Are you in an unhealthy office relationship?

If you spend more waking hours in your office building than with your significant other, your workplace had better be a good match. Studies have shown that office buildings aren’t benign containers but active contributors to good—or poor—health, mood, and productivity. Your office can do you right or wrong in many ways, till demolition do you part.

By Bonnie Berkowitz and Laura Stanton

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**LEAVING YOU GASping:** “Sick building syndrome” is largely a relic of the 1970s and ’80s, when office buildings were sealed for energy efficiency without adequate filtration and ventilation. But even now, paint, furniture, carpeting, pesticides and cleaning products can emit gases that affect air quality. A 2002 expert found that 9 percent of asthma cases among adults who had even been employed were workrelated.

**PUTTING YOU IN BAD LIGHT:** In many buildings, natural light gets no farther than the executive offices that monopolize the windows. Fluorescent tubes put out light that doesn’t match the natural spectrum, reducing alertness, darkening mood and impairing nighttime sleep, said Kevin Kampschroer, an innovator in sustainable federal office design.

**MAKING YOU SICK:** A 2011 Danish study found that people who worked in open spaces took 62 percent more sick days than those in offices or high-walled cubicles. Additional studies have shown that people who show up to work ill drain company resources and impair performance.

**RUNNING HOT OR COLD:** Heerwagen said that in tests of ambient temperature, half of all workers said they were too hot and, not surprisingly, less productive. Personal preference varies too much for a one-size-fits-all approach, especially in Washington, where some people still wear wool suits in summer.

**BRINGING IN THE NOISE:** If a cowbell rings on the copier’s whirl or the copyist’s whir puts you on edge, you are not alone. A 2000 study of white-collar workers found that background noise contributed to a measurable rise in stress as shown by heart rates, cortisol levels and an impaired ability to concentrate. Some of the most disturbing sounds can come from high-walled cubicles that give inhabitants a false sense of privacy.

**STUCK IN SHADES OF GRAY:** Monotone is bad decor. Even worse is a jarring jumble that rises above your shoulder and impairs nighttime sleep, said environmental psychologist Judith Heerwagen.

**HEATHER OR UNHEALTHY:** Studies have shown that office buildings aren’t benign containers but active contributors to good—or poor—health, mood, and productivity. Your office can do you right or wrong in many ways, till demolition do you part.

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Sources: Kevin Kampschroer; director of high-performance green buildings for the General Services Administration; environmental psychologist Judith Heerwagen of the GSA; National Institute of Building Sciences; Whirl Building Design Studio; Center for the Built Environment in Berkeley; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health; Environmental Protection Agency; “Effects of the physical work environment on psychological measures of stress” by Julian F. Thayer, et al., for the GSA and National Institutes of Health