



Corporate Real Estate's Guide to the Circular Workplace

Prepared exclusively
for CoreNet Global by



Executive Summary

Circularity is a growing corporate priority, with 60% of Fortune 100 companies highlighting it in their sustainability reports. Reducing waste and reusing materials is becoming a key business strategy for companies aiming to be more environmentally responsible.

Collaboration is essential for circular success. Corporate real estate professionals must work with architects, designers, facilities managers, and workplace strategists to design flexible, efficient spaces that reduce waste and extend the life of resources.

Office interiors have a significant carbon impact. Frequent office refreshes mean that furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FFE) can contribute as much to a building's carbon footprint as the structure itself, according to a growing number of whole-building life cycle analyses. Including FFE in lifecycle assessments is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of emissions sources.

Design for adaptability and longevity. By creating modular, flexible workspaces and planning for end-of-life at the beginning, companies can reduce waste from constant office overhauls and make better use of their resources over time.

Circularity delivers real business benefits. It not only helps companies lower costs and meet sustainability goals but also aligns with the values of today's employees, making it a smart strategy for boosting both operational efficiency and workforce engagement.

Circular Workplace, n.

a.

A place of work that designs out waste, circulates furniture, fixtures, and equipment at their highest value, and regenerates the natural and built environment.

b.

A global coalition to raise awareness of the zero-waste office. Founded in 2023 by [Green Standards](#), our membership includes hundreds of workplace professionals across ten industries and three continents.

c.

A way of working that exists, today, in real life! And the people in this report will tell you how they're making it happen.

Why workplace circularity matters

A circular workplace is a zero-waste office — but it's also something much bigger than that. It's a growing global movement to bring the principles of the circular economy into the spaces and places where the economy happens.

In the year since [Green Standards](#) published our first [Circular Workplace](#) report, the members of this coalition have spoken on panels, run workshops, conducted interviews, advised policy makers, and done the hard work to ensure the stuff in our offices stays in use and out of landfill. And the one thing we keep coming back to is this: Collaboration.

There is no such thing as a circular economy of one. Everyone in the modern workplace needs to know that circularity is a proven way to save money, resources, and carbon emissions. The **workplace strategist** needs insight into how the **furniture manufacturer** facilitates reuse and repair, while the **architect** must work with a **designer** who considers end-of-use planning from the outset.

Key to it all is the **corporate real estate professional**. You steer your company's property strategy, handling acquisitions, leases, and sales to boost business outcomes. By strategically aligning properties with company goals – including sustainability initiatives and benchmarks – you keep costs in check and maximize portfolio value.

To enable a true circular workplace, it will take all these individuals working more collaboratively with each other. No one company, team or individual can do this alone.

The following pages are an adapted excerpt of our [Who's Who in the Circular Workplace](#) report. For us, circularity is not an academic model or an interesting theory; it's how the biggest companies on the planet support local non-profits, optimize their real estate portfolios, and meet their sustainability targets. They're doing it today. This guide aims to show how corporate real estate can be a driving force for the circular workplace.

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The relationship of circularity to sustainability is that of means to ends. Circularity is the means to achieve sustainability goals.

– Gary Miciunas

What Corporate Real Estate Executives Can Do

Incorporate reuse into long-term planning, keeping assets in use and out of landfill.

Track disposition outcomes across the portfolio.

Ensure those numbers end up in sustainability reporting. The more digital your business operations, the more your real estate footprint matters to your overall emissions.

Key Voices

“First and foremost, understand the importance of this subject matter. No longer is it just nice to consider sustainability, it’s a corporate requirement. Don’t be so rigid with your standards that you miss out on opportunities for synergy. Be more agile!”

– **Johnny Alain, Director of Real Estate, North America, Stantec, Calgary**

“With leases being signed and lapsing regularly, consider replacing any ‘restoration clause’ with salvage operations, perhaps available to other new tenants on another floor or building that may want inexpensive carpet tile, furniture, etc.” – **Kjell Anderson, Director of Sustainable Design, LMN Architects, Seattle**

“Designing for flexibility from the beginning means more inclusive spaces as well as reduced need for refits as needs and desires change.” – **Jodie Ng, Sustainability Leader, New York City**

“Clearly define your objectives; engage all stakeholders in planning; document everything.”

– **John Mackay, VP Operations, Aleto Inc., Washington, DC**

“Build a foundation of data requirements required from all stakeholders.”

– **Christine McHugh, Founder & CEO, White Strand Development, New York City**

“It seems that in many instances companies find themselves in truncated construction or deconstruction timelines and usable material goes into the dumpster as a result. If relationships were formed proactively with organizations such as Green Standards and Habitat ReStores and key conversations held before the one or two-day “just get rid of it” imperatives, much of this material could not only be kept out of the landfills but could also provide potential tax deductions, satisfy grant requirements, and provide much-needed revenue for nonprofit organizations.”

– **Kent Rice, Corporate Acquisitions Manager, Habitat For Humanity ReStores of Lancaster/Lebanon PA**

How do we ensure shorter leases don't generate more waste?

Across the workplace landscape, one demand unites employees and employers: flexibility. According to CBRE's 2024 Americas Office Occupier Sentiment Survey, 80% of companies with over 10,000 employees are either considering or already adopting shorter lease terms. These companies are also integrating more flexible space options into their portfolios, preparing for future changes.

In addition to shorter leases, these companies are seeking green leases—agreements where landlords share energy and waste data and prioritize sustainability initiatives like recycling, composting, and electrification. Notably, 26% of occupiers say that the presence or absence of green lease clauses would influence their real estate decisions.

However, this push for flexibility poses a challenge: How do companies minimize waste while frequently changing offices? Most furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FFE) are designed to last over a decade, and their carbon footprint is substantial.

The solution lies in adopting a circular mindset from the outset. Kay Sargent, senior principal at HOK, emphasizes the importance of designing spaces that can evolve: "Design the spaces with change and the ability to adapt in mind. Identify core elements that don't change and elements that can be tweaked or refreshed to accommodate new users."

By focusing on adaptable design, companies can reduce waste while embracing the flexibility they need. The less that has to change, the more sustainable and efficient the workplace becomes.

How do we incorporate existing assets into long-term planning?

Incorporating existing assets like furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FF&E) into long-term design planning can feel daunting, but with a few specific strategies, you can make it work.

First, **conduct an asset audit**. This needn't be a comprehensive inventory, as we know those can take so much time and money that they become self-defeating. Start small and high-value: If you have a set of outdated office chairs, could they be reupholstered with updated fabrics? Maybe the frames are sturdy, but the cushions need refreshing.

"If you don't know where to start, let's talk!" says Heidi Frasure, Head of Sustainability at [Green Standards](#). "We can help you identify the assets worth tracking, and the ones that are best left to sustainable decommissioning to help save storage costs and optimize reuse potential."

Repurposing existing furniture like this can dramatically reduce costs while updating the look.

Another example is reworking conference room tables. Instead of ordering all-new tables, consider refinishing or resurfacing them. By changing the table's top to a more modern material or finish, you can align with the company's current aesthetic while avoiding a full replacement.

Modularity is another powerful tool. If you're working in a corporate environment that frequently shifts its team structures or project spaces, think about repurposing modular furniture. For instance, modular workstations can be reconfigured to create larger or smaller collaborative spaces without buying new furniture. This not only maximizes the lifecycle of existing assets but also enhances adaptability for future needs.

Rethink standard practices that inhibit reuse, like **whiteboxing**. If we completely clean out an office space before showing it to prospective occupants, it makes it all but impossible for them to keep the existing furniture.

"We need to work closely with landlords to change their standard operating procedures so that they tour prospective tenants through a space before demo/white boxing happens," says Benjamin Holsinger of Gensler. "We also need to talk with general contractors and demo contractors who are being hired by landlords to demo/white box a space – so that they can divert existing materials from landfill."

Lighting fixtures are another area where reuse is possible. Instead of replacing an entire lighting system, consider updating just the lampshades or using existing fixtures in new ways. A simple upgrade like adding energy-efficient bulbs or dimming capabilities can transform older fixtures without needing replacements. Highly visible projects like these are a great way to get a team excited, says Stephanie McLarty of Quantum Lifecycle.

Finally, link these efforts to sustainability goals. For example, promoting how **repurposing furniture** aligns with the company's carbon footprint reduction initiatives can help gain buy-in from stakeholders who prioritize environmental impact.

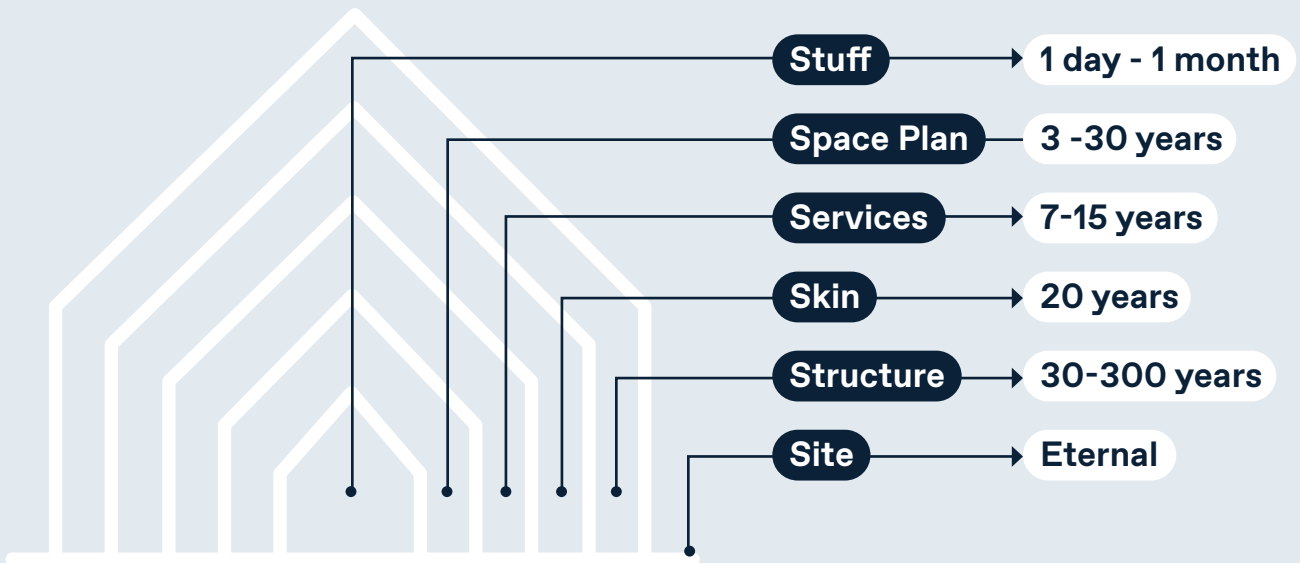
By using these specific strategies, you'll find creative ways to incorporate existing assets and deliver long-term value.

How do we make Whole Building Life Cycle Assessment live up to its name?

The Whole Building Life Cycle Assessment (WBLCA) is a brilliant concept in theory. Given that the built environment accounts for roughly 40% of global emissions, it makes sense to adopt a universal metric to measure the carbon footprint of any building. That’s the intention behind WBLCA. However, in practice, particularly in systems like LEED v3, these assessments often fall short by focusing solely on the building’s structure and enclosure. They typically exclude crucial elements such as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, and almost always neglect the furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FFE) within the building.

Stewart Brand’s 1994 book *How Buildings Learn* illustrates this gap with the “Six S’s” of a building—structure, skin, services, space plan, stuff, and site. The Whole Building Life Cycle Assessment tends to focus only on the structure and skin, overlooking the rapidly changing interiors that play a critical role in a building’s overall carbon footprint.

Stewart Brand’s 6 S’s from *How Buildings Learn*



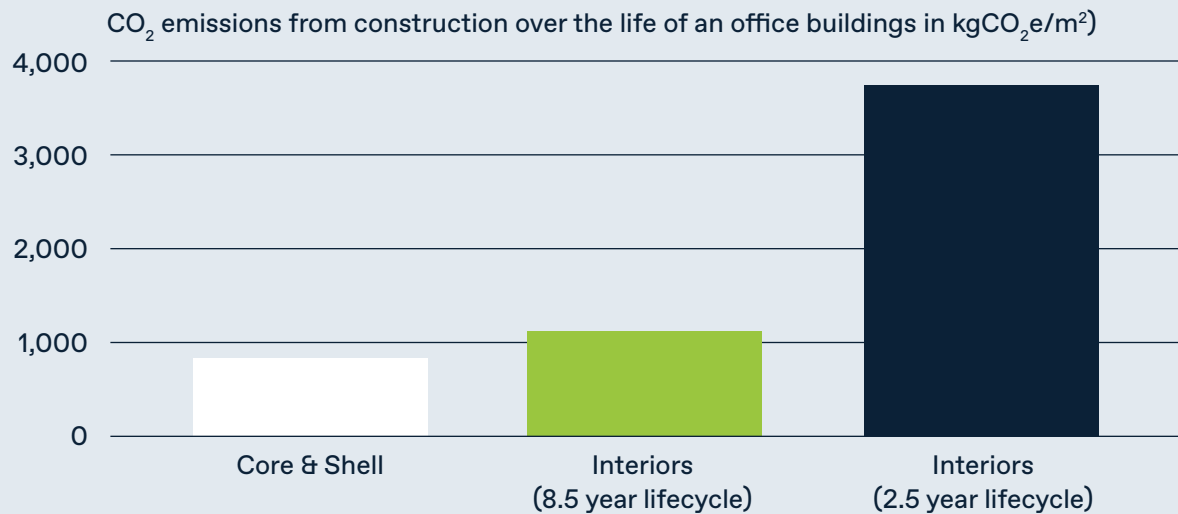
So why does this matter? While the concrete, steel, and glass used to construct a building contribute significantly to its embodied carbon, they are relatively stable over time. In contrast, the interiors—furniture, fixtures, and equipment—are constantly in flux, creating waste and emissions with every renovation or update. This continuous change has a massive, often unmeasured, environmental impact. As the saying goes, “what gets measured, gets managed.” So if we’re not measuring the carbon emissions of interiors, who’s managing their environmental footprint?

Jeffrey Frost, materials practice lead at Brightworks Sustainability, worked with Salesforce to measure the carbon impact of a two-floor office refresh. His finding was eye-opening: “Embodied emissions from furniture are equal to or greater than the construction materials used in a Class A tenant improvement.”

Similarly, LMN Architects conducted a thorough lifecycle analysis during their own office refresh and found that “when measured over time, interiors’ embodied carbon impact can be as significant, if not more, than the structure and envelope,” as noted by Jenn Chen and Kjell Anderson in a 2019 report. They argue that to truly assess a building’s carbon footprint, WBLCA must include interiors as part of the scope.

Architect Raefer Wallis, founder of the RESET standard, goes even further, stating bluntly, “It’s time to stop dismissing the impact of interior fit-out. It’s never been less than core & shell; it’s simply been more difficult to calculate.”

His data from 2022 couldn’t be more clear:



In short, the carbon emissions from interiors are far too significant to ignore. It’s time for assessments to cover the *whole* building, not just the bones.

How do you reuse furniture, fixtures, and equipment when design specifications won't allow it?

This one's easy: Change the specs!

Of course, in the complicated dynamics of a modern office, that's a herculean task. But a sustainable approach can still be achieved by cleverly navigating these boundaries. The key lies in strategic planning and creativity.

First, workplace strategists should engage with key stakeholders early on to outline sustainability goals, making reuse part of the project's value proposition. By embedding reuse in the initial concept, clients are more likely to support solutions that align with both regulatory requirements and eco-friendly practices.

Second, understanding the nuances of specifications is essential. Many rules focus on safety, accessibility, and aesthetics, but they rarely rule out reusing high-quality materials outright. Designers can propose modifications, refinishing, or retrofitting to meet standards without starting from scratch. For example, existing furniture can be updated with new upholstery, or fixtures can be refurbished to look modern and meet current codes.

Collaboration is another vital tactic. Partnering with suppliers who specialize in sustainable refurbishing or modular designs can lead to innovative solutions that fit within the constraints of the regulations.

Finally, clear communication with stakeholders, including procurement teams and regulators, can help reframe the conversation around sustainability. When reuse is presented as not only a cost-saving measure but also a responsible choice aligned with environmental goals, it becomes an easier sell, even when facing stringent specifications. The key is in rethinking what's possible within the rules, rather than seeing them as insurmountable obstacles.

Going Further

What have we missed? Share your perspective, join our coalition, and help your peers at circularsurvey.com

Read about the roles of architects, designers, workplace strategists, furniture manufacturers and more in the full Who's Who in the Circular Workplace report at circularworkplace.com

Who we are

Green Standards is a global sustainable decommissioning firm that captures value in workplace change. As an enterprise-level partner to the world's largest organizations, we efficiently and ethically redistribute furniture, fixtures, and equipment through charitable donation, resale, and recycling. To date, Green Standards has kept more than 125,000 tons out of landfill, maintaining a 98.6% landfill diversion rate across more than 2,000 projects. We have helped clients donate more than \$40M worth of independently appraised furniture, fixtures, and equipment to non-profits and schools in their communities.



2,000+
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of all sizes



\$40M+
In-kind
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98.6%
Landfill diversion
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To date, Green Standards has completed projects in more than 40 countries.



Certified



This company meets high standards of social and environmental impact.

Corporation

Green Standards is a Certified B Corporation, which means we are committed to high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability. This report is part of our commitment to building an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic system.

Participating organizations





Illustrations by Yarek Waszul