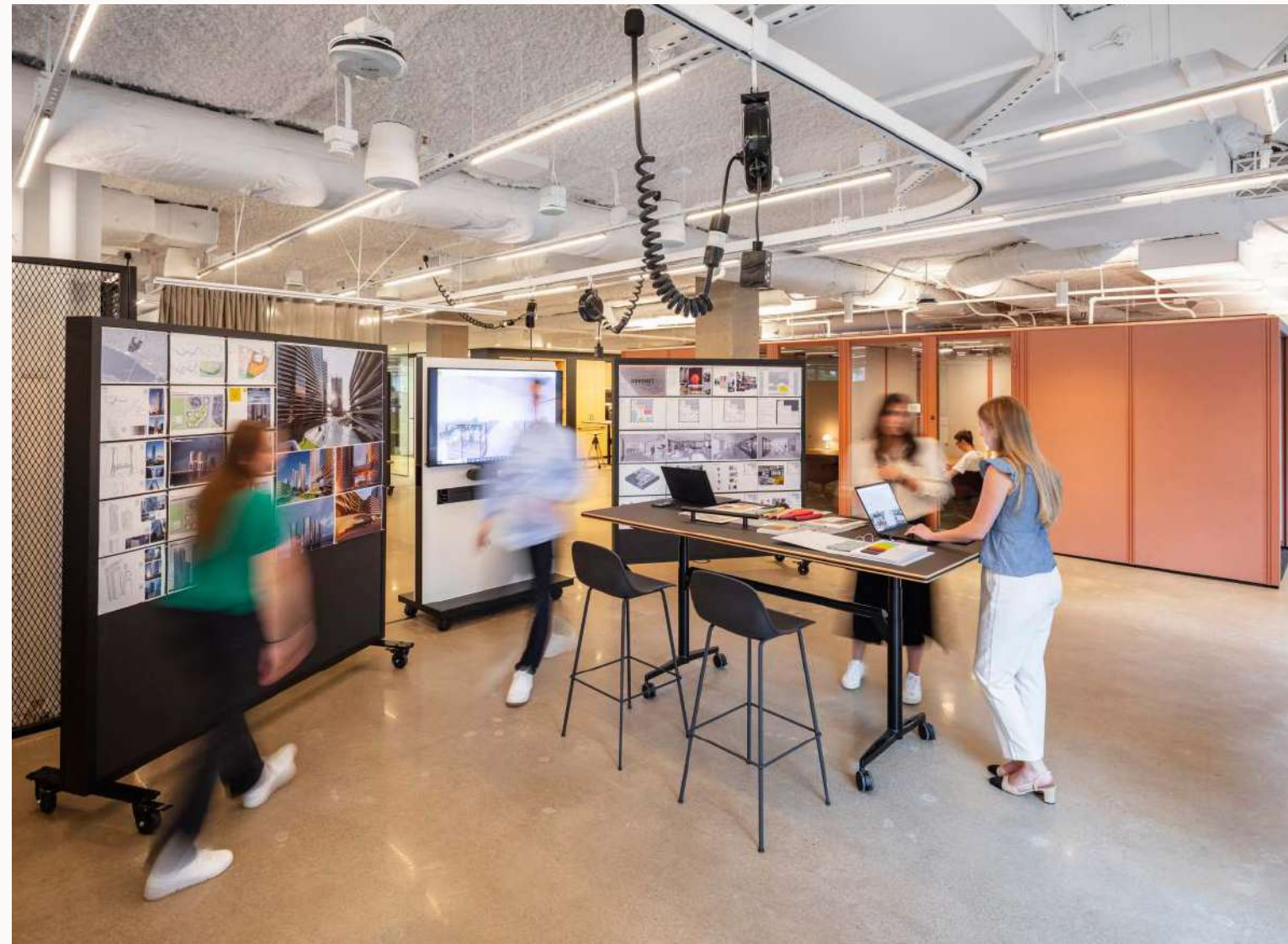
Photo: HGEsch Photography

Photo: HGEsch Photography

Characteristics of Space Arrangement Solutions

Finding solutions for work and meeting spaces is crucial in today's diverse work environments. The market features a range of options, including a variety of traditional acoustic pods, emerging room-in-room systems, from basic to adaptable, and the ever-popular fixed constructions.

Each client has distinct requirements shaped by project specifications, organizational culture, and personal preferences. This diversity leads to a wide range of choices in workspace solutions. While some may consider traditional plasterboard setups most practical, others might find acoustic pods highly adequate, others may see modular systems truly future-proof and sustainable.

	Traditional constructions	Mute Modular	Typical Pods
Efficient use of space (variety of sizes)	●	◑	○
Wide range of room capacities	●	◑	○
Individual configuration of wall and ceiling layouts	●	●	○
Full accessibility / ADA/DDA Compliance of every room	●	●	○
High acoustic performance	◑	●	●

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	Traditional constructions	Mute Modular	Typical Pods
Quality, predicatbility and repitability guarantee	◐	●	●
Easy and low-cost designing	○	●	●
Quick deployment	○	●	●
Quiet and clean assembly / construction	○	●	●
Short assembly / construction time	○	●	●
Seamless building installation integration	●	●	◐
Regulations Compliance	●	●	◐
Moveability	○	●	●
Reconstruction of existing rooms in size	○	●	○
Reconstruction of existing rooms in walls configuration	○	●	○
Rearrangement of interior and change of function	●	●	○

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Interview: How Adaptable Architecture Solutions Elevates Designers' Work

Architects at Mute Studio discuss the impact of adaptable office solutions on architects' and designers' daily work. How can the adaptable revolution facilitate their work, and what challenges does it bring?

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Photo: Paulina Zięcik

Mute Studio is a design and training team that supports clients in harnessing the full potential of Mute Modular and applying adaptable office architecture to workplace design. Alicja Dziedziela and Paweł Panek, of Mute Studio, discuss their work and explore the significance of adaptability from an architect's perspective.

How do architects perceive the concept of adaptable architecture? Are they familiar with this trend?

Paweł: Adaptable architecture is a well-recognized concept among architects, but mostly in the context of building design. It typically involves creating spaces that can be easily reconfigured to meet changing needs. Some iconic examples of adaptable architecture include the Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo. The building demonstrates how prefabricated modular units can be arranged and rearranged to create different configurations over time.

Alicja: However, this level of adaptability has not yet fully transitioned to office design. In office architecture, truly adaptable solutions are rare, and when they do exist, they are typically achieved through tailor-made systems designed for specific clients. These systems might involve movable walls or flexible furniture arrangements, but they still fall short compared to how adaptability is seen in other architectural domains.

You claim new Mute's product is a game-changer in that field. So, in a nutshell, what's Mute Modular?

Paweł: Mute Modular is a room-in-room system that aims to apply the benefits and functionalities of adaptable architecture to office design. It enables the creation of flexible, reconfigurable rooms of different sizes, capacities, and functions. Architects can easily build pods, small to large conference rooms, lounge areas, coffee points, and much more. Long story short: most of the spaces that we cannot imagine a modern office without can be built in the system.

Alicja: Best of all, an architect can design the space to the smallest detail. Size, dimensions, and interior configurations can be
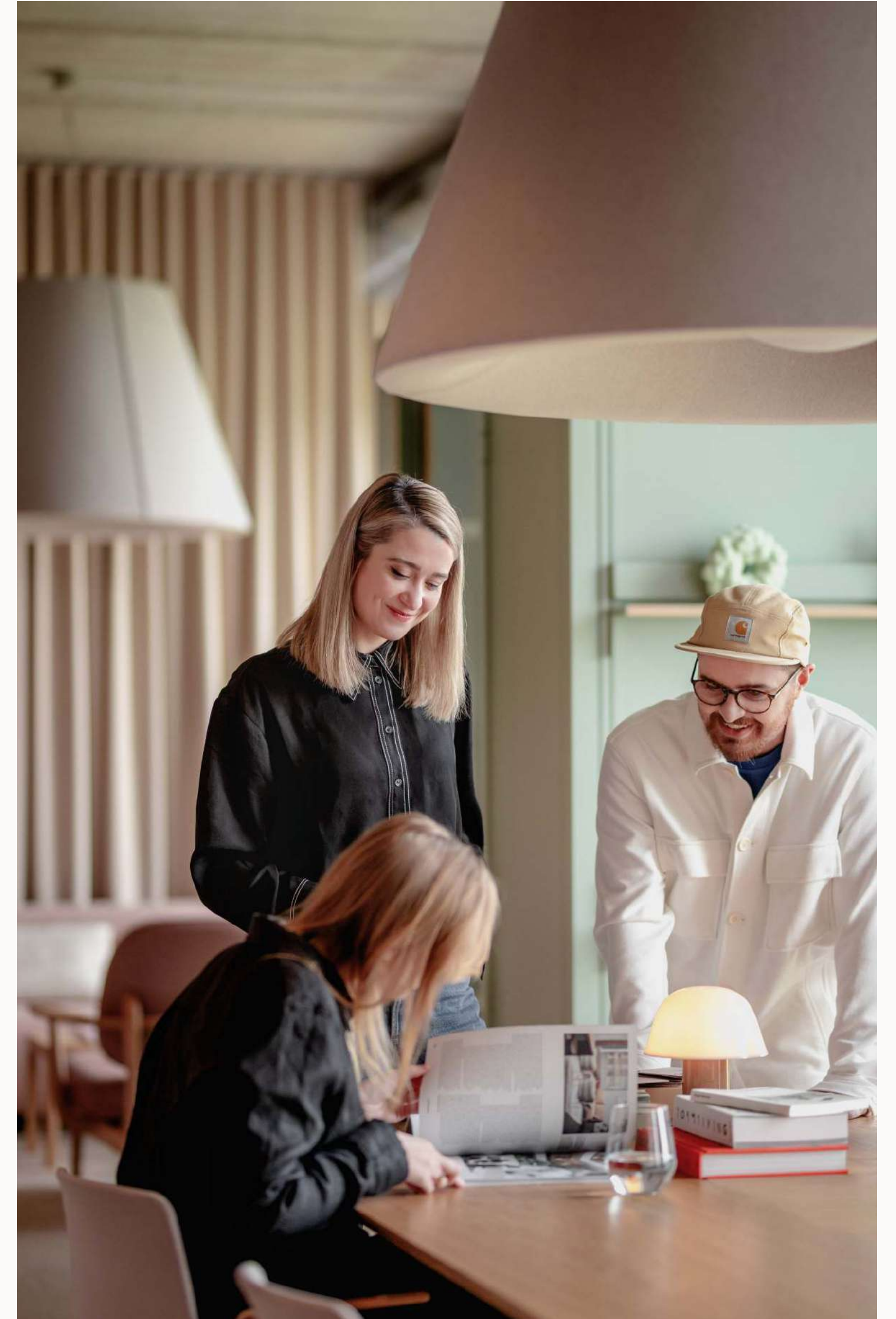
Photo: Paulina Zięcik

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"The fact that space can be easily and effectively divided without a permanent physical connection with the building constitutes a huge change for the user, but most importantly for the designer."

Paweł Panek
Interior Designer at Mute Studio

customized to suit the space and align with the requirements and style of the office. It's not a fixed collection (although clients can choose from a collection of 53 preconfigured spaces or use them as an inspiration), but rather a system that gives an architect complete freedom of creation.

Paweł: That freedom is what draws architects to Mute Modular. So far, the system has been implemented in offices across 15 countries and received numerous recognitions, such as Best of NeoCon andMixology, and a Dezeen Award nomination.

You highlight the advantage of flexibility, but on the other hand, the market has been full of products described as flexible or moveable for years.

Alicja: That's true, but the traditional methods allowing for adapting a space for its current function are rather limited. You can divide them into 2 main categories.

The first is furniture that lets you create various utility scenarios, such as modular furniture that can be used as a seat, stand, or table, stacking chairs, folding tables, furniture on wheels, or dual-purpose furniture. Another example you might recognize is a desk with an easily adjustable tabletop.

The second group includes different types of space separation, such as shades or moveable walls. Often these options require ceiling guide rails and a dedicated parking space There are also standalone mobile dividers, like whiteboards on wheels or moveable space dividers. Although both of these groups have been known and used for decades, they don't necessarily fulfill offices' contemporary needs.

Still, sometimes it's too late for changes. When an office is built with plasterboard, modification options are very limited to moving the furniture or adding workstations.

How are adaptable office systems different in this regard?

Alicja: Very different! Advanced adaptable office systems allow for moving and modifying entire rooms, changing their function and size. Such flexibility is thanks to prefabricates that can be combined, connected, and disconnected in various ways. Traditional construction methods using plasterboard and glass panels do not allow for that.

Paweł: The fact that space can be easily and effectively divided without a permanent physical connection with the building is not only a huge improvement for the user, but most importantly for the designer. And if those systems are also made of autonomous rooms with their own ventilation, lighting, and electric grid, we end up with a very interesting solution for modern interior designers: it lets them design quality spaces, while saving tons of resources and time.

Which Mute Modular features save the most time for architects and space planners?

Paweł: With Mute Modular, an architect uses a single system to design an entire office space, comprised of ready-to-use, standardized elements. They no longer need to choose or negotiate what linings, handles, or doors to use; where the electric wiring should go and what lighting system to use. This is the most time-consuming stage of the design process, because the negotiation and approval of every little detail is rather tedious. Also, making sure that all elements fit together can be a great challenge. For instance, ceiling design for conference rooms is often a meticulous puzzle of technical possibilities, where

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"As architects, we all know our industry's environmental impact, so we are obliged to seek solutions that can limit the use of materials and minimize an office footprint."

Alicja Dziedziela
Product Support Expert,
Architect at Mute Studio

everything – ventilation, air conditioning, lighting, ceiling type (e.g. modular or gypsum board) – needs to fit together. The architect not only takes care of these decisions, but also coordinates with design and collects quotes from vendors. It's a lot of work!

Alicja: Mute Modular is a product that you set up and plug in. Just like a plugging in a laptop at your workstation, you plug in Mute Modular and have a perfectly functioning conference room.

Thanks to the configuration tools available, such as the pCon configurator, the design process is totally optimized and streamlined through Mute Modular. In practice, we need only hours to develop rooms that would traditionally require a lot more time from architects, interior designers, and other industry specialists. Mute Modular blurs the line between a product dedicated to interior design and architecture itself.

Prefabricated and modular solutions are often more expensive than traditional walls despite their convenience for designers. How do you address concerns from investors who prioritize budget constraints?

Paweł: The price and the costs associated with each solution that is meant to last for years should be examined with the long-term in mind.

Currently, there are few businesses that could remain in the same unchanged space for more than five years. If we consider that redesigning an office created with an adaptable office system costs next to nothing, then we'll see that in the longer term, using traditional solutions like drywall and plasterboard construction, is simply not cost-effective.
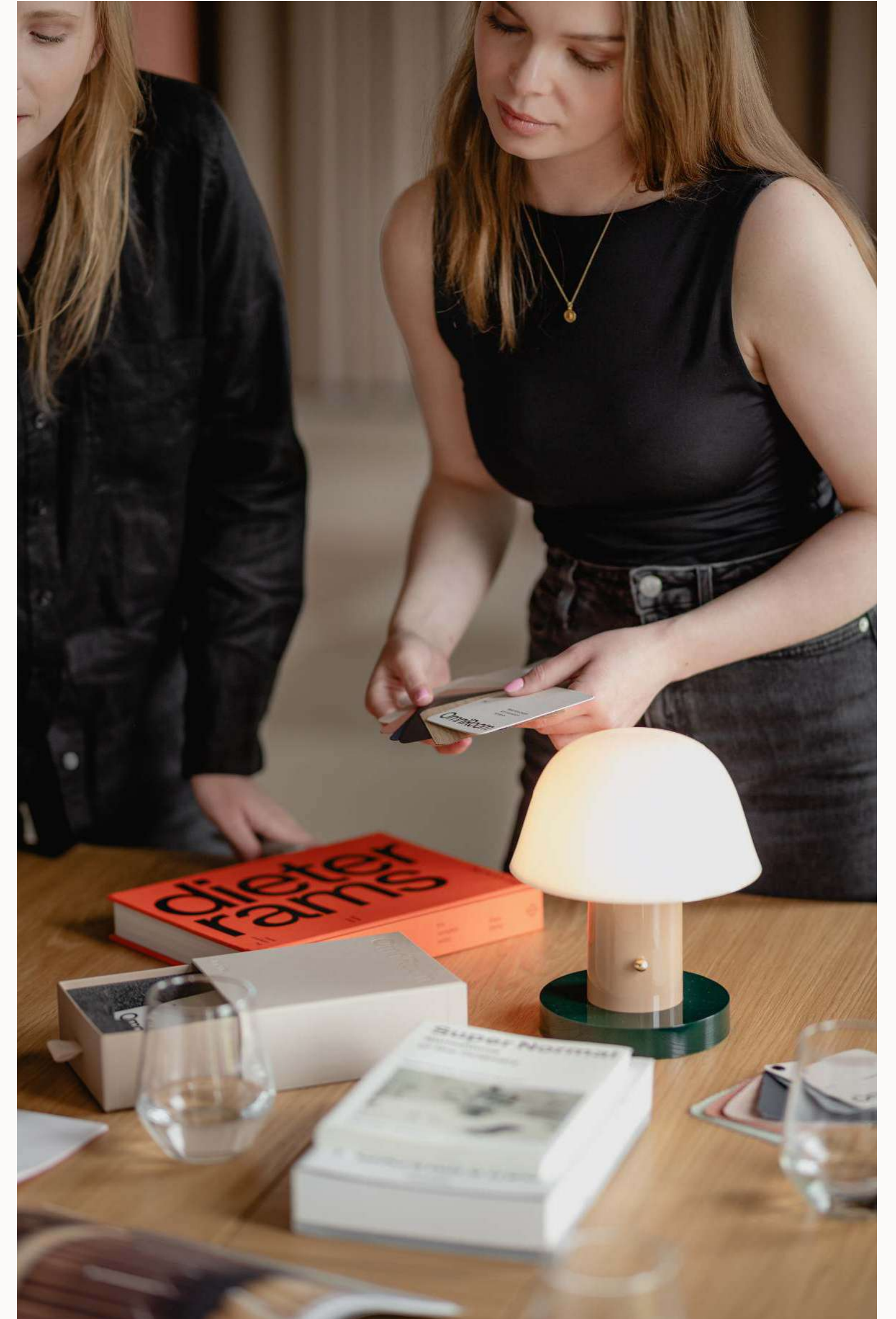
Photo: Paulina Zięcik

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This is especially true when we consider the ever-growing costs of materials and labor: according to Cushman & Wakefield, in 2022 alone, the average cost of equipping an office rose by 30 percent.

What other advantages do you raise when you meet with architects?

Alicja: We underscore that Mute Modular is more eco-friendly than traditional constructions because spaces can be changed or moved without generating waste. Even the largest modular units can be easily disassembled and rebuilt in the new office while relocating. Because offices change more often than ever, it means enormous environmental savings. As architects, we all know our industry's environmental impact, so we are obliged to seek solutions that can limit the use of materials and minimize an office's footprint.

3D visualisation: Adam Szpil

ELCA Workspace: The First Mute Modular-based Office in Europe

Client	ELCA
Location	Lausanne, Switzerland
Year	2023

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Photo: Florian Amoser

ELCA is among the first companies to use Mute Modular as the mainstay for an entire office. With 53 reconfigurable, personalized spaces of varying styles and functions across five floors, the leading Swiss IT company has revamped its headquarters office, adding both style and functionality.

Switzerland's Leading IT Company

ELCA, Switzerland's leading IT company, specializes in custom software development,consulting, cybersecurity, cloud services, data management, and AI. With its headquarters in Pully, ELCA serves as the central hub for a significant portion of its 2,000+ employees.

Customized Spaces Without the Hassle of Drywall

In their new office space the company aimed to provide its team with a variety of secluded, purposeful spaces, from spacious meeting rooms to one-person pods and spaces for collaborative work. The first challenge was to make it mostly without using drywall construction to not interfere with the building structure.

> Mute Modular offered total freedom of arrangement, allowing the ELCA team to create and customize spaces that perfectly fit their needs and maximize the space use.

The second was to make the entire process as quick and smooth as possible to limit the time when the office was out of use and employees had to work from home or co-working spaces.

Mute Modular ticked all the boxes. Our adaptable office system offered total freedom of arrangement, allowing the ELCA team to create and customize spaces that perfectly fit their needs and maximize the space use. Not to mention, all Mute Modular units are equipped with effective ventilation systems and electricity, which saved a lot of complicated, tedious work with puzzling out the technical details.

Photo: Florian Amoser

Photo: Florian Amoser

Photo: Florian Amoser

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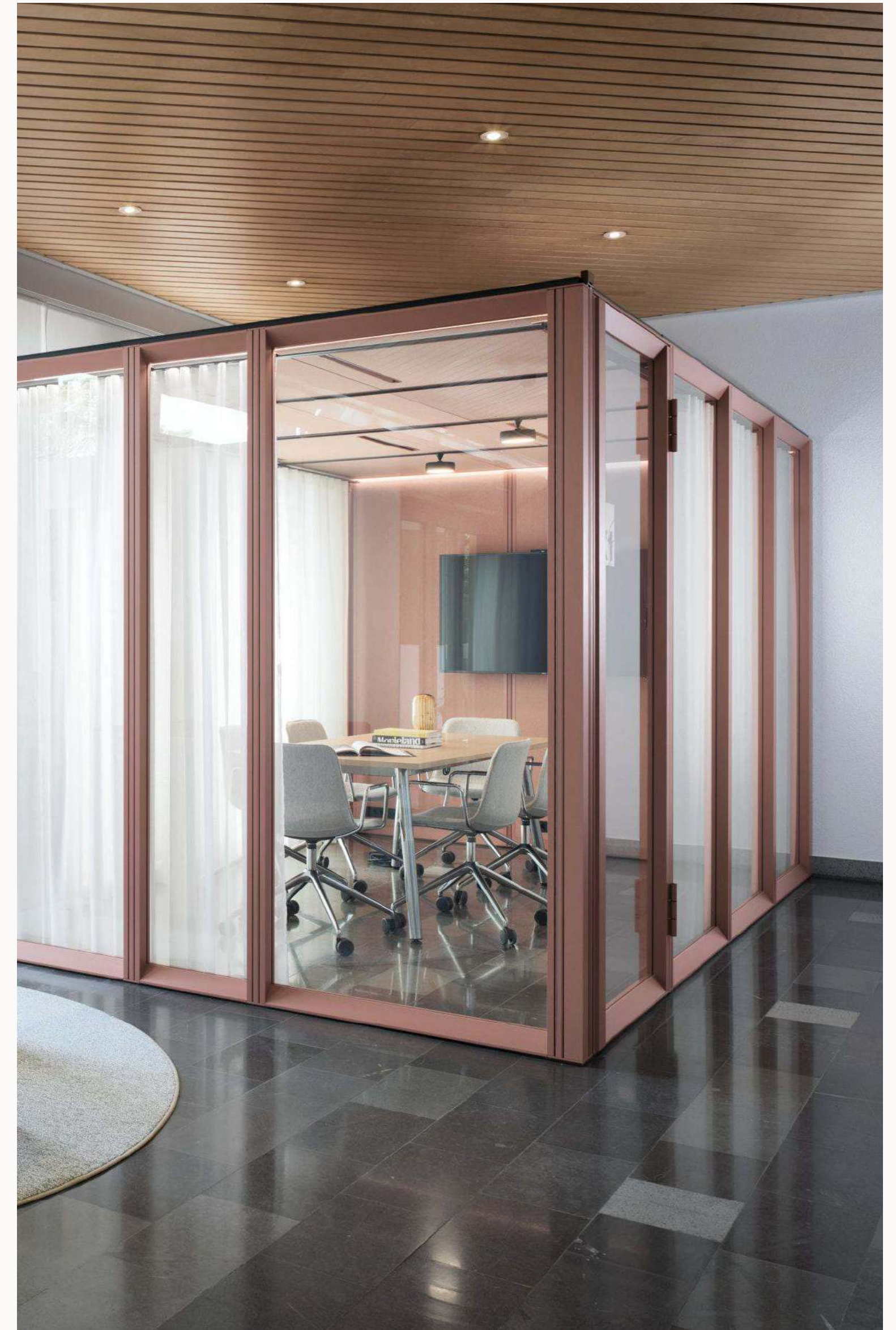
"Initially, we planned to use it just for several specific locations at the office. Once we learned how holistic and truly modular the system is, and after checking its user experience during the mock-up presentation, we didn't hesitate to apply it throughout the entire space. Generalizing the use of Mute Modular has been a critical success factor notably to stay on track of a challenging planning. Many thanks to Mute team for professional assistance at each stage of the project."

Patrick Zani
Deputy Head of Operations CH-FR at ELCA Informatique SA

Mute Studio: Comprehensive Support Across All Project Phases

Mute Studio architect consultants supported the whole planning process. Based on the project meeting with the ELCA team members and distributor from UnternehmenForm they suggested several options for space arrangement that meet the client's criteria.

The chosen proposal assumed the creation of 54 spaces of different sizes on each of the 5 floors of the buildings. The combination of open and closed spaces was spread throughout the entire space.

54 Mute Modular Units Placed on 5 Floors

The cornerstones of each floor were 4 multifunctional hubs, each consisting of from 5 to 7 areas. Thanks to the perfect sound insulation and acoustic solutions applied inside, each unit provides impeccable acoustics and speech privacy despite being located next to each other. The central hubs are accompanied by a variety of smaller two-zone units offering four-person meeting spaces and collaboration zones for two.

Finally, the individual, free-standing, full-scale Mute Modular conference rooms complete the fit-out, providing cozy surroundings for even a few-hour gatherings.

Mute Modular: Designed for Reuse and Reconfiguration

What's unique about Mute Modular is that the user can reconfigure every unit in case of the next refurbishment or relocation. Compatible, precisely crafted prefabricated wall modules and an original, patent-pending click-in system allow the client to create various sizes and configurations with the same elements. This is a massive plus for a company so dedicated to sustainability.

Photo: Florian Amoser

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Adaptability: An Ultimate Productivity and Well-being Booster

An activity-based working model has been proven to enhance productivity and employee well-being. How can the benefits of flexible office architecture be leveraged to implement it?
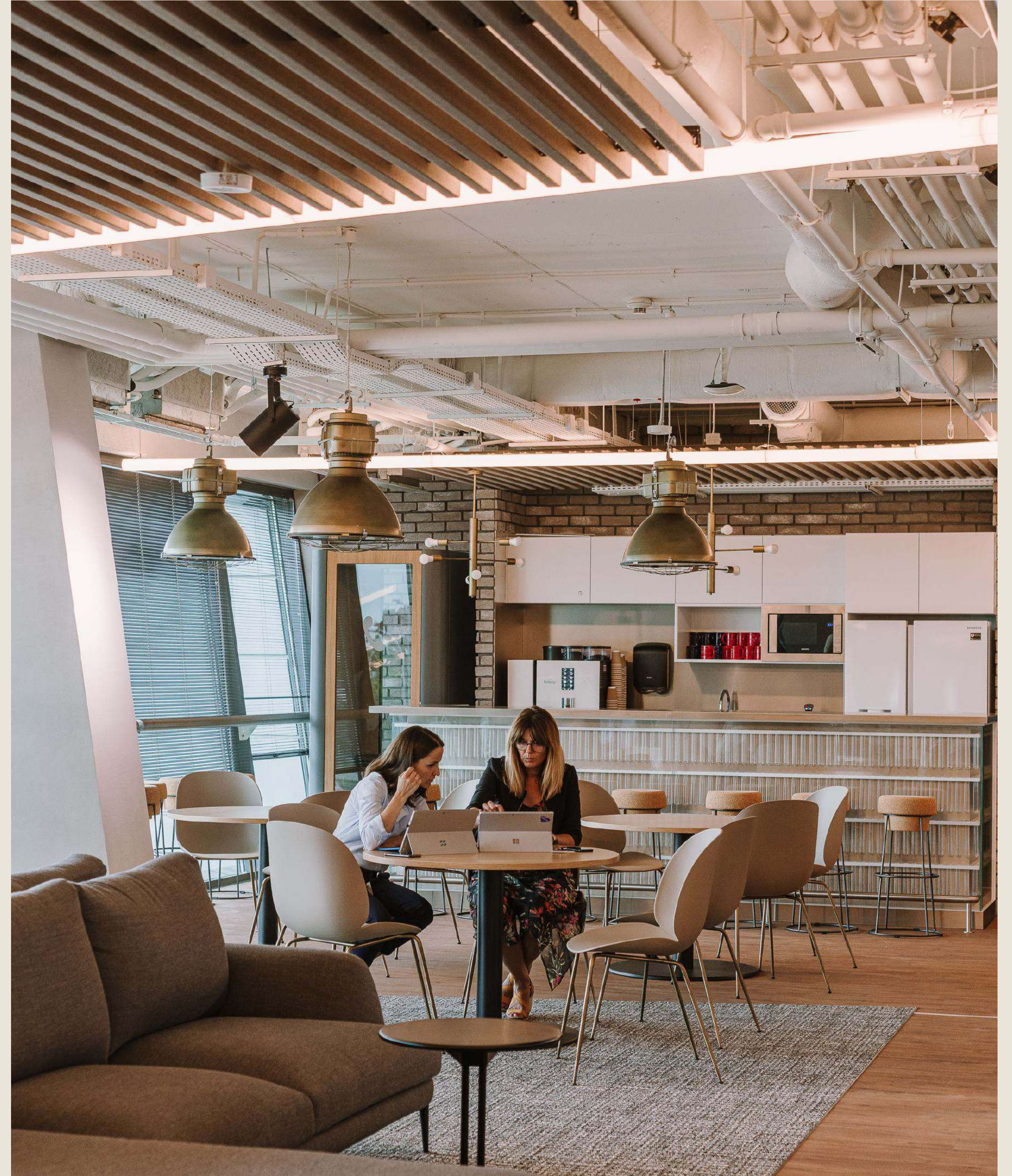
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Photo: Pion Photography

Adaptable office architecture and activity-based working (ABW) are reshaping modern offices to meet diverse employee needs. By providing flexible, task-specific spaces, these models enhance productivity, well-being, and employee satisfaction, making the office a more appealing and functional space in the hybrid work era.

Active-based working (ABW) is emerging as a popular model for workspace design that aims to foster people's well-being at work and, therefore to boost productivity. ABW acknowledges that employees require more than one work setting. As people perform varying tasks throughout the day, they benefit from the ability to work in a range of spaces. Therefore, when designing work areas within an office space, one needs to prioritize varying degrees of privacy and collaboration and, most importantly, facilitate different types of productivity. To support this model effectively, we believe that adaptable office architecture is the cornerstone to success and, as such, the future of work.

Plus, not all employees work alike. People work better or worse depending on their personality, work style, and even the unique ways that their brain chemistries work. To get the most out of office environments, both in terms of collaboration with colleagues and in terms of focused work, employers must offer people a variety of workspaces. Activity-based working is all about allowing people to choose the work environment that fits them best at the moment and for the task in front of them. While some people need the buzz of a cafe, others prefer total silence and isolation, for example.

3 predictions for the office's future

1. "Fit the Task"

In today's working environment, a one size fits all workplace just won't cut it. Employers need to provide a proper work environment for a wide variety of tasks, from focused work to collaboration to brainstorming to video calls. Workspaces that can match both tasks and personal work styles give employees the best chance at success and well-being. In turn, workers have more support and control over a wider range and more complex set of work tasks.

Photo: Shai Epstein

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2. Employee Agency

To achieve their best results, people need to work in ways and in environments that fit them personally. Approaching office design with an eye towards personalization empowers employees to manage their own work environments. Employees also gain the freedom to choose where, when, and how they work based on their tasks, preferences, and work demands. This kind of employee agency is becoming increasingly important for retention and productivity. ABW fosters a sense of ownership, responsibility, and trust at work. Employees have the agency to determine how they work best, and employers can rest easy knowing that such empowerment drives the best results for the organization.

3. Well-being

Especially important in today's work environment is an emphasis on balance and well-being. A new report by Deloitte and Workplace Intelligence found that workplace well-being is floundering, while highlighting that employers must consider employee well-being to retain talent and ensure long term organizational success. According to the report, 60 percent of employees, 64 percent of managers, and 75 percent of the C-suite said they would seriously consider quitting for a job that better supports their well-being.

The report, published in 2023, emphasizes a growing trend in prioritizing well-being, as these numbers reflect growth from last year. ABW asks us to reimagine the office as a place where well-being and productivity can coexist. Workspaces that foster physical and mental comfort can therefore strengthen the longevity and productivity of organizations.

Photo: HGEsch Photography

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How adaptable office architecture boosts ABW

So, how can organizations implement activity-based work efficiently and effectively? That's where the adaptable office architecture – products that allow for modular or flexible arrangement – comes in. We all know that traditional construction is costly, and organizations can quickly outgrow original office plans. Adaptable office architecture remedies both the cost and adaptability challenges that organizations so often face.

> As people perform varying tasks throughout the day, they benefit from the ability to work in a range of spaces. Therefore, when designing work areas within an office space, one needs to prioritize varying degrees of privacy and collaboration and, most importantly, facilitate different types of productivity.

"Adaptable architecture" includes office spaces and furniture that can be arranged quickly and that easily adapt to the current needs of employees. Such dynamic design offers purposeful, activity-based spaces for all kinds of tasks and working personalities.

Adaptable office architecture facilitates the creation of a wide range of spaces: small huddle zones, personal workspaces, large conference rooms, and everything in between. Such variety ensures that organizations offer purpose-based working zones catering to people's comfort and diverse needs.

1. Modular Furniture and Workstations

As the foundation of adaptable office architecture, furniture and workstations should be modular to allow for easy workspace reconfiguration. Modular furniture and workspaces allow for different work activities and varying group sizes. For optimal efficiency, employers can monitor space usage and adjust the work area accordingly. No time and money are wasted on costly constructions (and, as a bonus, this approach is more friendly to the environment).

Employees, too, benefit from this arrangement. They can access spaces that fit their tasks and teams can reconfigure work areas based on growth, project, and make up. On a personal level, each employee is also able to adjust and configure the furniture so that it is tailored to their specific needs.

2. Agile Meeting Spaces

Although it sometimes feels like meetings are all the same, they're certainly not! A weekly one-on-one, team brainstorming, cross-team planning session, or client meeting are not all created equal. Each meeting has different interpersonal dynamics, and the space should reflect that.

3. Seamless Technology Integration

Although it sometimes feels like meetings are all the same, they're certainly not! A weekly one-on-one, team brainstorming, cross-team planning session, or client meeting are not all created equal. Each meeting has different interpersonal dynamics, and the space should reflect that.

4. Ergonomics and Comfort

Office furniture and its layout should prioritize employee well-being. Offer adjustable chairs and desks to ensure people are as comfortable as possible while working. And don't forget proper lighting and acoustics, both of which play a major role in facilitating focus and productivity. Comfortable spaces encourage employees to come to the office by providing comforts they either have at home or, especially, may not have at home but want or need. Furniture that supports people's well-being in turn supports a more dynamic approach to work.

Key benefits of activity-based working

Adaptable office architecture enables more and more organizations to implement activity-based working. Products inspired by the principles of adaptable architecture offer quick setup of a wide variety of workspaces that once required extensive office remodels or traditional constructions. With adaptable office architecture, organizations can adapt to the needs of their employees, growth, and change without disruptions to productivity, workplace satisfaction, and employer-employee trust.

1. Higher Productivity

The productivity of an employee working in an ABW environment is 16 percent more than that of a regular employee. That's 6.4 hours per week, per ABW employee.

2. Workplace Satisfaction

According to one study, organizations that utilized ABW achieved a 17 percent improvement in overall workplace satisfaction than those organizations that did not.

3. Trust & Agency

Alongside workplace satisfaction, the freedom to choose where and how to work fosters trust between employers and employees. It also extends the agency people have by working from home into the office. This kind of autonomy and trust leads to better retention and can help attract talents.

4. Cost Efficiency

Construction and redesign are often time-consuming and costly undertakings. Organizations need the ability to reconfigure workstations and rooms quickly, easily, and without huge costs, so that they can regularly optimize offices according to their needs. The entrenchment of hybrid work has only made this even more important, as the needs of both the workforce and organizations fluctuate.

5. Health and Well-being

Adaptable office architecture supports employees' physical and mental well-being. Ergonomic furniture, natural lighting, and workspaces that cater to a wide range of personalities and workstyles support inclusive, welcoming workspaces. People who feel their best, produce their best!

Photo: Kuba Certowicz

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Examples of ABW in Action

1. Collaborative Zones

According to a 2021 Microsoft survey of 160,000 of their employees, 70 percent cited collaboration with coworkers as a reason to come into the office. Collaboration fosters not only an important exchange of ideas between colleagues and a sense of camaraderie, but also facilitates creativity, problem solving, and productivity. As such, it's critical to provide work areas designed especially for collaboration.

- Conference Room
- Brainstorm Room
- Roundtable Area

2. Quiet Areas and Focused Work Zones

Whether a person is extroverted, introverted or somewhere in between, everyone benefits from the ability to step away and recharge during the workday. Research from Microsoft's Human Factors Lab found that brains need breaks. Set aside some calm and beautiful spaces that encourage a quick breather or even some ultra-focused private workspace. These places not only give everyone a chance to recharge, but also offer the comforts of home for those who prefer (or work better in) a cozy and isolated environment. Signpost these areas to let people know they are specifically for silent or low-volume use.

- Cozy Corners
- Private Booths
- Semi-Private Rooms

3. Chillout or Social Zones

Chillout zones provide a multifunctional space for hanging out, relaxing, working, or meeting. Unlike the quiet areas, chillout zones can be more community-centric and offer people a chance to really interact with one another. The need for social interaction was second only to collaboration (another type of social exchange) in a 160,000 person survey that asked Microsoft employees why they would work in-person. Now that work seems to have permanently gravitated to hybrid working models, ample space to socialize with colleagues is a critical benefit of coming into the office.

- Open Lounge
- Outdoor Terrace
- High-top Space

By incorporating adaptable architecture, companies can unlock the full potential of the activity-based working model. Flexible layouts and movable furniture enable quick transformations, allowing offices to offer a range of purpose-built spaces. This approach not only supports employee well-being but also ensures the office is always aligned with the team's needs.
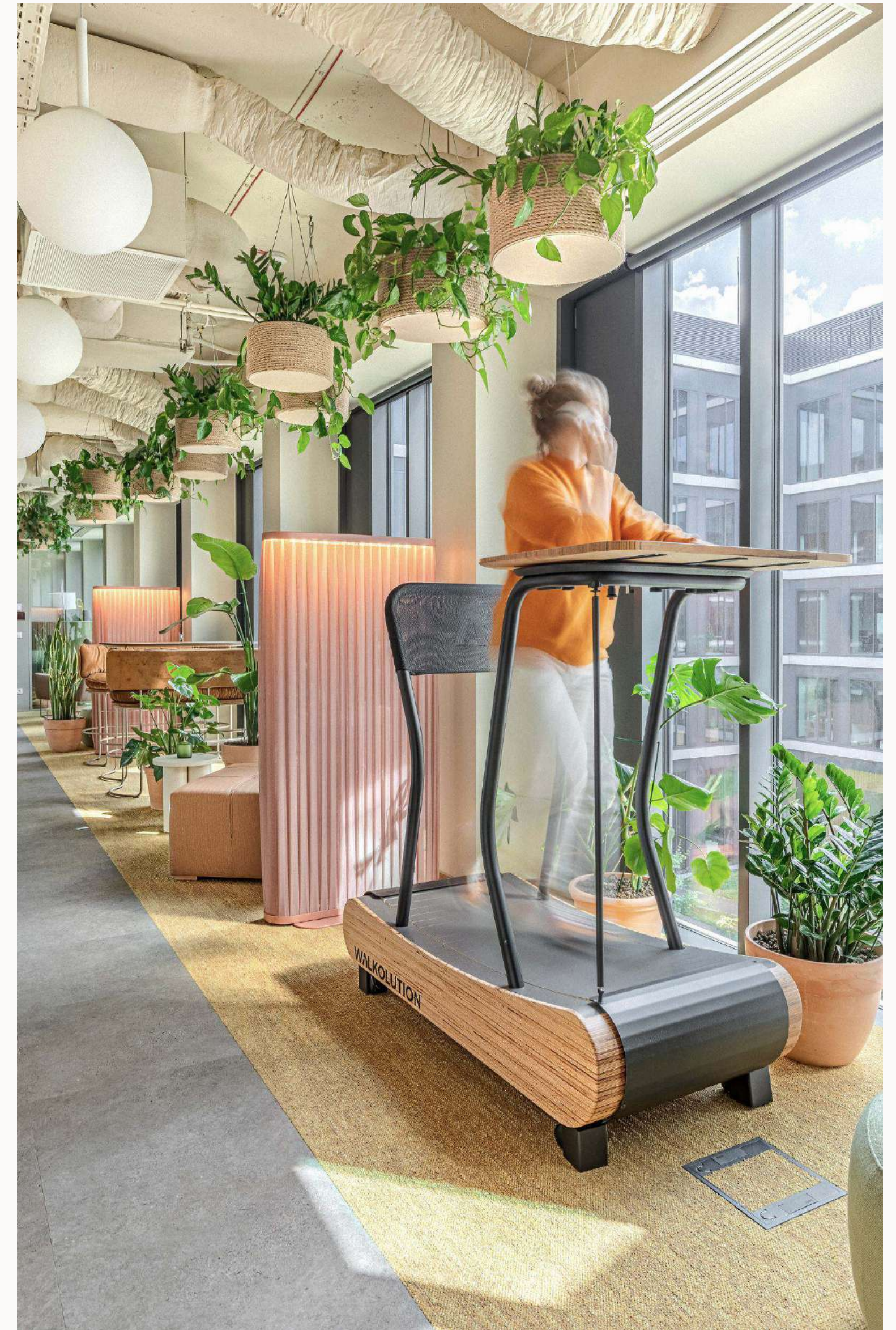

Photo: Bartosz Płuska

Adaptable Offices: A Global Shift Towards Sustainability

Robert Schmidt III
BArch MArch PhD, Loughborough University

About the author:

Robert Schmidt III is a designer and academic at Loughborough University where he led the development of architecture (BArch & MArch) and currently leads the RaRe design lab and the Adaptable Futures Research Group.

He has published several papers and books on the topic of adaptability, flexibility and adaptive reuse, including the book *Adaptable Architecture: Theory & Practice*. His research investigates the design and management of change in our built environment.

Office design is increasingly moving away from the 'desk' and towards more diverse spaces that foster social interaction. Hybrid working remains the future and the office has established itself as an arena for collaboration and innovation whereas independent work is preferably being carried out at home or satellite locations. The trend for offices to increase their collaborative space is set to continue moving towards a startling 50/50 split. While the need for offices to be adaptable has been long established, now more than ever, it is a paramount part of how companies can manage the increasingly dynamic nature of staff needs and physical resources while contributing to sustainable practices.

This growing diversity of spaces includes stark and subtle changes in spatial and physical qualities to best suit transitory activities and the unique desires of people. This may include changes in lighting, acoustic qualities, materials, spatial layouts, equipment, furniture, visual connections, and colours. In addition to fostering social interaction, spaces are being asked to accommodate areas for mental well-being and neurodiversity, as well as opportunities for physical well-being and fitness. *What if three quiet rooms could be combined to form a collaborative space for a day or vice versa?*

While there is a move away from the 'desk' and the notion of static ownership, the ability to personalize space quickly and temporarily remains important. Smart systems will help us respond to and plan for these changes as we can better optimise for occupant work patterns, behaviours and choices. *What if occupants could customise their work environment to their individual comfort and tasks for the day before they even arrived at work?*

While the need to respond to change and provide diverse spaces is a principal trend, it, in turn, increases the opportunity significantly for waste to be generated if we design using traditional methods of construction. The use of off-site and modular construction is an important shift in how we can reduce waste and enable change to be more efficiently and effectively accommodated. Furthermore,

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www.project-inrichting.nl
info@witteveen.nl
www.telefooncel.info

Starting with a conscious material selection and then designing for adaptability and disassembly will design out waste and will continue to build our material intelligence towards a stewardship economy (...)

designing with dry, reversible connections which are easily accessible and durable enable components to be kept in use longer, reconfigured and reused again and again. *What if the way our spaces were constructed allowed components to be un-damaged and returned back to the supply chain?*

Products based on true modularity like Mute Modular system exemplify this with their capacity to support changes in user preferences and activities, spatial layout, performance, scale, and more. Importantly, changes occur not just linearly in time, but cyclically which means the feasibility to change back-and-forth between states is significant. The system approach allows for components to be replaced easily in the unlikely case of being physically damaged, to upgrade components overtime or to install new components when wanting to add additional features. *What if a modular system could enable us to close the enormous gap between a material's use span and life span?*

Mute Modular and similar products could be a first step towards creating a closed-loop flow of material resources to enable a regenerative approach to our office environments. A system which provides for shared ownership, a leasing model, or offers operation, maintenance or buy-back schemes can all help contribute to a more circular approach to accommodating change. *What if our choice in office system could result in a zero waste economy?*

Starting with a conscious material selection and then designing for adaptability and disassembly will design out waste and will continue to build our material intelligence towards a stewardship economy, but we must balance capital costs with lifecycle costs and our ability to mitigate economic, social and environmental risk.

Key Terms Dictionary

Adaptability

Adaptability refers to the ability of a design, space, or system to accommodate changes over time. This typically involves features that allow for modifications in response to varying needs, preferences, or environments. The focus of adaptability is on the design's long-term use and functional flexibility, allowing it to remain relevant and useful as conditions change.

Example: an adaptable office layout can be reconfigured to create different workspaces as a company grows or changes its workflow. This might include movable walls, modular furniture, or adaptable room-in-room systems.

Adaptivity

Adaptivity refers to the capacity of a design to respond in real-time to immediate changes in its environment. It often implies a more dynamic and sometimes automated ability to adjust to varying conditions. The focus of adaptivity is on the real-time performance of the design and its ability to react to environmental stimuli without the need for human intervention.

Example: a building or acoustic pod equipped with smart systems that automatically adjust lighting, temperature, or airflow based on occupancy levels or external weather conditions.

Interchangeability

Interchangeability refers to the ability of individual components or modules to be easily swapped, reconfigured or replaced without requiring significant modifications to the overall product or system. This concept is particularly important in the context of modular design, as it enhances flexibility, efficiency, and customization in various applications, such as architecture, manufacturing, and product development.

Modularity

Modularity refers to the design principle of breaking down a system or product into smaller, interchangeable components or modules. This approach allows components to be easily swapped or replaced without impacting overall functionality, facilitating maintenance and customization. Modularity enables products to adapt to changing needs by rearranging, adding, or removing modules to create new configurations. It allows accommodating growth or downsizing without a complete redesign. Overall, modularity enhances efficiency, responsiveness, and user-centered design.

Prefabrication

Prefabrication refers to the process of manufacturing components or structures in a controlled factory environment before they are transported to the construction site for final assembly. This method can significantly reduce the overall construction timeline, lower labor costs, and ensure quality since factory-produced components undergo strict quality checks. Additionally, prefabrication contributes to more sustainable building practices by minimizing material waste, optimizing resource use, and reducing the environmental impact of construction.

Standardization

Standardization refers to the process of developing and implementing uniform specifications, guidelines, and criteria for manufacturing, quality, and performance of products. Adhering to established standards makes products more safe, efficient, durable and interchangeable.

Modular | MUTe.

The World's Most Advanced Adaptable Room-in-Room system.

- Functions as acoustic pods, conference rooms, copy points, and more.

- Offers over 70 sizes and unlimited configuration options.

- Features superior acoustic properties.

- Includes a collection of dedicated wall-mounted furniture.

- Free-standing, movable, and reconfigurable.

- Saves time and budget with easy click-in assembly.

- Plug-and-play solution with integrated lighting, ventilation, electrical outlets.

- Complies with ADA standards.

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Credits

The creation of this report was a collaborative effort by the Mute Marketing and Product teams. We extend our heartfelt thanks to Dr. Robert Schmidt III, whose book, *Adaptable Architecture: Theory and Practice*, was a significant source of inspiration and insight throughout our research.

Project Team: Beata Banaś, Tomasz Cirmirakis
Design: Łukasz Pachałko, Krystian Talar
Photos and renders: Florian Amoser, Kuba Certowicz, Shai Epstein, HGEsch Photography, Jesper Lindborg, Pion Photography, Bartosz Płuska, Adam Szpil, Paulina Zięcik

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Mute is a leading innovator in adaptable office architecture. With our modular office system, acoustic pods, lamps, and panels, we help companies create comfortable, flexible, and future-ready offices and commercial spaces.

Celebrated by clients and industry experts, our products have earned prestigious awards like Best of Neocon Gold and Mixology'23, and are featured in the offices of Netflix, Microsoft, L'Oreal, and Audi.

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