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# **Beyond These Spaces**

**Episode 3**

Wellbeing, Sustainability, Empathy and Design

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# Introduction

## **Interviewer:**

### **Christine Espinosa-Erlanda**

Associate Director

Godwin Austen Johnson

## **Guest:**

### **Sandra Woodall**

Design Principal

Tangram MENA

## **Christine Espinosa-Erlanda**

Christine Espinosa-Erlanda is an architect and Associate Director at Godwin Austen Johnson (GAJ), a British-founded architectural practice established in 1989 with roots tracing back to 1847. GAJ is well known for architecture that is contextual, honest, and technically rigorous - creating spaces that respond to end users, clients, and their context with designs that stand the test of time.

Christine has been based in the region for over two decades, leading hospitality, education, and master-planning projects across the UAE. She is passionate about embedding wellbeing and sustainability into every design, believing that architecture, at its best, is an act of empathy for the people who inhabit it.

## **Sandra Woodall**

Sandra Woodall is Design Principal at Tangram MENA, a practice now in its fourth decade of regional presence and with two generations of experience in healthcare architecture and design for health and wellbeing. Tangram delivered its first regional scheme in the mid-1990s in Saudi Arabia and has since worked across the world on projects where people and planet are at the centre of every design decision.

Sandra is a long-standing member of Architects for Health - a UK-based non-profit that promotes leadership and best practice in improving health and wellbeing through design. She is an active CPD educator across the region, having delivered programmes for the Architecture Design Commission in Saudi Arabia. Her CPD content on health and wellbeing is now available on RIBA's learning platform. Sandra is also an advocate for design for health and wellbeing in the broader MENA context.

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# The Architecture of Wellbeing

For both Christine Espinosa-Erlanda and Sandra Woodall, wellbeing is not a design trend or marketing term. It is a core responsibility of the profession. Christine opens the discussion by challenging the industry's tendency to associate wellbeing with visual aesthetics alone, asking a more fundamental question: what does wellbeing actually mean in architecture?

Sandra argues that architecture must always begin with people and the planet. Drawing on decades of healthcare and wellbeing-focused design experience, she positions health and wellbeing as an essential pillar of sustainability rather than a separate discipline. Scientific research increasingly demonstrates how everyday environments influence sleep, mood, concentration, creativity, and productivity, making the design of healthy spaces a measurable rather than theoretical pursuit.

As the conversation develops, both speakers arrive at a shared conclusion: wellbeing is not an additional layer applied to a project. It is a foundational principle that should inform every design decision from the outset.

# Designing for the Human Experience

Christine reflects on a challenge many architects encounter: buildings that appear beautiful in photographs but feel strangely disconnected once occupied. This gap between visual impact and lived experience, she argues, is where empathy becomes one of the designer's most valuable tools.

Sandra expands on this idea by highlighting the many environmental factors that influence human behaviour and comfort. Light, acoustics, materials, colour, texture, and spatial flow all contribute to how people experience a place. Even seemingly practical considerations such as wayfinding can have a profound impact on wellbeing, particularly when users feel stressed, confused, or disoriented.

## **The user experience advantage**

The discussion also explores the commercial value of designing around people. Sandra notes that when spaces genuinely respond to the needs of their occupants, they create stronger businesses. People are more likely to return, stay longer, and form positive relationships with the places they use.

## **Case study: Jaffa Centre**

Christine shares the example of the Jaffa Centre, a school project recognised with a RIBA Sustainability Award. Post-occupancy feedback revealed lower absenteeism among students, while natural light and biophilic design contributed to improved engagement and learning outcomes. The project demonstrates how empathy, wellbeing, and sustainability can work together to create measurable benefits for both users and operators.

Ultimately, both Christine and Sandra emphasise that successful design is measured not only by how it looks, but by how it feels to inhabit

# Nature, Sustainability and Climate

Throughout the conversation, wellbeing and sustainability emerge as inseparable concepts. Christine poses the question directly, but Sandra's response is immediate: architecture is about people, and sustainability is about life.

## **The benefits of biophilic design**

Sandra traces Tangram's long-standing interest in biophilic design back to the firm's early work exploring the psychology of colour and environmental influence. Today, a growing body of evidence supports what many designers have intuitively understood for years: access to nature improves mental and physical wellbeing. Whether through direct exposure, views of greenery, or carefully integrated planting, natural environments have been shown to reduce stress, improve concentration, support recovery, and enhance psychological wellbeing.

## **Designing for rest and recovery**

The importance of these connections extends across all building types. Sandra describes healthcare environments where staff are encouraged to step away from highly focused tasks and spend time in restorative spaces overlooking courtyards and gardens. Christine notes that similar principles increasingly influence education, hospitality, and workplace projects, where opportunities for rest and reflection are becoming essential design considerations.

## **Environmental and human benefits**

Many of the same strategies that improve wellbeing also contribute to sustainability. Green roofs, planted streetscapes, shaded public spaces, and improved air quality all support healthier environments while reducing energy demand and mitigating urban heat.

Christine highlights research linking better indoor environmental quality with improved productivity, while Sandra points to decades of regional experience demonstrating how climate-responsive design can enhance both comfort and environmental performance.

### **Lessons from the region**

Traditional Middle Eastern architecture provides many examples of this relationship. Wind towers, courtyards, shaded pathways, deep recesses, and passive cooling strategies were developed as responses to climate, but also created environments that supported human wellbeing.

Rather than replicating these solutions directly, both speakers advocate understanding the principles behind them and adapting them to contemporary life.

# Healing Spaces and Healthy Cities

One of the most compelling themes throughout the discussion is the idea that wellbeing can be designed at every scale, from individual patient rooms to entire cities.

## **Evidence-based healing environments**

Drawing on Tangram's extensive healthcare experience, Sandra explains that healing environments are not created through decoration or aesthetics alone. They are the result of evidence-based design strategies linked to measurable health outcomes.

Research has shown that well-designed healthcare spaces can reduce patient stress, shorten recovery periods, and even decrease the need for certain medications. These outcomes are driven by factors such as natural light, access to nature, intuitive circulation, and a sense of comfort and control.

## **Case study: Children's cancer hospital**

Sandra shares the example of a children's cancer hospital where patients recovering from stem-cell transplants were required to remain in isolation for several weeks. Unable to access the natural environment outside, they were instead connected to nature through a carefully designed healing garden integrated within the building itself.

Protected patient pods overlooked climate-controlled landscapes featuring local trees, stone, and planting. The project demonstrated how thoughtful design can address both clinical requirements and emotional wellbeing simultaneously.

## **The rise of the healthy city**

Christine broadens the discussion beyond individual buildings, highlighting the growing role of cities as public health infrastructure. As urban populations continue to increase, designers and planners face mounting challenges related to stress, inactivity, and social isolation.

## **The 15- and 20-minute city**

Sandra explores the concept of the 15- and 20-minute city, where daily amenities such as schools, parks, grocery stores, workplaces, and transport links can be accessed within a short walk or cycle ride.

Rather than focusing solely on efficiency, this approach aims to encourage movement, reduce stress, strengthen communities, and improve quality of life. Both speakers note that many of these principles already existed in traditional urban settlements and are now being reinterpreted through contemporary planning strategies.

The pandemic, they suggest, accelerated this shift by exposing shortcomings in how many homes and cities were designed, leading people to place greater value on nature, community, and adaptable environments.

# Designing for people, including ourselves

The conversation eventually turns inward, examining wellbeing within the architecture and design profession itself.

## **The wellbeing challenge within design**

Christine raises concerns around increasing levels of burnout across creative industries, noting that architecture is not immune to the pressures affecting modern workplaces. Designers spend their careers creating environments that support others, yet often struggle to prioritise their own wellbeing.

Sandra identifies one of the biggest contributors to this challenge: constant connectivity. The ability to remain connected to work at all times has blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life, creating expectations that previous generations never experienced.

## **Building better workplace cultures**

While breakout areas, wellness initiatives, and workplace amenities can contribute positively, both speakers argue that meaningful wellbeing requires cultural change. Organisations must actively support balance, recovery, and human connection if they expect employees to perform at their best.

Christine shares examples from practice, including wellness initiatives, outdoor activities, and ongoing health programmes designed to reduce stress and strengthen workplace culture. These may seem like small interventions individually, but together they contribute to healthier and more resilient teams.

## **Empathy as a professional responsibility**

The discussion repeatedly returns to empathy as a guiding principle. Whether designing hospitals, schools, cities, or workplaces, understanding how people truly experience space remains one of the architect's most important responsibilities.

Technology and behavioural analysis tools can support this process, helping designers understand movement patterns, test assumptions, and evaluate how spaces are used in reality. However, both speakers stress that technology should complement human understanding rather than replace it.

## **The value of post-occupancy learning**

Sandra also highlights the importance of returning to completed projects and measuring their real-world performance. While post-occupancy evaluation is rarely built into project briefs, it remains one of the most effective ways for designers to learn, refine their approach, and improve future outcomes.

# The Future of Wellbeing

Looking ahead, Christine and Sandra see wellbeing becoming increasingly embedded within every aspect of design rather than existing as a specialist discipline.

## **Technology as an invisible support system**

Sandra describes a future where smart buildings actively support occupant wellbeing by monitoring temperature, humidity, lighting, air quality, and energy use in real time. Rather than requiring constant intervention from users, these systems respond proactively to changing conditions, reducing cognitive load while improving comfort.

Christine notes that many hospitality, healthcare, and educational environments are already moving in this direction, demonstrating that the technology exists today. The challenge is no longer innovation but broader adoption and integration.

## **Designing for resilience**

Beyond individual buildings, future design priorities are expanding to include social infrastructure, climate resilience, and equitable access to healthcare and community services. Sandra discusses initiatives exploring future-ready neighbourhoods, resilient urban environments, and healthcare solutions capable of reaching remote communities through digital delivery models.

## **From sustainability to regeneration**

A recurring theme is the transition from sustainability towards regeneration. Rather than focusing solely on reducing environmental impact, future buildings may actively contribute to ecological health and restore natural systems.

For both speakers, this shift represents an important evolution in the profession's thinking. Designers are no longer asking how to minimise harm, but how the built environment can create positive outcomes for both people and planet.

## **Advice for the next generation**

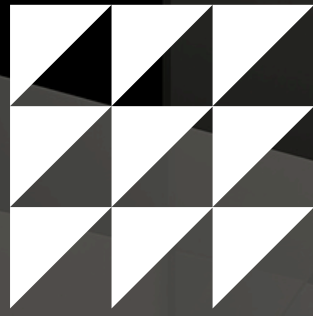
The episode concludes with a shared message for emerging designers. Sandra encourages young professionals to bring forward new ideas and explore opportunities previous generations could not have imagined. Christine emphasises the importance of listening first: listening to users, communities, clients, and context before beginning the design process.

Together, their advice captures the central message of the conversation. The future of wellbeing in design will be shaped not only by technology, sustainability, or innovation, but by the ability to understand people and create environments that genuinely improve their lives.

## **Closing reflection**

Christine closes with a definition that synthesises the conversation: wellbeing is responsibility. Architecture shapes health, productivity, behaviour, belonging, safety, and dignity. It is not a trend. It is inseparable from sustainability, from empathy, and from the civic duty of anyone who designs spaces.

She ends with a question for every designer: when a person walks into a space you have designed, what will they feel? If the answer is: relaxed, comfortable, healthier, then you are designing well.



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