CES 26

IN PERSPECTIVE

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CES 2026 In Perspective

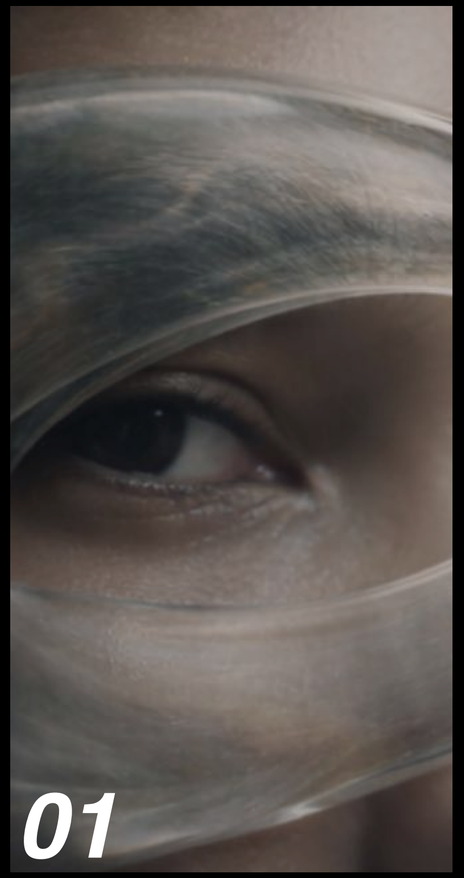
By now, the headlines almost write themselves: humanoid robots everywhere, AI in everything. CES 2026 didn't disrupt that narrative - it confirmed it.

What changed was the subtext. This was the year AI stopped feeling experimental and started feeling infrastructural. Intelligence has shifted from novelty to baseline, forcing harder questions about consequence, control, and agency, not just what technology can do, but how it reshapes systems once opting out is no longer realistic.

For years, progress at CES has been measured in speed, scale, and spectacle. In 2026, a different metric quietly surfaced: judgment. The most advanced products weren't the most aggressive or attention-seeking. They were the most considered - designed with an understanding that when intelligence becomes unavoidable, restraint becomes a competitive advantage.

Beneath the obvious trends, a recalibration was underway.

BY MARIEL BROWN



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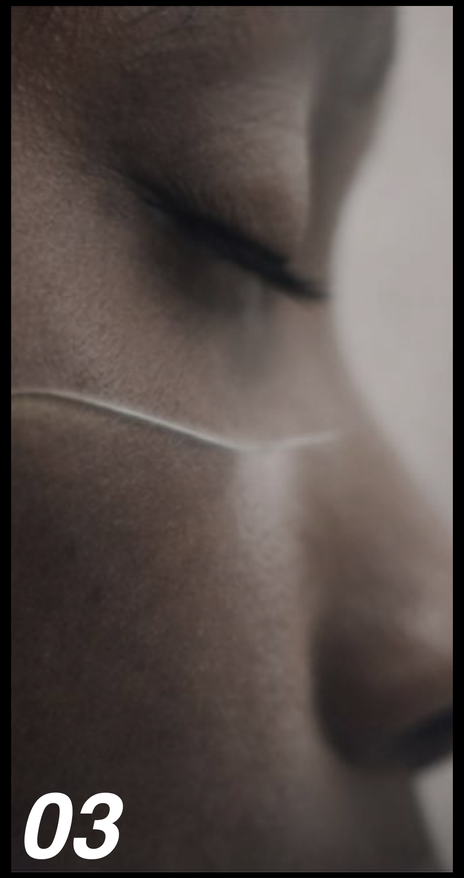
The Body is the *New Platform*

Products focused on body placement, subtle interaction, and socially acceptable interfaces

02

Agency Becomes *a Design Problem*

Products that foreground boundaries, restraint, and clarity around autonomy



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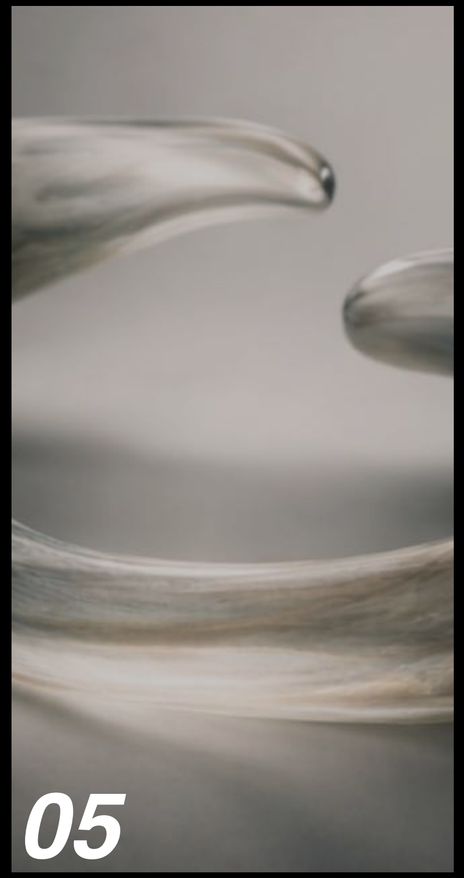
Care Moves From *Apps to Infrastructure*

Care systems that reduce load rather than track behavior

04

The Physical World *Gets Its Software*

AI applied to infrastructure, materials, and physical systems at scale



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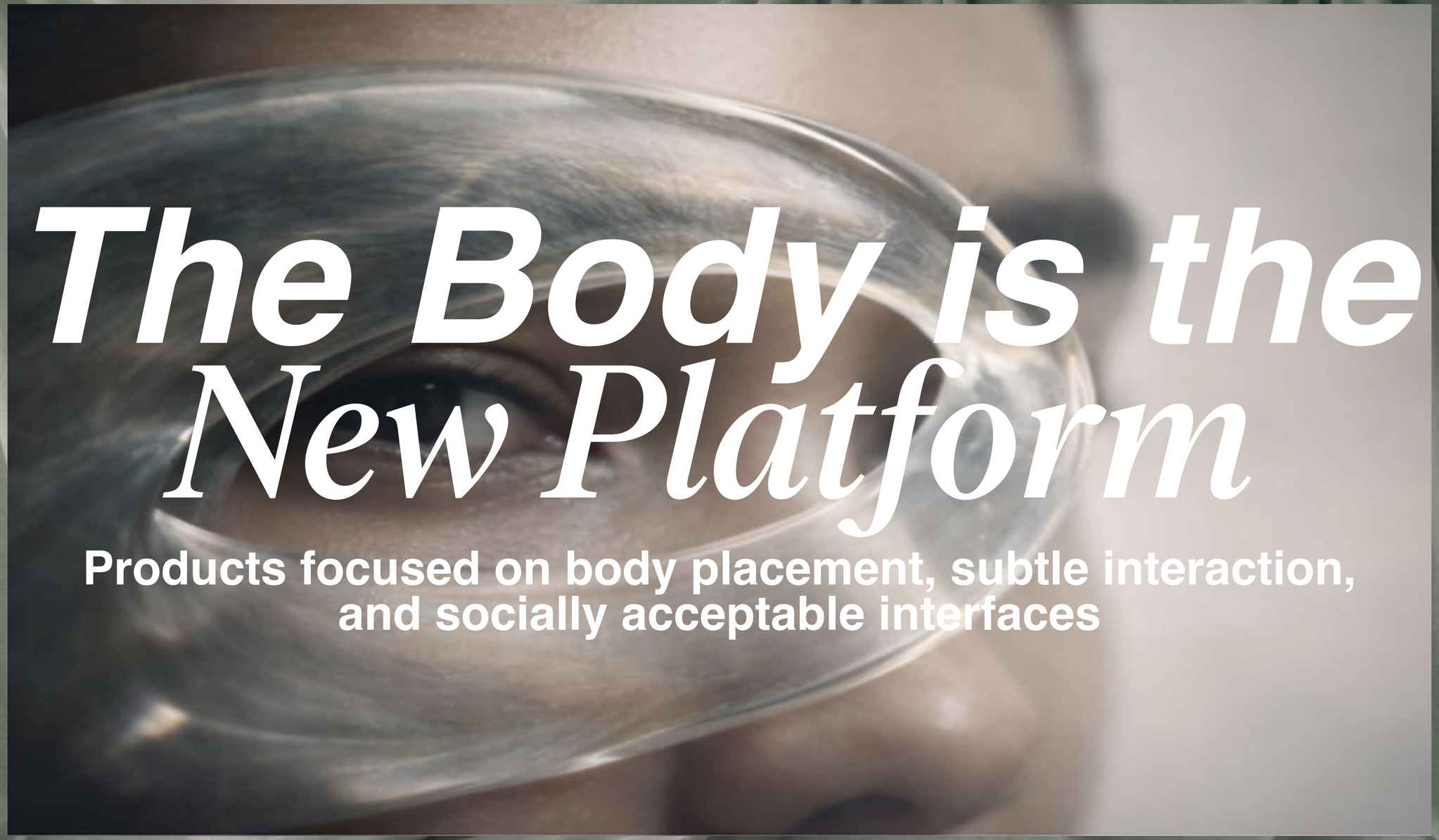
Restraint Becomes *a Feature*

Products that intentionally slow interaction or scaffold behavior rather than optimize it

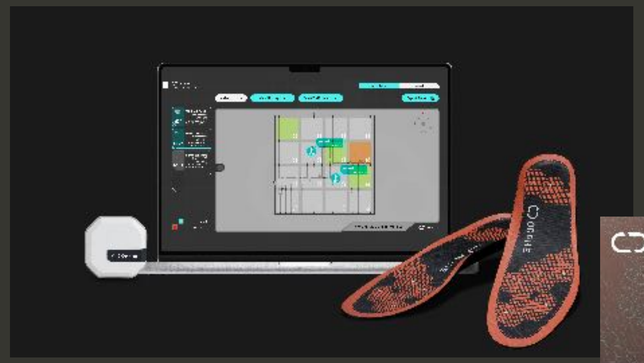


The Body is the *New Platform*

Products focused on body placement, subtle interaction, and socially acceptable interfaces

“Technology is now choosing to settle: on the body, and within the social rules that already govern it.

Computing has long lived in front of us - on desks, in hands, behind glass. At CES 2026, the more consequential shift was where technology is now choosing to settle: on the body, and within the social rules that already govern it.



Orphe Insole →

↑ *Naqi's Neural Earbuds*

← The ModeX™ Bomber Jacket

This wasn't about wearables as accessories. It was about gravity, deciding which parts of the body can host intelligence without demanding attention, breaking etiquette, or forcing users into performative behavior. The real innovation wasn't simply where technology sits, but how interaction becomes quieter, more physical, and often subconscious.

Naqi's neural earbuds exemplified this shift. Using micro-facial signals rather than voice, touch, or cameras, control happens almost invisibly interaction without overt action. ModeX treated clothing itself as infrastructure, embedding power and compute into garments that don't announce themselves as "tech." ORPHE's sensor-enabled insoles brought lab-grade biomechanics into everyday movement, while .lumen's assistive glasses reframed accessibility as scalable augmentation rather than specialist accommodation.

Across categories, the pattern was consistent: the next interface war won't be won by screens. It will be won by technologies that understand where they're allowed to live, and how quietly they're expected to behave.

The Takeaway

As intelligence migrates onto the body, social permission becomes as important as technical capability. The future belongs to products that feel natural not because they disappear, but because they respect the spaces, physical and cultural, they occupy.

Agency Becomes *a Design Problem*

Products that foreground boundaries, restraint, and clarity around autonomy

> “As AI becomes infrastructural, the question is no longer whether systems act autonomously but how, when, and on whose behalf.

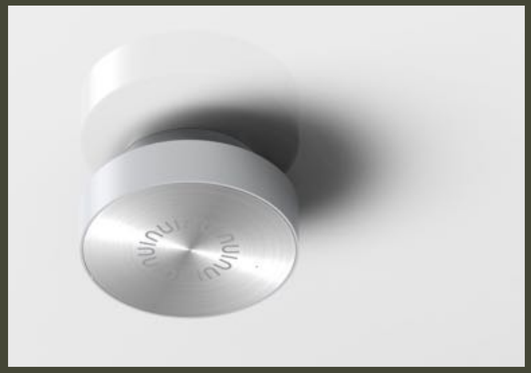
As opting out becomes unrealistic, agency itself is becoming a design material. CES 2026 revealed a growing recognition that trust isn’t built through capability alone. It’s built through boundaries. The most compelling products weren’t those that automated the most, but those that were explicit about where human judgment still sits.

Sorcerics Lens

GARMIN, Descent™ S1 Buoy

Littlebird

Uniuni, RestroomGuard Savvy



Littlebird embodied this shift in the family context, offering predictive safety intelligence without screens, feeds, or surveillance theater. RestroomGuard Savvy applied the same thinking to public infrastructure, proving AI-driven safety doesn't require cameras or biometric intrusion to be effective. Sorcerics Lens extended the idea into the home, replacing dashboards and commands with contextual awareness that responds to situations rather than constant instruction. Even the Descent S1 buoy followed this logic augmenting diver judgment with shared situational awareness instead of replacing it with alerts or automation.

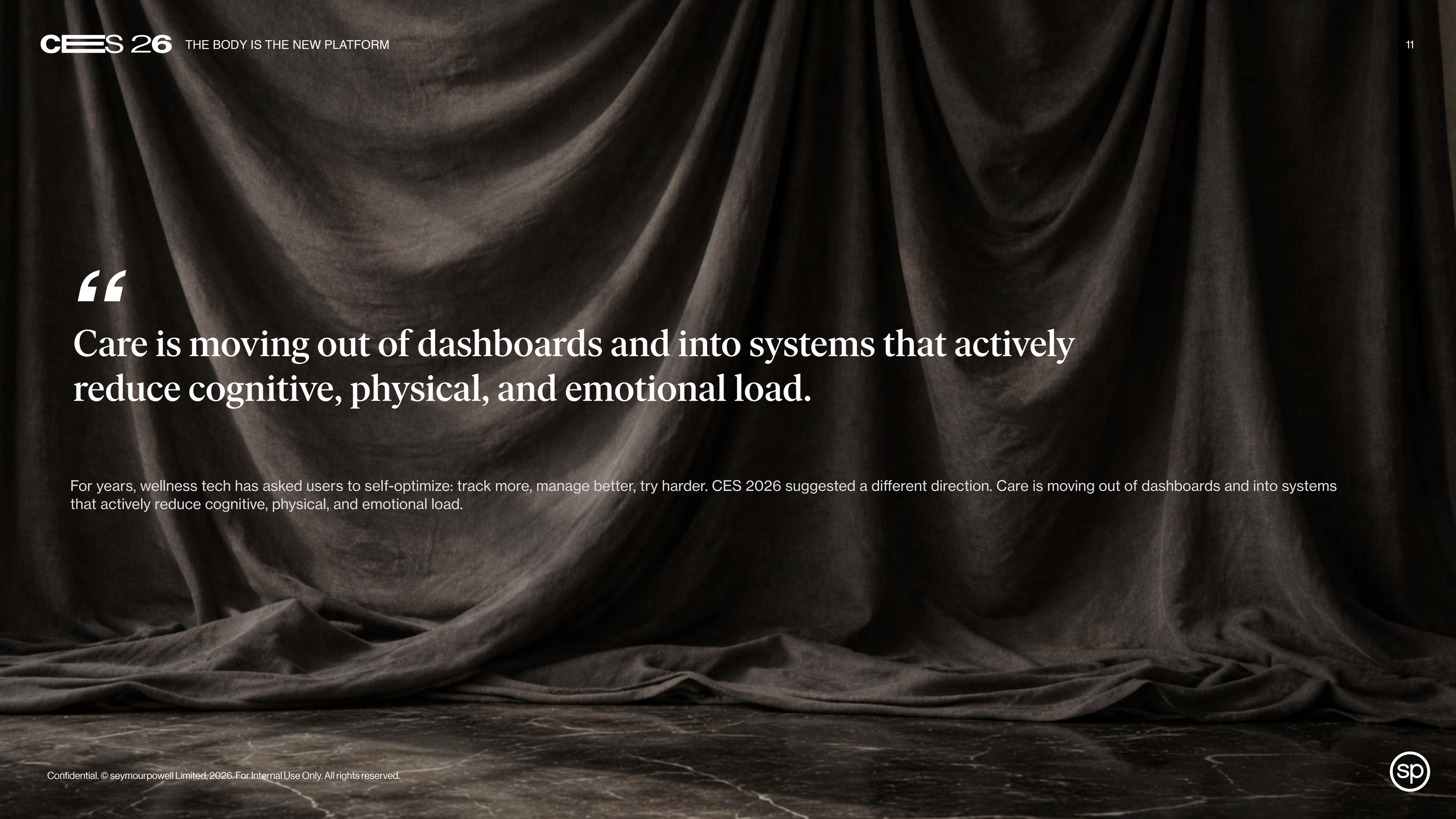
These systems didn't remove humans from the loop. They clarified where the loop should be.

The Takeaway

As autonomy becomes unavoidable, agency becomes intentional. The most trusted systems won't be the fastest or smartest, but the ones that are clearest about when not to act.

Care Moves From Apps to Infrastructure

Care systems that reduce load rather than track behavior



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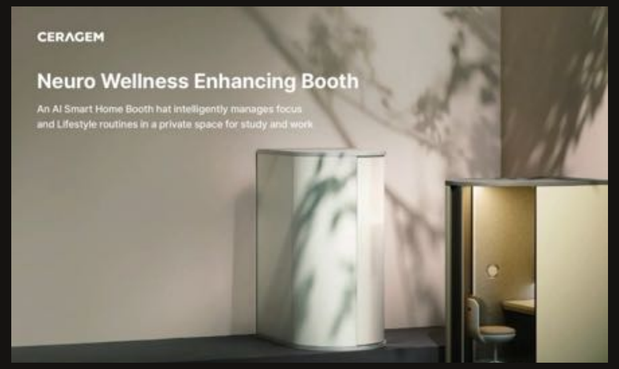
Care is moving out of dashboards and into systems that actively reduce cognitive, physical, and emotional load.

For years, wellness tech has asked users to self-optimize: track more, manage better, try harder. CES 2026 suggested a different direction. Care is moving out of dashboards and into systems that actively reduce cognitive, physical, and emotional load.

Moxi,
Diligent Robotics



Neuro Wellness Enhancing Booth

L'Oreal,
Light Straight

AI Rejuvenation Shower System

Diligent Robotics' Moxi didn't promise better metrics - it freed nurses from coordination work so they could spend time caring. Neuro wellness booths reframed focus and recovery as environmental conditions that can be supported, not personal failures to manage. The AI rejuvenation shower treated water itself as a programmable medium, embedding skincare into a daily ritual without screens or self-surveillance. Light Straight addressed an unspoken hygiene pain point - maintenance between "reset" moments - by cleaning and styling hair without water. It didn't gamify wellbeing or quantify it. It simply reduced friction in daily life.
Across healthcare, beauty, and home, the signal was clear: care is no longer a niche vertical or a personal optimization project. It's becoming consumer infrastructure - embedded into environments, routines, and systems that quietly do the work for us.

This aligns with a broader shift already underway: from "aging better" to care as a baseline condition of modern life; from individual responsibility to systemic relief. At CES 2026, the most meaningful care technologies didn't ask users to try harder. They redesigned the system around them.

The Takeaway

Care is no longer about empowerment through information. It's about relief through design. The next generation of care tech won't track you - it will quietly take something off your plate.

The Physical World *Gets Its Software*

AI applied to infrastructure, materials, and physical systems at scale

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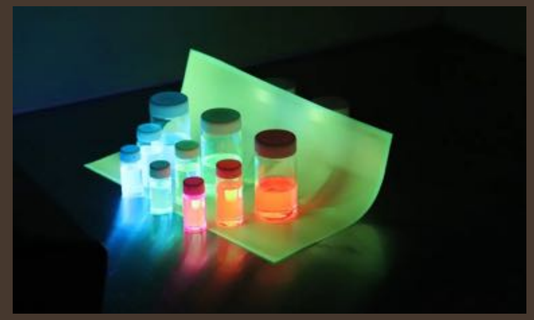
ALPON X5,
Edge AI Computer

AI Transformer Home Trailer (AI-THt)

Caterpillar, Autonomous & AI-Enabled Fleet

Perovskite, Color Conversion Film



Infrastructure, energy, logistics, manufacturing, and housing are where intelligence is being stress-tested - not in prototypes, but at scale. This was the year the “invisible layer” of the tech stack stepped into focus.

Caterpillar’s keynote crystallized this shift. By embedding AI, autonomy, and edge intelligence directly into fleets, worksites, and heavy machinery, the company reframed physical infrastructure as something that can sense, learn, and adapt in real time. Not flashy. Mission-critical.
The same logic appeared elsewhere. The AI Transformer Home Trailer treated housing as adaptive infrastructure rather than a fixed object - physically reconfiguring space on demand. ALPON X5 made enterprise-grade AI deployable at the edge, without cloud dependence, reframing intelligence as something that lives where work actually happens. Perovskite color-conversion films pushed display progress not through software, but materials science - a reminder that some of the biggest leaps ahead won’t come from code alone.

The Takeaway

The next phase of AI growth won’t be constrained by models - it will be constrained by matter. The companies that win won’t just scale intelligence. They’ll modernize the physical systems it depends on.

Restraint Becomes *a Feature*

Products that intentionally slow interaction or scaffold behavior rather than optimize it

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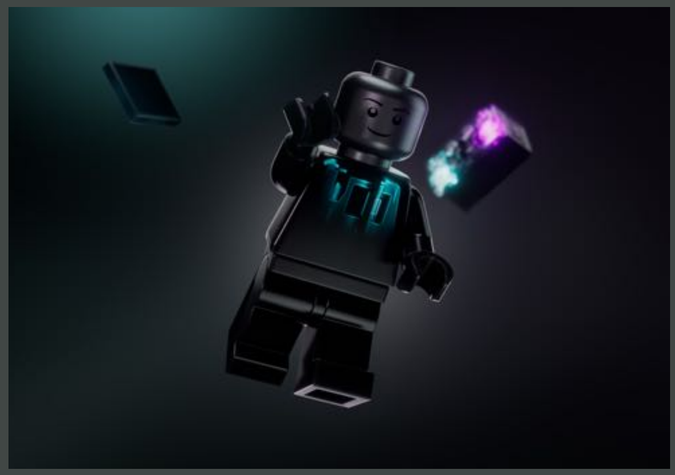
Perhaps the most telling shift at CES 2026 wasn’t technological at all. It was tonal.

After years of maximalism, more sensors, more screens, more “AI”, a quieter maturity is setting in. The most confident products no longer feel the need to prove intelligence. They demonstrate judgment.

Birdfy Hum Bloom

Toniebox 2

LEGO,
Smart Play Experiments



Birdfy Hum Bloom used AI not to capture attention, but to slow it down - turning backyard observation into discovery rather than content. Toniebox 2 doubled down on screen-free interaction, resisting dopamine loops in favor of presence and routine. Even LEGO's Smart Play experiments pointed toward intelligence that scaffolds creativity rather than directing it.

This wasn't visible fatigue so much as visible discernment. Companies are beginning to understand that adding intelligence everywhere isn't innovation. Knowing where **not** to add it is.

The Takeaway
In a world where intelligence is cheap and ubiquitous, restraint becomes premium. The most advanced products of the next decade may be the ones that know when to step back.

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Get in Touch

CES 2026 didn’t deliver a single, dominant narrative - and that may be its most honest reflection of where we are.

AI is no longer a question mark. It’s a condition. And once intelligence becomes unavoidable, progress is no longer about acceleration. It’s about alignment - between systems and people, automation and agency, capability and consequence.

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