

Has a Seattle Building Discovered the Secret to Making Stairs Irresistible?

Caroline Winter / Business Week

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Seattle's \$30 million carbon neutral [Bullitt Center](#), billed as the world's greenest commercial building, will feature what its owner, the Bullitt Foundation, calls an "[irresistible stairway](#)" when it opens at the end of the month. The elegant, light-filled *escalier* offers panoramic views of downtown and Puget Sound. It's intended to conserve energy and provide physical exercise for occupants. Will it be a lesson to companies trying to get employees to make healthier choices?

We all know climbing stairs is good for us: It's a good workout and can even save time. In 2011, researchers at a Canadian hospital found that when they had doctors take the stairs rather than the elevator, the doctors saved an average of 15 minutes per workday—and they were required to walk, not run.

But despite the benefits, few office buildings do anything meaningful to encourage stair climbing. Many workplaces have grim, fluorescent-lit, concrete passages hidden away behind fire doors. Some all but prohibit stair use, in part due to post-9/11 security concerns.

Persuading elevator-addicted employees to change their ways isn't easy. A 2004 [study](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that motivational signs and music increased office stair use by a mere 8.9 percent. Meanwhile, the study only "suggested" that physical improvements to staircases, like new carpeting and framed artwork, "may" increase physical activity.

In coming months, a number of universities and organizations will be studying the effects of several innovative aspects of the nearly self-sustaining Bullitt Center. One study will investigate how tenant behavior—including stair use—changes after moving into the building, says Brad Kahn, a spokesman for the Bullitt Foundation. Of course, beauty won't be the only factor in persuading people to take the stairs; the elevators in the building will require key-card access. If you don't have access to the elevator, you won't be able to resist the new stairway.

[Winter](#) is a reporter for *Bloomberg Businessweek* in New York.