

More than a feeling

How commercial
real estate can
utilize artwork to
enhance tenant
well-being

Headstrong II, by Kat Honey,
was created by hand at magazine
scale, then enlarged to magnify
the qualities of printing dots,
textures and cuts.



We've all seen a striking sculpture or painting in a public space that stops us in our tracks. Whether it's a giant salmon hanging in the lobby of a new office tower in Vancouver or a smaller exhibition of paintings by an Indigenous artist in a building atrium, art is often more than just an aesthetic experience – it impacts your mood and overall sense of well-being, too.



← *Storyteller*, by Peter Migwans, was displayed at the North York Centre in Toronto for National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2024.



25%

Canadians reported moderate to severe symptoms of **anxiety** or **depression** in 2023

Source: Statistics Canada (2023)

A growing number of building owners and managers are starting to understand the power of art, placing dynamic exhibits in their spaces to reduce anxiety and improve tenant and employee mental health. Good timing, too: with employees returning to the office, many workers are feeling increasingly anxious about coming to work.

A study from the Conference Board, a U.S. non-profit think tank, found that 34% of workers reported lower levels of mental health after returning to the office. It also found that 37% of employees experienced a decrease in their sense of belonging and engagement. That, along with the fact that one in four Canadians reported moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression in 2023 – an increase from one in five in 2020 – means business leaders have their work cut out for them if they want to foster employee well-being and provide supportive workplace environments.

It's a challenge that Elizabeth Schreurs, Vice President of Property Management in Central Canada with GWL Realty Advisors, has observed at sites across the country. "We believe strongly that the most effective and happy employee is someone who is being supported from all sides," she notes. "Not just their career, but also their mental health and family life."

GWL Realty Advisors has long had art in its buildings, and continues to put new works in its newly built commercial and residential buildings. In January 2023, the company was approached by helloart, an art-tech company that empowers the commercial real estate sector to foster stronger community connections, enhance tenants' and staff's well-being

and drive meaningful social impact through its dynamic arts rotation program. These collections act more like art exhibitions that are changed out every three months. They're often themed to coincide with events like the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation or Black History Month.

"We wanted to have more amenities in our buildings, and art became one of those things that we could make more prominent and interactive," Schreurs explains. "What better way to give people a reason to come back into the office? To see the art, but also a reason to – when they're in the office – give themselves a bit of a break, let their brain go somewhere different, somewhere better, and observe the art from that standpoint. That became important to us as part of our amenity set, but also to provide additional support, not just to our tenants, but also to our teams within the buildings."

Hussain Al-Jibory, helloart's CEO and co-founder, has seen first-hand that art plays an important role in stress reduction and mood enhancement. "Exploring art can uplift your mood, which enhances overall emotional well-being and boosts productivity. Think about all the tenants in the building coming to work, and think about the overall bottom-line impact of that productivity, right? You see something creative and different, and it helps you achieve more."



←
Spawn,
by Douglas
Coupland,
hangs in the
atrium joining
the new
Vancouver
Centre II and
Scotia Tower,
downtown
Vancouver.



The science behind the philosophy

While a painting in the lobby of a building won't likely change the trajectory of someone's life, science says it can affect someone's mood. Several pilot projects, in which healthcare practitioners prescribe a "dose" of the arts, be it a trip to an art gallery or a musical performance or even participating in an art workshop to boost the well-being of patients suffering from chronic conditions or mental illness, are growing in popularity worldwide. Research conducted by Johns Hopkins University, the University of Gloucestershire and other academic institutions consistently points to improvements in participants' symptoms of anxiety and depression and overall feelings of well-being when looking at art.

Casting an eye beyond the positive impact art can have on symptoms of depression and anxiety, a University of Exeter study found that a beautified space that includes art can also improve employee productivity by 15%. It specifically looked at cubicles, but a welcoming space that included art, plants and photography resulted in employees who worked faster and reported fewer health-related environmental events than those who worked in more sterile offices.

Karen Mills, the founder of Public Art Management and an art consultant with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), notes that multiple studies in health facilities have shown how the brain positively responds to art. "Having that moment to step back and look at something that's not associated with what you do allows for those moments of calm that help you feel like you can get it together and go back to things," she says.

15%
**Improved employee
productivity when a workspace
is beautified with art**

Source: Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied (2010)

Toronto artist Kat Honey speaks with a tenant about her art during an exhibition at 1 Adelaide St. E.



Building meaningful connections

In addition to the mental health and tenant engagement benefits, art can also be a way to interact with and draw in the broader community. As part of GWLRA's long-standing commitment to supporting the communities it operates in, it makes the walls and hallways of its buildings available to emerging and established artists. For instance, it manages a 33-story Vancouver Centre II office tower, which includes the Douglas Coupland-created "Spawn," a stainless steel, 30-foot-long salmon that looks as if it's swimming through the building's atrium.

In June 2024, GWLRA's property at 1 Adelaide Street, in downtown Toronto, included an artist showcase celebrating Pride, which also featured a public talk by local multimedia artist Kat Honey. Art is also often prominently displayed in one of the windows at the property, which increases community engagement by inviting people into the space to learn more.

In fact, one day in October 2024, Canadian film director Bronwen Hughes saw a painting by John Laford, an Ojibway artist from Manitoulin Island, Ont., in the window of 1 Adelaide. She was in a cab that drove by the painting and told the driver to turn around so she could see it. She ultimately purchased the piece online through helloart.

"I recognized the style of work right away as we whizzed by in the taxi. Then I said, 'Stop this car!'" she wrote in an email to Al-Jibory. "I was excited because I have prints of John Laford, and I now had the chance for an original. His work makes me happy through and through."

Al-Jibory says he regularly hears about these kinds of community connections to art. Whether it's an interaction between tenants who have never spoken before or someone coming into the building to experience a profound moment, art has the capacity to transcend barriers.

Good for mental health, good for business

Providing commercial building lobbies that can offer that moment of refuge is just a good business practice, if you ask Schreurs. "Employers understand that the mental health of their team members is critically important," she observes. "And if there is anything that can help the people using our buildings and our own team members have a quieter, restful day or a better mental health day, then we should be doing it."

Although choosing and investing in art for your building's lobby might seem daunting, there are companies out there that can do most of the heavy lifting. Whether you want permanent exhibits or would prefer to change things up regularly, all you need to do is provide a budget and, if you want, some themes for a curator to run with. Then, perhaps spend some time walking around the exhibition yourself and let the art work its magic.

"When we have an installation up, I walk around," says Schreurs. "I want to hear what people are saying because you're wondering, 'OK, is this worth it? Is this working? Do we like this?' And it's doing what we wanted it to do. It's providing another space for people. It's providing an area where they can be more contemplative, where they can enjoy the quiet. And that, to me, is the success of it." ■

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE GUIDE,
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Lake Superior Sunset,
by Peter Migwans, displayed in
North York Centre, Toronto.



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