

SPACES OF THE MIND

ARCHITECTURE THROUGH A
NEUROTYPICAL VS NEURODIVERGENT LENS



Figure 1

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ESSAY PLAN_

Written Essay Route A:

1. Introduction

- Define scope: psychological wellbeing in design.

2. The Problem of Neurotypical Architecture

- Origins: efficiency, standardisation, aesthetics.
- Limitations: overstimulation, exclusion, “designing for the average”.

3. The Alternative: Neurodivergent Architecture

- Understanding neurodivergency as a designer.
- Principles of neurodivergent architecture: sensory awareness, adaptability, inclusivity.
- Differences to neurotypical architectural design.
- Links to psychological health.

4. Case Studies

- Neurotypical architectural design in the workplace and more.
- Spaces whereby neurodivergent principles are applied in the workplace and more.

5. Implications & Future Directions

- How workplaces, education, and public spaces can evolve.
- What this shift means for architecture as a discipline.

6. Conclusion

- Manifesto.
- Critical reflection.

ABSTRACT_

This essay explores the relationship between psychological health within designed environments, focusing particularly on the workplace. It examines how design can better support neurodiversity by addressing the specific requirements and individual considerations needed to create comfortable, inclusive spaces for all minds. As awareness of mental wellbeing continues to grow, design is increasingly recognised as a vital tool for ensuring inclusivity and psychological balance. This topic is therefore both timely and essential, reflecting wider cultural shifts towards empathy, accessibility, and human-centred design.

My experience volunteering with children and young adults with diverse neurodiversities has deepened my interest in how spaces can either nurture or hinder wellbeing. Through this essay, I aim to understand what neurodivergent and neurotypical architecture looks like, specifically in the workplace, whilst exploring how individuals experience space differently and how these differences can inform design strategies and spatial organisation to design inclusive spaces for all minds alike.

The research employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating literature reviews, case study analysis, observational research, and design-led exploration. Key ideas highlight how inclusive, sensory-aware design supports neurodivergent experiences, ensuring greater comfort and productivity within working environments. Through identifying the limitations of neurotypical architectural approaches, the case studies enable a proposition for a clear way forward through empathetic, participatory design that moves beyond visual aesthetics to promote sensory balance, emotional wellbeing, and cognitive inclusivity within the built environment.

The essay argues that architecture and design must move beyond neurotypical approaches to workplace design towards a more flexible, sensory, and psychologically responsive model. The findings indicate that designing for neurodiversity not only benefits those with specific needs but enhances overall wellbeing for everyone. Ultimately, this research positions empathy as a driving force in design practice, inspiring future designers to create environments where all minds can thrive.

PREFACE

Wondering hands and curious eyes take in the room around them. Listening carefully to each sound that fills the air. Some individuals moving through the space by touching everything within reach, letting their hands explore each shape and texture as they tacitly map out the environment around them. Some stand quietly in a corner, overwhelmed by the intensity of their surroundings, their minds crowded by too many objects and too much stimulation. Some in a state of shock or temporary paralysis due to the overstimulation that fills their personal space. Others, joyfully exploring and engaging with wide eyes and an exciting energy to them. A few are fortunate enough to recognise that they process the world differently from their siblings or peers, but many move through these moments completely unaware of why they feel this way.

As I observe this room full of children with neurodivergent minds and additional needs, I am immediately drawn to the unique ways each of them navigates the space around them. I watch how they interpret their surroundings, and how they work out where and how they fit within the objects and built environment that envelop them. My work over the years with these diverse individuals has provided me with a new insight and profound understanding of how they process the world. Minds that often grow to be involved in separate special needs schools and after-school clubs, exclusive for those with similar needs and differences. Having never been directly challenged by such differences or unique needs myself, I only began to understand what it means for someone to be more or less “sensory,” or more or less stimulated by themselves or their environment, through my work and research. As my experiences with neurodivergent individuals grew and my understanding deepened, I started to notice that many of these traits are present not only in the individuals I worked with, but also, often subtly, in the neurotypical people around me, including myself. Understanding the needs of those with neurodivergent ways of thinking has also helped me better understand and support neurotypical individuals. This has sparked my interest in how designing with neurodivergent users in mind can, in turn, create environments that benefit neurotypical minds as well.

Whilst specialised and separate social activities or classroom environments may be beneficial and somewhat essential for these children’s development, sense of stability, and self-worth, there remains a significant absence of what I would describe as truly inclusive neurotypical environments, such as mainstream schools and workplaces, that are equipped to support their participation and integration. I have observed many older neurodivergent or developmentally challenged individuals experience a lack of direction, purpose or sense of responsibility.

As a result, these young adults may self-sabotage or find their professional abilities restricted, not because of their potential, but because of the absence of inclusive spaces, particularly in workplace design, that would support their participation and allow their contributions to be fully realised. This raises questions not only about architecture and interior design but about the cultural and political values embedded within them. This reflects the way in which spaces are built, through the lens of who designers imagine as the “default” user. Mainstream education, workplaces, and public institutions are still overwhelmingly shaped around neurotypical norms, norms that quietly signal who belongs, who must adapt, and whose comfort is prioritised.

I believe designing with an inclusive lens allows individuals to be less defined by their differences and instead seen, by others and by themselves, as part of a whole working alongside many different minds. This approach shifts the focus away from compensating for perceived deficits and toward expanding the idea of a collective environment in which all bodies and minds can participate without compromise. My research aims to understand how neurotypical architecture and design have been shaped, and how these approaches can be redirected through specialised strategies that support both neurodivergent and neurotypical users.

My research also explores the influence of the Taylorist approach to design, which values efficiency, standardisation, and a uniform user experience. While effective for productivity, these principles often favour neurotypical cognitive patterns and overlook diverse sensory and behavioural needs. Case studies such as The Johnson Building and Middlesex University Library illustrate how rigid spatial zoning, controlled circulation, and sensory uniformity result in environments that function efficiently yet limit inclusivity. By contrast, inclusive models such as the Zurich Google Office and the CNA Center embrace varied spatial typologies, flexible layouts, and multi-sensory comfort. These examples show how design can intentionally support a spectrum of neurological needs, reduce sensory strain, and promote autonomy, ultimately fostering environments where all users feel they belong rather than needing to adapt to neurotypical expectations. My research concludes by examining design’s wider impact on mental health and considering how future practice can evolve to create environments that genuinely prioritise cognitive diversity, emotional well-being, and equitable spatial experiences for all.



Figure 2

INTRODUCTION_

NEUROTYPICAL

“Not affected with a disorder or condition that impacts the way the brain processes information: exhibiting or characteristic of typical neurological development.”¹

NEURODIVERGENT

“Having or relating to a disorder or condition (such as autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or obsessive-compulsive disorder) that impacts the way the brain processes information: exhibiting or characteristic of variations in typical neurological development.”²

Architecture shapes one’s view the world, influencing how comfortable, focused or connected one feels within a space. DSS Architects and the Global Brain Health Institute confirm that although 40% of the population have some sensory and/or cognitive impairments³, majority of buildings are designed through a neurotypical lens, built for those with minds medically and societally considered ‘typical’.

Architecture designed with a neurodivergent user in mind, prioritises productivity and control over emotional or psychological comfort as spaces such as offices are designed for the “average” user, assuming that everyone experiences their surroundings in the same way. This often manifests in spatial uniformity which ensures efficiency but unintentionally excludes those with different cognitive or sensory needs. David Howes suggests that instead of the five detached senses, humans have thirty systems of sensing and psychologists are only beginning to understand these complex functions in terms of mediating one’s relationship with the environment.⁴

Neurodivergent individuals, such as those with autism, ADHD, or dyslexia, experience and interpret space differently, often finding environments shaped through a neurotypical design lens fail to meet their sensory and cognitive needs. By defining neurotypical architecture and then reinterpreting space through a neurodivergent lens, this research essay moves from conventional thinking towards a more holistic and empathetic understanding of architecture, valuing psychological wellbeing as much as visual appeal.

This essay explores sensory segmentation as a framework for spatial design, where sensory experience shapes function and atmosphere. By tuning environments to individual sensory needs, the design promotes inclusion and comfort, setting the groundwork for spaces that respond empathetically to neurodiverse patterns of perception and engagement.

Ben Channon argues that architecture is not simply about aesthetics or form but profoundly affects the way people feel, noting “we spend more than 80% of our time in buildings... and these buildings can affect our mood both positively and negatively”⁵. This illuminates how the environment in which one works or lives, including one’s access to nature, personal space, air ventilation and isolation or community deeply influence mood and health.⁶ Channon expresses that if one is uncomfortable, one is less likely to want to engage with oneself, tending to switch off from the physical world and this can have serious affects on one’s mental wellbeing. A literature review reports that numerous benefits of mindful engagement are shown to reduce anxiety and improve ADHD symptoms and wellbeing.⁷ This perspective underlines how psychological effects are often overlooked or deprioritised in architectural practice; emotions, security, and identity are not abstract experiences but are inherently shaped by material and spatial choices, demanding more deliberate design consideration for direct improvement of mental and psychological wellbeing.

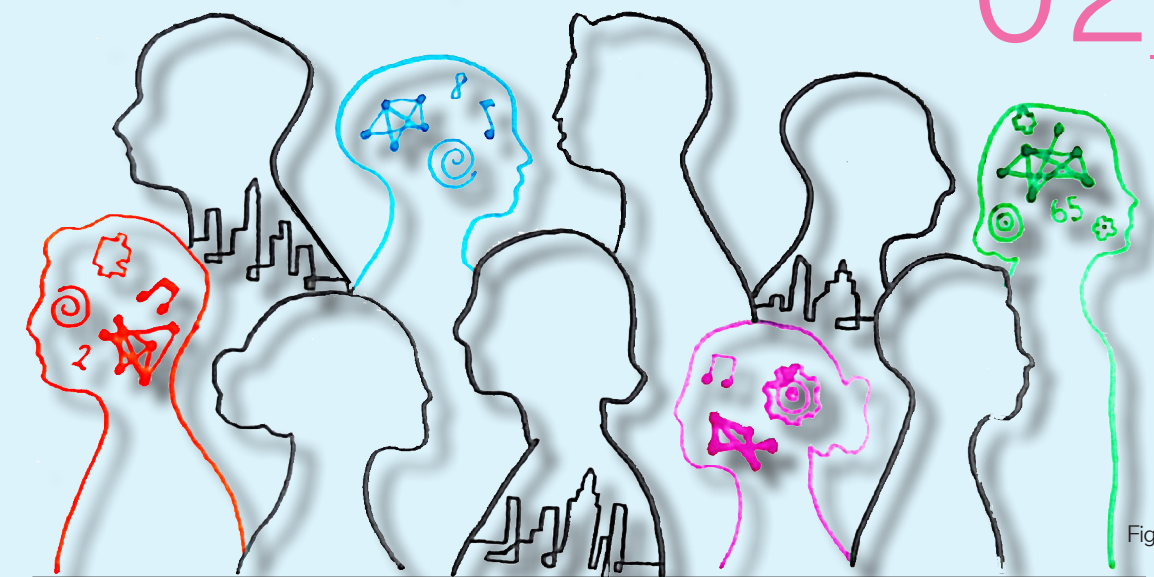


Figure 3

¹ Merriam-Webster. 2024. “Merriam-Webster Dictionary.” Merriam-Webster.com. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neurotypical>.

² Merriam-Webster. 2024. “Merriam-Webster Dictionary.” Merriam-Webster.com. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neurodivergent>.

³ Bamford, Lydia. 2022. “The Importance of Inclusive Design.” Planning, Building & Construction Today. Available at: <https://www.pbctoday.co.uk/news/planning-construction-news/the-importance-of-inclusive-design-in-the-built-environment/119625/>.

⁴ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. *The Eyes of the Skin*

⁵ Channon, Ben. 2018. *Happy by Design: A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing*. London: Riba Publishing. Page 10 Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mdx/reader.action?docID=5806917&c=RVBVQg&ppg=47>

⁶ Channon expresses how “research into the psychology of mess has now shown a direct link between untidiness and stress”, reinforcing how emotional responses are shaped by our surroundings. Channon, Ben. 2018. *Happy by Design: A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing*. London: Riba Publishing. Page 10 Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mdx/reader.action?docID=5806917&c=RVBVQg&ppg=47>

⁷ Channon, Ben. 2018. *Happy by Design: A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing*. London: Riba Publishing. Page 19 Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mdx/reader.action?docID=5806917&c=RVBVQg&ppg=47>

Traditional neurotypical architecture is designed with an “average” user in mind, assuming that everyone experiences a space in the same way. While it focuses on functionality, efficiency and aesthetic uniformity, it can often overlook the needs of people who process environments differently. Rooted in early industrial and modernist thinking, it prioritised order, efficiency, and standardisation over psychological or sensory diversity, often viewing buildings as systems of productivity, functional and visually coherent, yet often indifferent to those who perceive and process environments differently. Annie Gingell notes in *The Planner*, that the historic fixation on standardisation, noting that the built environment has long been designed “for the hypothetical average person - who, in reality, does not exist.”⁸

Additionally, *The Planner* records an estimation in 2025 that around 15–20% of the population are neurodivergent,⁹ with 20% of UK entrepreneurs having dyslexia (2024),¹⁰ as well as mentioned before, DSS Architects and the Global Brain Health Institute confirming in 2022 that around 40% of the population have some sort of sensory and/or cognitive impairments.¹¹ Yet despite these significant statistics as well as the built environment continues to be shaped largely by neurotypical assumptions. Consequently, spaces can be overstimulating through bright lighting, echoing acoustics, or intense colours, or understimulating, causing discomfort or disengagement. Such noisy, visually complex, and unpredictable environments may trigger sensory overload and disorientation, affecting mental wellbeing and limiting participation, autonomy, and inclusion in daily community life.

By reinterpreting existing spaces through a neurodivergent lens and applying design approaches grounded in sensory zoning, visual hierarchy, and flexible use, designers can move from conventional design thinking towards environments that support cognitive diversity, wellbeing, and inclusion, emphasising that good design depends on whose perception defines it.

⁸ Gingell, Annie. 2025. *Designing Neurodiversity: Why It Matters and How to Do It*. *The Planner*. Available at: <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2025/08/28/designing-neurodiversity-why-it-matters-and-how-do-it>

⁹ Gingell, Annie. 2025. *Designing Neurodiversity: Why It Matters and How to Do It*. *The Planner*. Available at: <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2025/08/28/designing-neurodiversity-why-it-matters-and-how-do-it>

¹⁰ IPSE. 2024. “Neurodiversity and self-employment”. IPSE. 2024. <https://www.ipse.co.uk/advice/neurodiversity-and-self-employment>.

¹¹ Bamford, Lydia. 2022. “The Importance of Inclusive Design.” *Planning, Building & Construction Today*. Available at: <https://www.pbctoday.co.uk/news/planning-construction-news/the-importance-of-inclusive-design-in-the-built-environment/119625/>.

THE NEUROTYPICAL WORKPLACE



Figures 5,6

Neurotypical workplace design, rooted in Modernist principles of standardisation, efficiency and Taylorist approaches to productivity, often manifests in hot-desking and open-plan layouts which have been commonly critiqued to have strong psychological impacts on employees. Hot-desking was first popularised in the 1990s to save space and reduce costs, it has become increasingly relevant today due to the rise of hybrid work.¹² Architectural firm Gensler reported that around 10% of U.S. knowledge workers worked in this type of setup. Companies have adopted ‘hoteling’ or hot-desking which forces employees to “scramble for spots like kids in a school cafeteria”¹³, rather than providing assigned workspaces, creating a sense of detachment whilst undermining personal identity and sense of inclusion in the workplace. High exposure to loud noise, visual distractions, and fluctuating environments can lead to sensory overload, particularly for neurodivergent individuals, highlighting the limitations of standardised, one-size-fits-all approach to workplace ergonomics.

Furthermore, the lack of personal control over one’s workspace reduces autonomy, negatively affecting motivation and job satisfaction. While open-plan layouts are often intended to promote equality and community, they often reinforce hierarchical scrutiny and social pressure instead, limiting creativity and self-expression. Neurotypical designs such as these prioritise efficiency and uniformity, frequently overlooking the diverse sensory, cognitive, and emotional needs of employees.

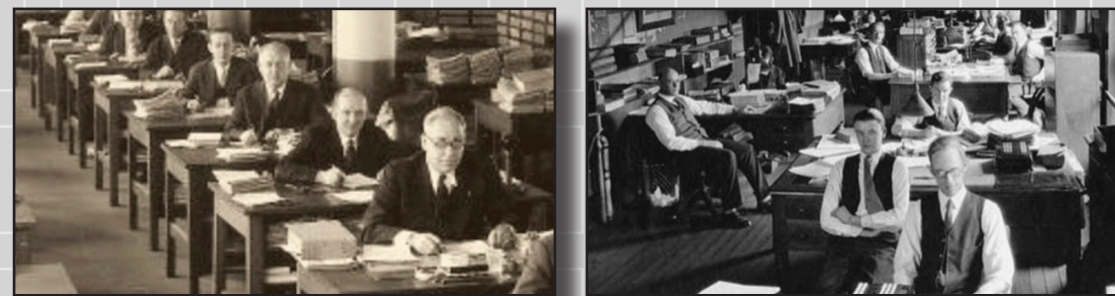
¹² Brue, Melody. 2023. “New Desk, Who Dis? Hot Desking and the Hybrid Workplace.” Forbes. 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2023/04/28/new-desk-who-dis-hot-desking-and-the-hybrid-workplace/>.

¹³ Musser, George. 2023. Fixing the Hated Open-Design Office. Scientific American. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fixing-the-hated-open-design-office/>.

TAYLORISM

The origins of neurotypical architecture can be traced back to the early 20th century and the rise of ‘Taylorism’. WORKTECH Academy explains the Taylorist model as a ‘scientific management’, viewing the workplace as a machine for optimal efficiency and work production¹⁴. Office layouts mirrored factory assembly lines, with rows of desks arranged in rigid, grid-like formations to allow maximum visibility and control for the supervisor but with little regard for human comfort or psychological wellbeing. As Juhani Pallasmaa words it: “Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless.”¹⁵

This design thinking valued order, predictability, and productivity, relevant to the ‘typical’ worker capable of functioning in uniform and fixed conditions. Focusing on standardisation often overlooked sensory variation, emotional comfort, and cognitive difference. As Christopher Alexander argues, the Modernist approach “prioritised innovation, abstraction, and mechanistic efficiency at the expense of human-centred and organic values.”¹⁶ The early office is a physical expression of these neurotypical design principles: structured, rational, and efficient, yet largely indifferent to the diverse psychological and sensory needs of its users. This legacy continues to shape contemporary workplaces, where the pursuit of efficiency and visual order frequently takes precedence over inclusivity and psychological wellbeing.



Figures 7,8

¹⁴ Adriane. 2023. Charting the evolution of office design to Workplace 3.0 - WORKTECH Academy. WORKTECH Academy. Available at: <https://www.worktechacademy.com/charting-the-evolution-of-office-design-to-workplace-3-0/>

¹⁵ Pallasmaa, J. (1996). The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley.

¹⁶ Jiang, Bin. 2024. “The Status Quo of Architecture and Its Impact on Urban Management: Christopher Alexander’s Insights.” Journal of Urban Management. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jum.2024.09.003>.

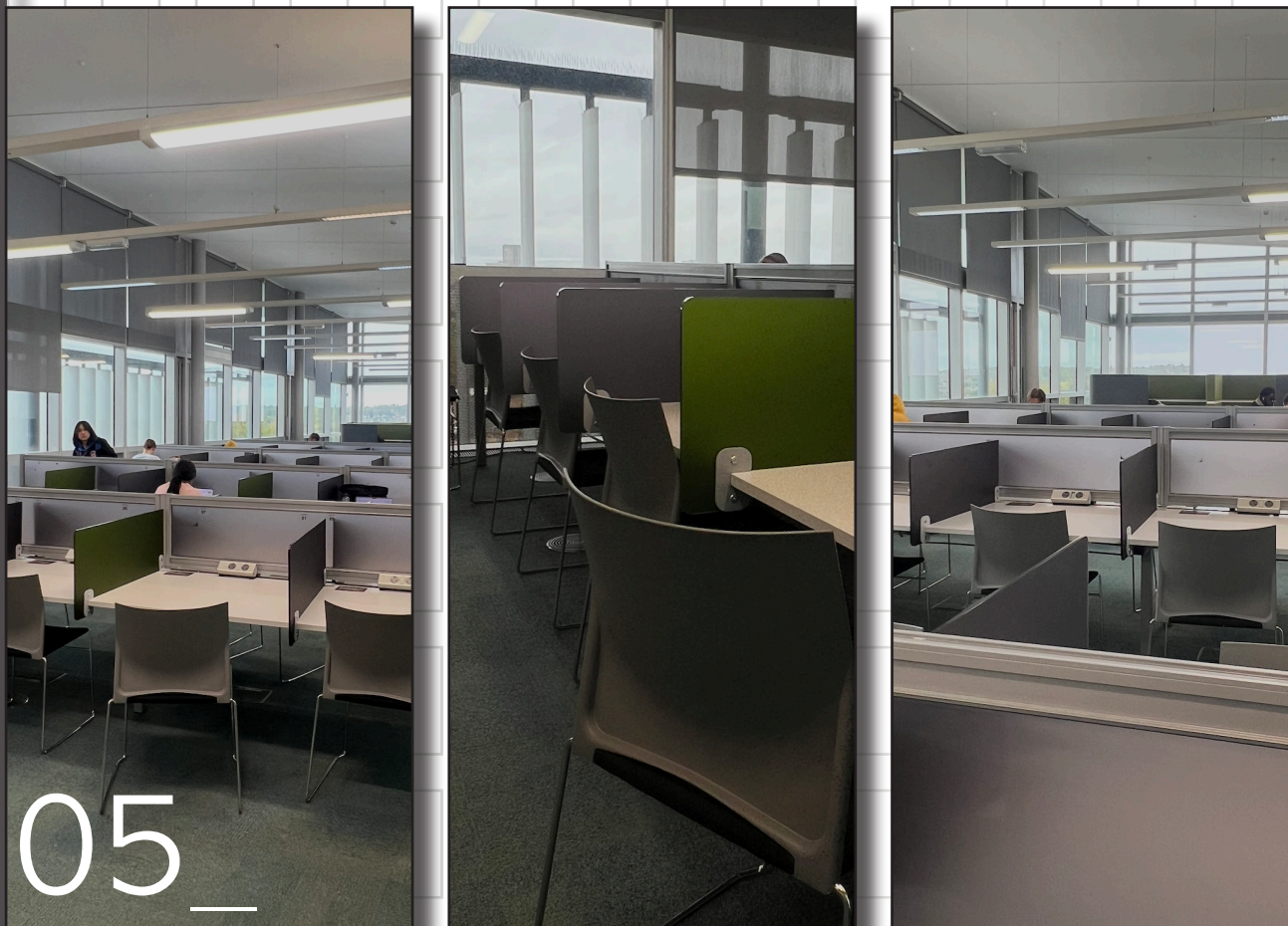
UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Primary research at the University's library shows an exemplification of a neurotypical approach to spatial design in a working environment that reflects a one-size-fits-all mentality that fails to account for diverse cognitive and sensory needs. With its grid-like rows of desks, uniform artificial lighting and partitioned study areas intended to promote silence and concentration.

Whilst this layout may effectively support students that thrive in structured, low-stimulation, controlled spaces, it neglects those who require more sensory variation or spatial flexibility to focus and feel comfortable. For neurodivergent students, the rigid organisation and lack of adaptability can heighten discomfort, reduce engagement, and limit the ability to self-regulate attention.

This illustrates how educational environments shaped through a neurotypical lens risk prioritising productivity over psychological inclusivity and the holistic needs of their users.

Figures 9-11



THE JOHNSON BUILDING

The Frank Lloyd Wright Johnson Wax HQ was completed in 1936/1939 in Racine, Wisconsin. It provided the main office for SC Johnson & Son, an American manufacturer of household cleaning supplies. It embodies a distinctly Taylorist, neurotypical approach to workplace design, prioritising efficiency, order, and control over sensory diversity or individual comfort.

Wright's use of skylights instead of facade glazing ensured "you catch no sense of enclosure whatever, at any angle, top or sides"¹⁷, directing and controlling focus within the space. Its rational open-plan layout, clear circulation routes, and visual transparency through glass facades and atrium spaces reflect the pursuit of productivity and managerial oversight. Curved mezzanine floors extend from the central core, overlooking the main office space, reflecting Taylorist efficiency, modernist clarity, and a neurotypical spatial hierarchy.

While the building delivers a coherent, efficient environment, it exemplifies how modern offices can privilege uniformity and visual openness over inclusivity, overlooking the varied sensory and cognitive needs of neurodivergent individuals.

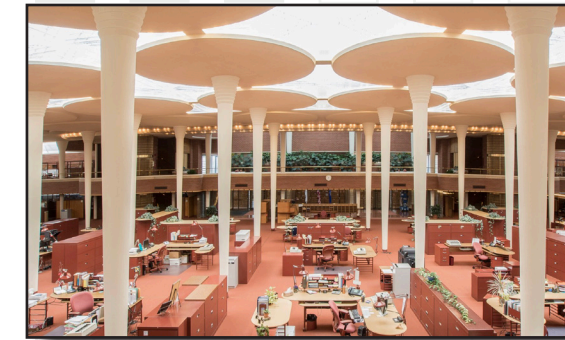


Figure 12

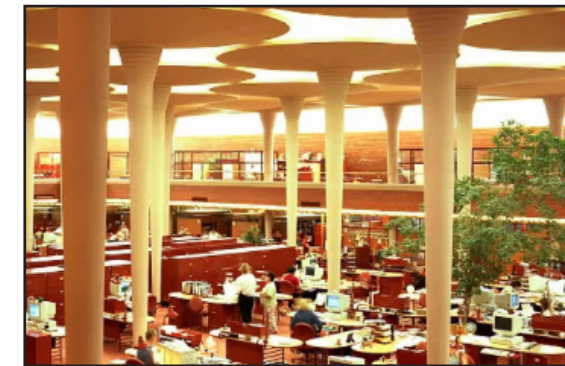


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

¹⁷ Gibson, Eleanor. 2017. "Frank Lloyd Wright Designed the Johnson Wax Offices like a Forest Open to the Sky." Dezeen. Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/06/14/frank-lloyd-wright-johnson-wax-administration-building-headquarters-racine-wisconsin-open-plan-office/>.

To design spaces inclusive of neurodivergent minds, it is vital to first understand their distinctive needs. This familiarity establishes clear criteria for the design process. Autism, for instance, involves various complex accommodations and requirements in how individuals function and interact with their surroundings. Theo Peeters explains that people with autism have a different cognitive style.¹⁸ Environmental psychology equips designers to understand the human connection to space. Grasping perception, the process by which humans interpret sensory input, is essential. Daily environments generate far more stimuli than the brain can process at once, so it selectively attends to certain inputs. By perceiving and processing environmental information, humans can better orient themselves, develop strategies to meet their needs and goals, and cultivate confidence and security within a space.¹⁹ These insights rely on designers considering how individuals respond to sensory aspects of the built environment.

Research in autism-friendly architecture by Tola et al. found that sensory quality, intelligibility, and predictability are “three main factors to be considered”²⁰ in design, each having specific spatial requirements tied to sensory and perceptual processing differences. Features such as controlling sensory stimuli, reducing ambiguity in spatial layout, and providing wayfinding cues to reduce disorientation, mark clear departures from more conventional architectural norms that assume a neurotypical occupant who can adapt to standardised environments. Finnigan examined neurodivergent perceptions of outdoor environments, finding that both hyper- and hyposensitivity strongly shape experiences. Elements such as ambient noise, lighting, materials, echoes and spatial layout determine whether a space feels soothing or overwhelming. Autism Housing Pathways similarly emphasises that many standard housing designs are a poor fit for neurodivergents due to sensory mismatches,²¹ identifying many irritants and proposing design goals such as safety, familiarity, stability, sensory control, privacy, and wellbeing, closely aligning with Finnigan’s respondents’ experiences.

¹⁸ Cognition being a method of obtaining an understanding through interpreting information acquired through the senses. Turner, Jonathan. 2020. Neurodiversity in Architecture: Confronting the Agency of Autism Within the Built Environment. University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture
¹⁹ Cassidy, Mary Kate. 2018. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Architecture for Autism. University of Cincinnati. Available at: http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1525170488990925
²⁰ Tola, Giulia, Valentina Talu, Tanja Congiu, Paul Bain, and Jutta Lindert. 2021. Built Environment Design and People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A Scoping Review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18063203>.
²¹ Finnigan, Kathryn. 2024. Sensory Responsive Environments: A Qualitative Study on Perceived Relationships between Outdoor Built Environments and Sensory Sensitivities. Land 13 (5): 636–36. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/land13050636>.

On average, neurotypicals receive more than 11 million pieces of sensory information every second. Consciously, humans are only able to process about 50 pieces of information, resulting in the vast majority of the irrelevant information being filtered out so one can focus their energy and brainpower onto the relevant stimuli.²² With the increasing explosion of stimuli through media and external chaos, the human mind is being forced to be more multimodal. Psychologist James Gibson summarises how the senses are ‘aggressively seeking mechanisms rather than passive receivers’.²³

Neurodivergent minds exist on a spectrum from hyposensitive, with under-responsive reactions to sensory stimuli, to hypersensitive, with over-responsive ones. Hyposensitive individuals often seek heightened stimulation to process information effectively, while hypersensitive individuals prefer controlled environments, as their minds amplify sensory input. This sensitivity can make bright lights, crowds, or unfamiliar scents, textures, and temperature changes uncomfortable.

Sensory avoidance stems from being in an overly active or stimulating space with unpredictable, chaotic or confusing spaces presenting deep struggles for their sensory processing.²⁴ Individuals with autism are known to have acute sensory preferences involving both hyposensitivities and hypersensitivities, resulting in difficulty processing and filtering environmental stimuli as the Interactive Autism network described “the streaks of light coming through the window blinds may be mesmerising, whilst the low hum of the heater may be unbearably irritating.”²⁵

²² Markowsky, George. 2019. Information Theory - Physiology | Britannica. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/science/information-theory/Physiology>.
²³ Pallasmaa, J. (1996). The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley.
²⁴ Autism Housing Pathways. 2025. Autism Housing Pathways. August 27, 2025. Available at: <https://autismhousingpathways.org/>
²⁵ Interactive Autism Network (IAN) Research Project Archive. 2019. Kennedy Krieger Institute. Available at: https://iancommunity.org/cs/what_do_we_know/sensory_based_therapies.

NEURODIVERGENT ARCHITECTURE

Neurodivergent architecture should cover all neurodivergent diagnoses, enabling flexibility and choice within the built environment, providing spaces for work, collaboration, rest, and sensory processing regulation. Including features such as lighting, acoustics, colour, touch and clear circulation routes, these designs ensure inclusion and health. “Neurodiversity challenges the traditional medical model, which often frames neurodivergence as a disorder. Instead, it aligns with the social model of disability, emphasising inclusion, accessibility, and the importance of designing environments that accommodate diverse ways of thinking and experiencing the world”²⁶.

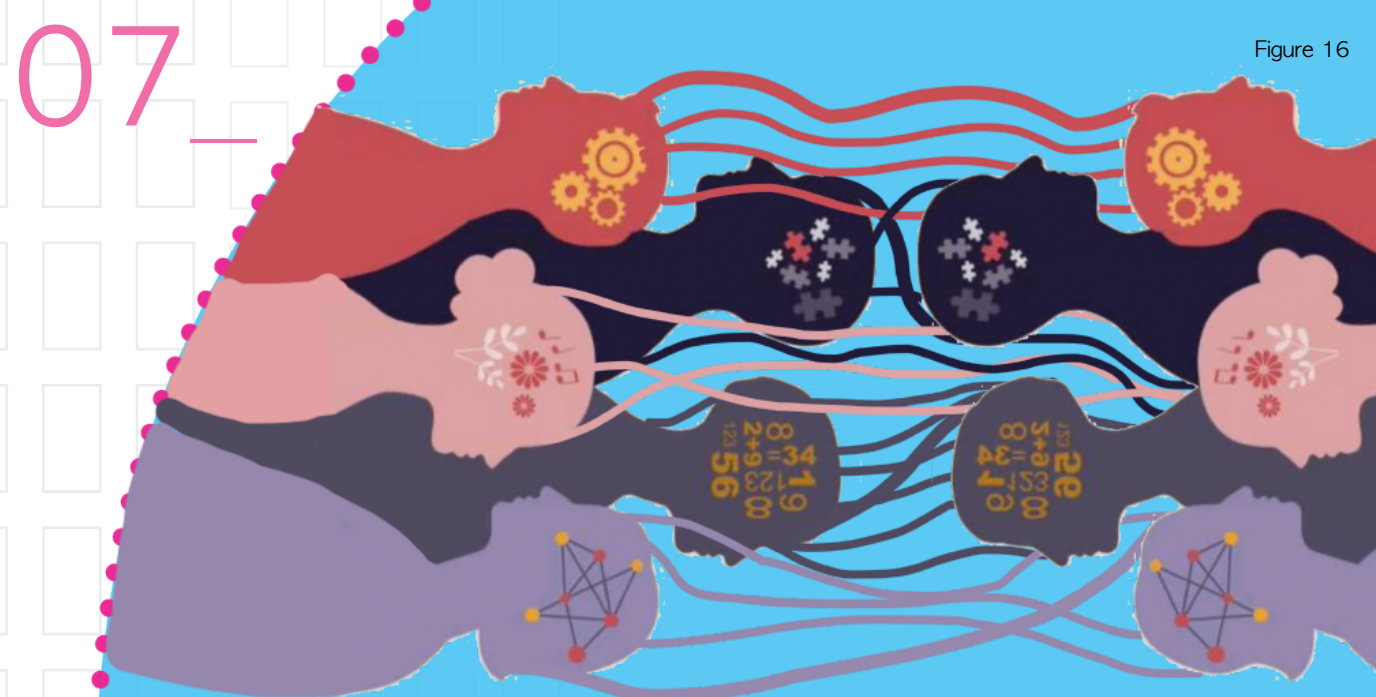
Many neurodivergent spaces move beyond the “average” human experience, emphasising natural features, non-intrusive materials, and areas for both calm and stimulation. This approach treats difference as an asset, creating clear, independent, choice-rich environments that support diverse needs and behaviours, in contrast to the reductive “one-size-fits-all” neurotypical model. Noting success not by conformity but by its ability to support diverse ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling within a space, architecturally valuing both ethics and aesthetics.²⁷

Studies summarise that “‘neurodiversity’ describes the infinite, natural variation of neurocognitive functioning in human minds... ‘neurodivergent’ refers to those who differ from societally perceived norms.”²⁸ Central to this perspective is the understanding that disability is not solely an intrinsic condition but a relational one: “societal factors can contextually disable neurodivergent people due to a mismatch between their differences and any given expectations.” This reframes the issue, shifting attention away from “fixing” the individual and towards adapting environments to support and celebrate diverse ways of thinking and being.²⁹ ArchDaily argues that “neurotypical spaces often privilege visual dominance, open-plan efficiency and aesthetic minimalism,”³⁰ producing environments that feel chaotic or unregulated by others. They propose an alternative spatial ethic centred on “choice, control and refuge” - principles that recognise perception as dynamic and subjective.

²⁶ Bas, Ayse Humeysra. 2025. A Neurodivergent Architect’s Journey: Rethinking Housing Performance in the UK. Housing Studies Association. Quotation: Oliver, M. (1990). The Politics of Disablement. Macmillan. Available at: <https://www.housing-studies-association.org/articles/a-neurodivergent-architect-s-journey-rethinking-housing-performance-in-the-uk>.

²⁷ Rather than being a clinical issue, architects agree there is an architectural responsibility to support cognitive and sensory diversity. Many argue that “...our environments are designed around efficiency and uniformity, not around experience,” reflecting a distinctly neurotypical paradigm in which design is guided by assumed norms of comfort and behaviour.

KSS Architects. 2024. Guiding Principles to Design for Neurodiversity | KSS Architects. Available at: <https://kssarchitects.com/journal/guiding-principles-to-design-for-neurodiversity/>



One’s sense of self is shaped through interaction with architecture, which acts as “an extension of nature into the human-made realm.” Every encounter is multi-sensory, with place, material, and scale perceived through eyes, ears, skin, and muscles. As Graham Sutherland notes, “in a sense the landscape (the painter) must almost look at the landscape as if it were himself.”³¹ Neurodivergent spaces must internalise context and function, experiencing the building as a body, and be designed with care and empathy rather than standardised form. Kay Sargent portrays how “many people are out of touch with sensory stimulation because we’ve learned to mask and suffer through environments we can’t control... Our philosophy is ‘when we design for the extreme, we benefit the mean.’”³² This framing situates neurodivergent architecture within a critique of modernism’s pursuit of visual order and efficiency, suggesting that truly inclusive design engages all senses rather than suppressing them.

²⁸ Shaw, S.C.K., Brown, M.E.L., Jain, N.R., George, R.E., Bernard, S., Godfrey-Harris, M. and Doherty, M. 2024. When I say... neurodiversity paradigm. Medical Education. Quotation: Dwyer, Patrick. 2022. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.15565>.

²⁹ Hames Sharley’s landmark publication on designing for neurodivergent individuals, The Designed Environment, explains that nearly all typologies of architecture maintain the cognitive preferences of neurotypical designers and clients. This is not intentional, but rather embedded in norms. Examples are designs which assume constant alertness, consider circulation as time efficient connections, and use materials to create visual uniformity across spaces. The paper argues that neurodivergent design signals a “philosophical shift from optimisation to accommodation,” where the aim is not to perfect the environment but to make it more legible, forgiving, and responsive. Conceptually, the authors connect this shift to broader human-centred design principles, framing neurodiversity as their most progressive and inclusive development.

Uylaki, Taliya and Duric, Sonja. 2023. The Designed Environment: A Neurotypical and Neurodiverse Perspective. Hames Sharley. Available at: <https://www.hamessharley.com.au/knowledge/the-designed-environment>.

³⁰, Ankitha. 2025. Architecture for Neurodiversity: Designing for Control, Choice, and the Senses. ArchDaily. Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/1027772/architecture-for-neurodiversity-designing-for-control-choice-and-the-senses>

³¹ Pallasmaa, J. (1996). The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley. Quotation: Graham Sutherland

³² Gattupalli, Ankitha. 2025. Architecture for Neurodiversity: Designing for Control, Choice, and the Senses. ArchDaily. Quotation: Kay Sargent - global co-director of HoK’s workplace team. Available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/1027772/architecture-for-neurodiversity-designing-for-control-choice-and-the-senses>

THE NEURODIVERGENT WORKPLACE

Historically, workplace design prioritised productivity, efficiency, and control, often serving neurotypical users while overlooking cognitive diversity. Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax HQ, for example, used natural light, early air conditioning, and metal furniture to improve comfort, yet reinforced a standardised "average" worker model. Elevated offices promoted managerial oversight, encouraging efficiency but standardising work habits and neglecting individual sensory and psychological needs.

Contemporary workplace design now focuses on wellbeing, creativity, and inclusivity. Modern offices accommodate diverse sensory preferences while fostering communication, adaptability, and team identity. Psychologist Janetta Mitchell McCoy highlights the importance of spatial variety to support different work patterns. Companies like Steelcase provide flexible configurations for every stage of the creative process. Their 'Respite Rooms' offer quiet reflection, while 'Focus' and 'Duo Studios' balance individual concentration with collaborative work, creating environments that respect both neurodivergent and neurotypical needs.

Research was held to determine the ideal workplace for all employees, including those with autism. Understanding every individual has different spatial preferences that influence their efficiency, productivity, and well-being, they found employees with autism require specificity and diversity in design, considerations that aid all employees. As no single space can accommodate everyone perfectly, a variety of environments are essential to create a successful workplace. The effectiveness of these spaces were assessed through the sensory responses they elicit across a broad range of users. The design study begins at a personal scale and expands to a proposal for the building as a whole³³.

BBC CAPE *creating a positive environment*

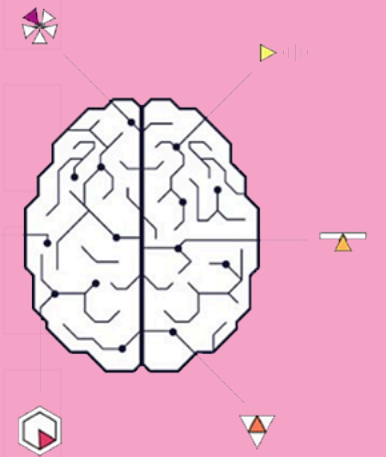


Figure 17

The BBC's 'Creating a Positive Environment' neurodiversity initiative enabled neurotypical staff to experience the challenges of working with a neurodivergent mind in a typical office.³⁴ This allowed employers to modify the workplace, making it more comfortable and easier for neurodivergent staff to contribute. Strategies included pairing employees with in-house mentors and conducting awareness training for neurotypical staff. Measures such as reducing lighting, providing supportive software, noise-cancelling headphones, and allowing breaks throughout the day have benefited both neurodivergent individuals and the companies.³⁵

A study was held in 2022³⁶ that found neurodivergent minds, specifically those with autism or ADHD, are twice as likely to have joint hypermobility syndrome which results in extreme flexibility and pain. Designing workspaces that support more physical comfort allow these employees to experience less pain and stress and therefore be able to produce a higher quantity and quality of work.

³³ Cassidy, Mary Kate. 2018. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Architecture for Autism. University of Cincinnati. Available at: http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1525170488990925

³⁴ BBC. 2020. BBC CAPE. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/neurodiversity>.

³⁵ The U.S. Job Accommodation Network reported most of the adjustments are free to implement or cost around \$300 for the rest, concluding these accommodations are a relatively low-cost investment for potentially great results, with the changes benefiting all employees, not just neurodivergent staff. Some workplaces have noted that allowing neurodivergent employees a space where they know is quiet or they can adjust the lighting to better suit them encourages awareness for all staff members as well as creating a diverse workspace whereby everyone is comfortable and able to contribute successfully.

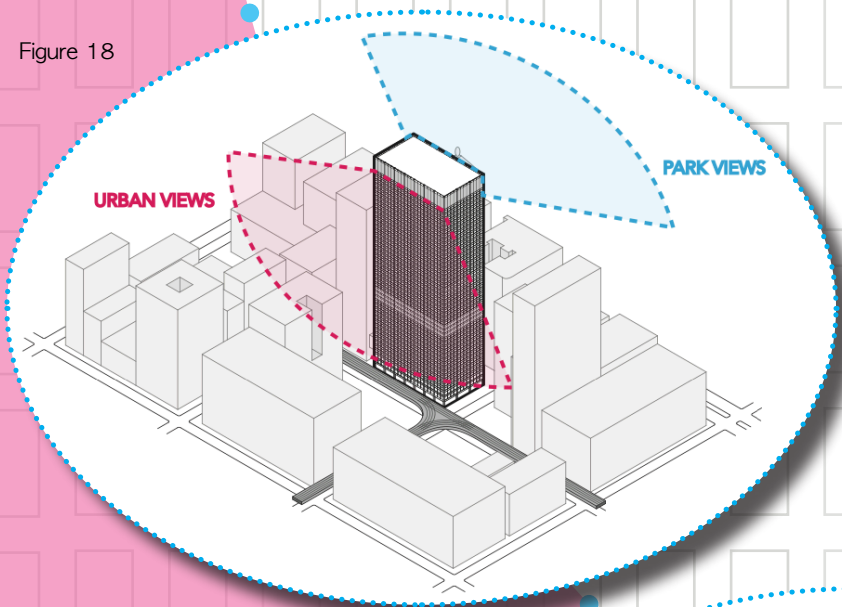
Sarraf, Mohammad. 2024. Urban Form for Autism : The Role of Architectural Design in the Social Life of Autistic Individuals. DIVA. Available at: <https://ri.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1930426/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

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CNA CENTER

The site is situated at the corner of South Wabash Avenue and East Van Buren Street, offering an interesting contrast in views from within the building. The east side overlooks Grant Park and Lake Michigan, providing a natural, calming environment, particularly beneficial for employees who are hypersensitive. In contrast, the west side faces the dense urban landscape of downtown Chicago, offering a more chaotic visual experience, which may be better suited for employees at the hyposensitive end of the sensory spectrum.³⁷ Given that the building offers views of contrasting sensory environments, its architecture should respond accordingly. The form and programme should be organised to reflect the sensory characteristics of interior spaces in relation to exterior conditions.

Figure 18



08

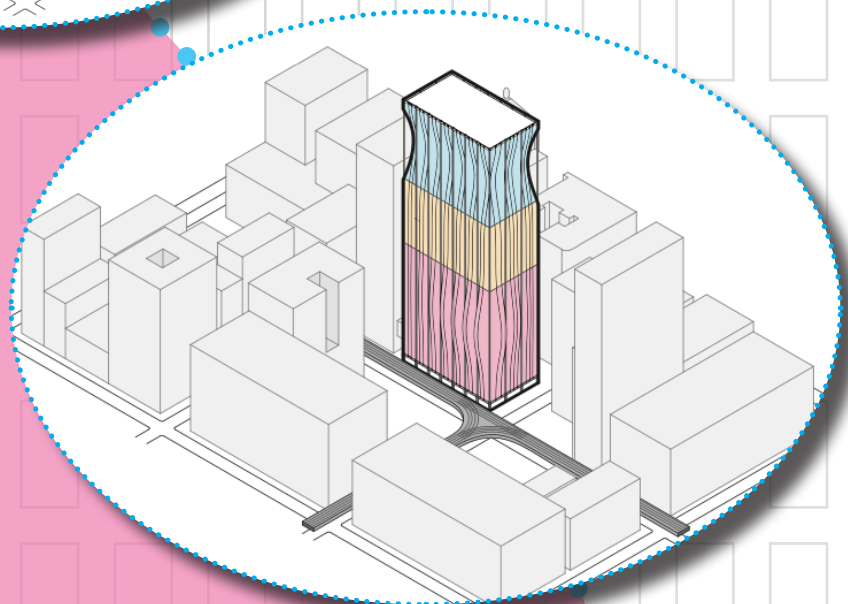


Figure 19

HYPERSENSITIVE

INTERFERENCE

HYPOSENSITIVE

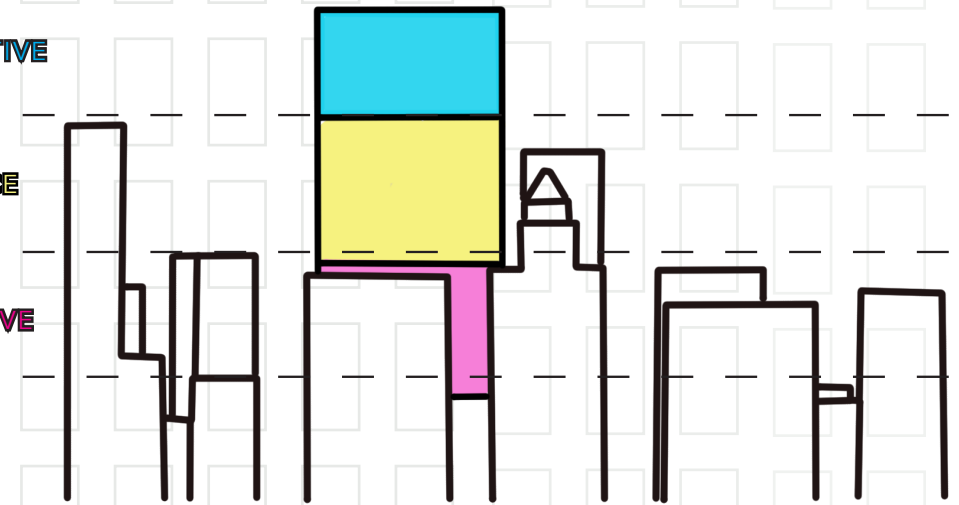


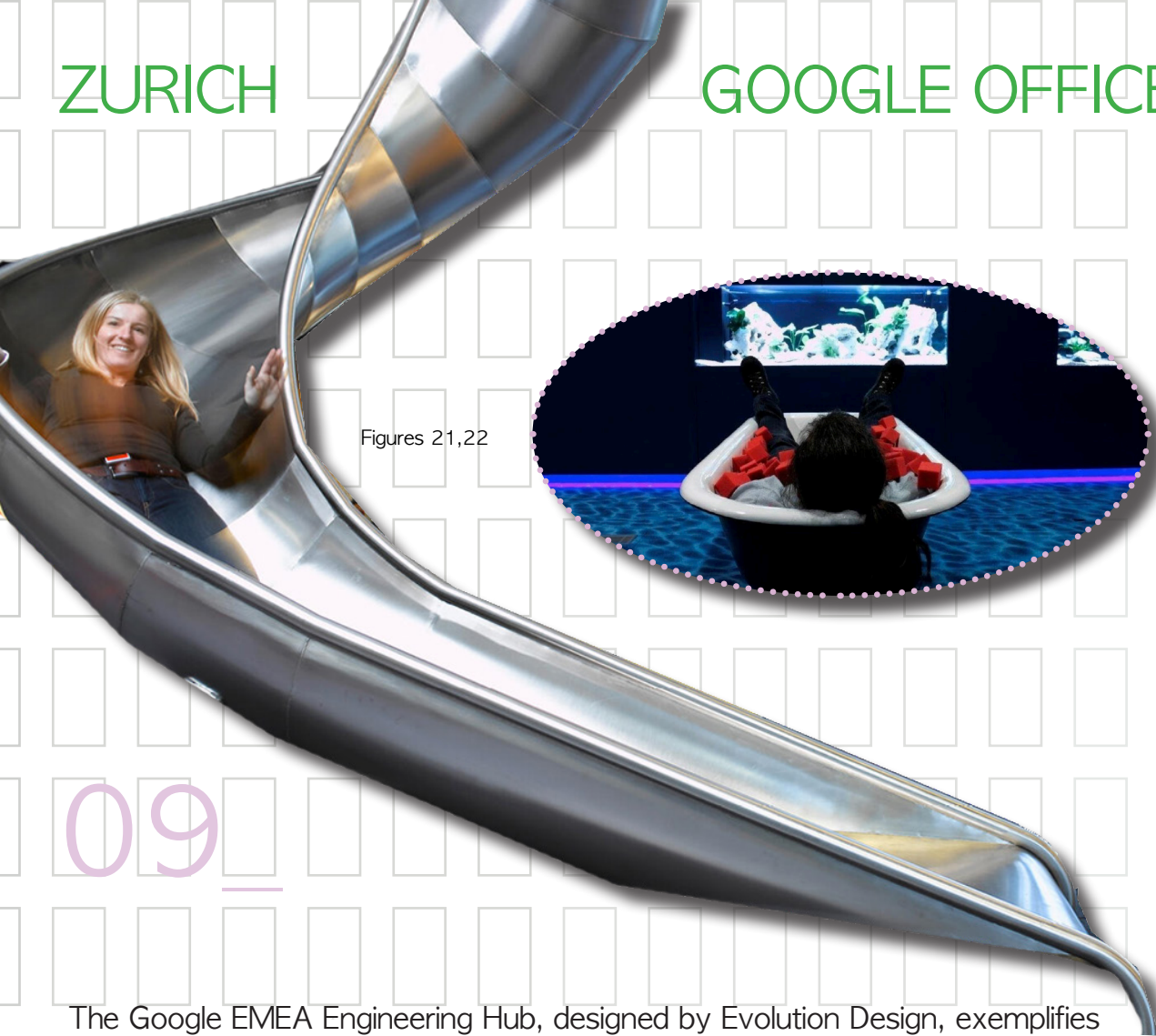
Figure 20: Building sections showing: top level for hypersensitive workers (quiet, calm views), middle for mixed-interference zones, and bottom for hyposensitive workers (stimulating street-level environment).

The lower levels receive significant visual and auditory stimuli, making them most suitable for hyposensitive employees. The middle levels, partially enclosed by buildings, offer moderate sensory input and suit employees within the interference range of the spectrum. The top levels, set apart from surrounding structures with unobstructed views of Grant Park and Lake Michigan, provide the quietest, least visually distracting environment, ideal for hypersensitive employees.

This sensitivity to varying sensory conditions aligns with Paul Rodaway's argument that spatial experience is fundamentally multisensory and embodied, shaped by how individuals perceive and process their environment through all senses rather than vision alone. He calls for a "return to the senses," recognising that touch, smell, hearing, and sight actively shape how we experience place. "The senses are not merely passive receptors... but actively involved in the structuring of information," he writes, positioning the sensuous as "the ground base on which a wider geographical understanding can be constructed." For Rodaway, "sight paints a picture of life, but sound, touch, taste and smell are actually life itself," reminding designers that true spatial experience is embodied, emotional, and multisensory.³⁸ By recognising a multisensory understanding of space, designers can move beyond visual uniformity to create environments that respond empathetically to varying sensory thresholds, ensuring architecture supports both neurodivergent and neurotypical experiences.

³⁷ Cassidy, Mary Kate. 2018. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Architecture for Autism. University of Cincinnati. Available at: http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1525170488990925

³⁸ Rodaway, Paul. 2002. Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place. Routledge.



Figures 21,22



09

The Google EMEA Engineering Hub, designed by Evolution Design, exemplifies a pioneering approach to a neurodivergent workplace, blending functionality with creativity. Designed by a diverse team of employees and architects, the space transforms the ‘typical’ office into a vibrant environment that reflects Google’s culture and values, ensuring every element resonates with its users’ needs and identities. Innovative features include Swiss alpine gondolas repurposed as meeting pods, ‘egg’ booths for private calls, a jungle lounge for focused work and a water lounge with loungers and a bathtub for relaxation³⁹.

A striking feature is the slide connecting office floors to the restaurant below, symbolising the company’s commitment to fun and creativity in the workplace. This design not only ensures collaboration and innovation but also integrates elements of local culture, creating a unique, engaging environment for its diverse workforce. Creative director Tanya Ruegg encourages: “It’s OK to be a little crazy with the design approach in... the workspaces. Don’t go for average, you need to create an atmosphere that gives people the opportunity to have a break, recharge and refocus.”⁴⁰

Setting a new tone for workspaces, this design moves beyond traditional neurotypical layouts, like Taylorist arrangements of rigid desks with little regard for wellbeing. It introduces communal and informal areas with playful features to support varied cognitive needs. Biophilic and sensory elements, natural materials, adaptable lighting, and tactile surfaces, enhance focus, creativity, and psychological comfort.

By challenging standardised, dehumanising layouts, the design demonstrates how architecture can provide inclusive, collaborative spaces that promote belonging for both neurotypical and neurodivergent employees.



Figures 23,24

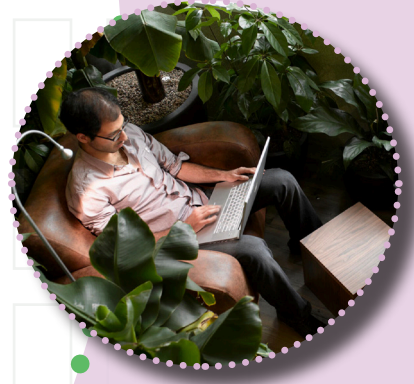


Figure 25

³⁹ Evolution Design. 2022. Google Zurich. Available at: <https://www.evolution-design.info/all-projects/commercial/google-zurich>
⁴⁰ Evolution Design. 2022. Google Zurich. Quotation: Tanya Ruegg. Available at: <https://www.evolution-design.info/all-projects/commercial/google-zurich>

EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

An installation at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture explored designing for the wellbeing of autistic students in higher education. Many students with autism reported a need for greater awareness of autism, more sensory recharging spaces, and wider acceptance of self-stimulatory behaviour.

Correlating with research findings that architecture can improve the attention span, behavioral temperament, and response time of those with autism. Sensory stimulation can calm them down when factors such as acoustics, lighting, and tactile aspects are considered⁴¹.



Figure 26



Figure 28

This installation engages all the senses to create an enjoyable space for everyone, specifically designed for students with autism to recharge. Encouraging interaction and sensory stimulation, it features elements such as ambient sound and a perforated threshold. Healthcare studies highlight sensory design as a way to address challenges associated with autism. By creating a calming, adaptable space, the project aims to accommodate all students and be applicable across campus environments.

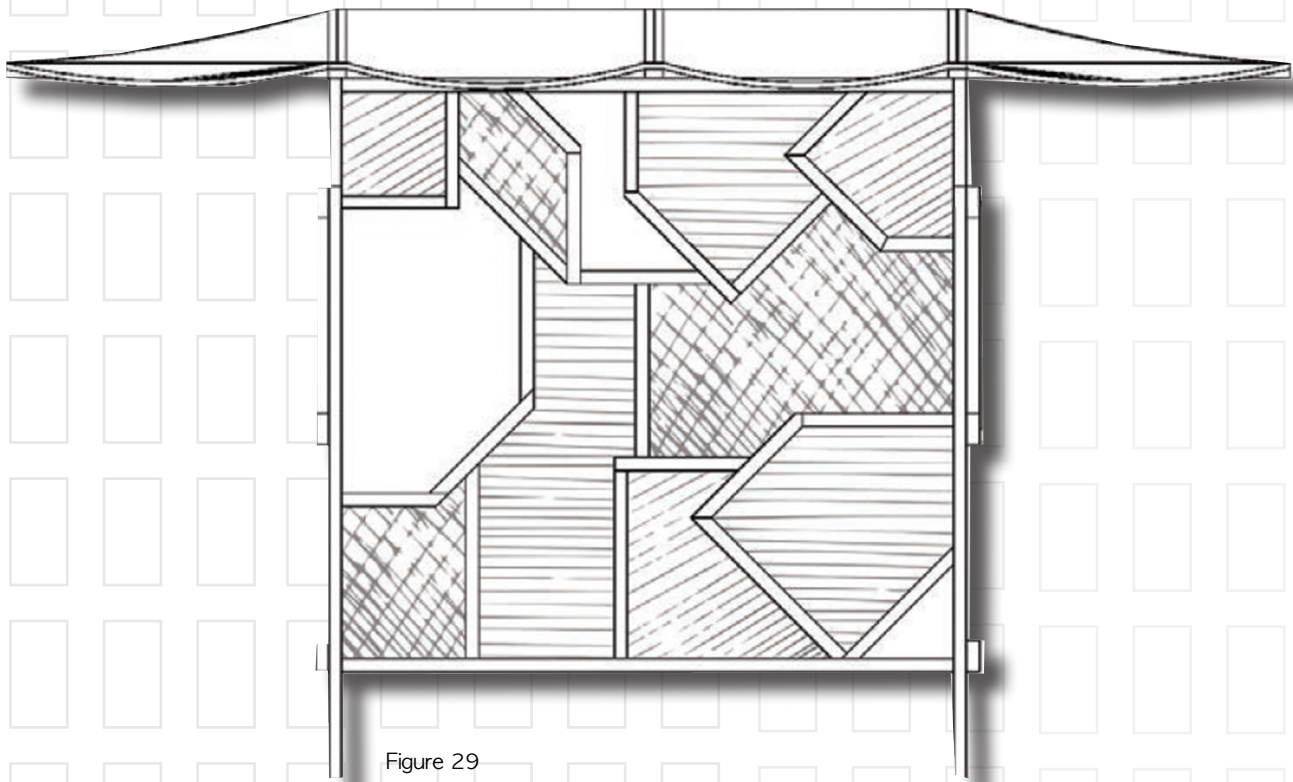


Figure 29

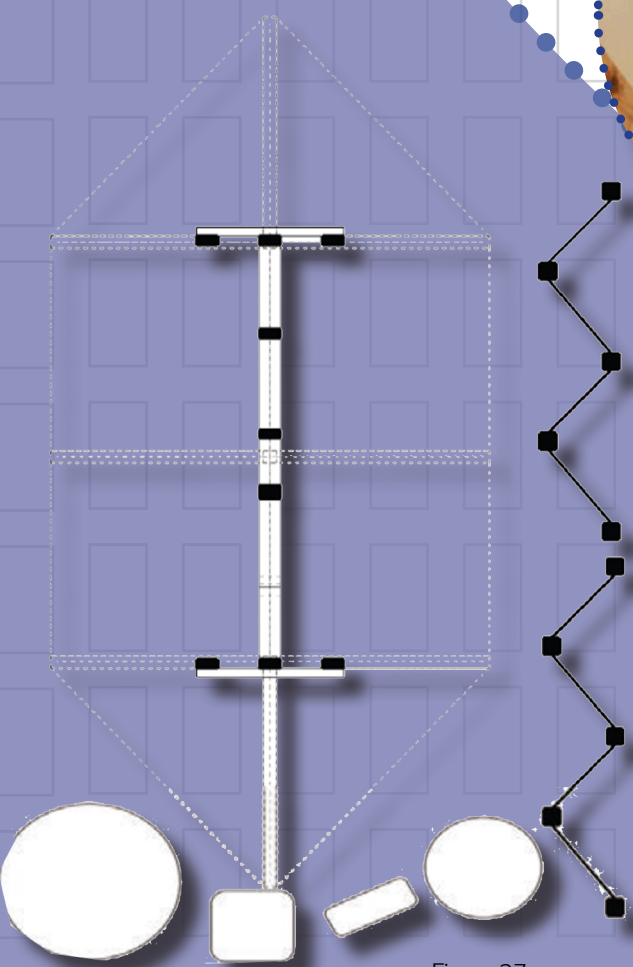


Figure 27

⁴¹ Turner, Jonathan. 2020. Neurodiversity in Architecture: Confronting the Agency of Autism Within the Built Environment. University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

Workspaces designed for neurodiversity feature flexible environments supporting varied cognitive styles and tasks. Active zones encourage movement, while quiet zones minimise sensory input. Unassigned or bookable seating lets employees choose spaces that suit their routines. Acoustic management with absorbent materials or exposed ceilings reduces distractions, and adaptive lighting, including circadian systems and personalised desk controls, accommodates sensory sensitivities. Biophilic elements, such as plants, natural materials, nature views and mindfulness zones, further enhance well-being and cognitive function by providing calming, restorative environments.⁴²

Sensory segmentation uses responses to stimuli to define spatial function, starting with reconfigured layouts. Through subtle modifications, existing spaces can adapt to new patterns of use based on sensory qualities and neurodivergent responses. Targeted interventions can enhance or reduce specific stimuli, creating controlled environments that allow individuals to choose spaces where they feel most comfortable. Alvar Aalto was conscious of the senses within his architecture, commenting that “a piece of furniture that forms a part of a person’s daily habitat should not cause excessive glare from light reflection... it should not be disadvantageous in terms of sound etc... a piece that comes into the most contact with man, as a chair does, should not be constructed of materials that are especially good conductors of heat.”⁴³ This exemplifies clearly the importance of every detail within design and the way in which the human body and mind encounters surrounding sensory objects.

Adaptable spaces respond to individual needs by allowing elements to be added, adjusted, or removed. Thoughtful choices in furnishings, finishes, and fixtures, such as colours, minimalist design, resilient materials, extra windows, or soundproofing, create environments that are functional and supportive, accommodating diverse sensory and cognitive requirements. The design prioritises care and empathy alongside aesthetics and function.

Professional adaptive suggestions

1. Christopher Beaver works on designing environments for autistic adults and children and finds that typical project briefs identify desired performance, occupation and use. In designing for autistic users, he finds that “the heart of the brief cannot be written down”.⁴⁴ It should be derived from an understanding of the autistic mind. Key considerations include effective ventilation, varied spatial forms to aid perception, multifunctional corridors, simple layouts, minimal detailing, and clear materials and colours.
2. Simon Humphreys develops autism-friendly design principles based on Pallasmaa’s argument that buildings shape consciousness and self-perception.⁴⁵ He favours low-arousal, calming spaces with clear, rhythmic layouts, personal space, and balanced sensory interaction, recognising that autistic individuals experience senses differently from neurotypicals.
3. Dr Magda Mostosta introduced evidence-based design principles in 2014 after a decade of research. Her Sensory Design Theory suggests reacting to sensory contexts by shaping architecture to have a positive effect on autistic experience.⁴⁶ She identifies compartmentalisation, designing space as separate areas with distinct sensory properties and soft divisions so that uncertainty is reduced to manageable proportions.
4. Teresa Whitehurst’s book on autism-special living environments focuses on the interface between human and environmental factors to create spaces where children can thrive.⁴⁷ She recommends calming colour palettes, minimising noise with sound-absorbing materials and regulated reverberation, silent durable floor coverings, and underfloor heating for comfort.

These professionals agree that early design stages, layouts, and schematic plans shape a building through spatial composition. Using space and form as guiding principles supports autism-friendly design, emphasising distraction reduction, transition zones, and organisation by stimulation levels. Planning should follow the user’s journey from site entry inward, providing a foundation for neurodivergent-friendly environments.

⁴² Sarraf, Mohammad. 2024. Urban Form for Autism : The Role of Architectural Design in the Social Life of Autistic Individuals. DIVA. Available at: <https://ri.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1930426/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁴³ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley

⁴⁴ Turner, Jonathan. 2020. Neurodiversity in Architecture: Confronting the Agency of Autism Within the Built Environment. University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

⁴⁵ Turner, Jonathan. 2020. Neurodiversity in Architecture: Confronting the Agency of Autism Within the Built Environment. University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

⁴⁶ Mostafa, Magda. 2014. Architecture for Autism: Autism ASPECTSSTM in school design. International Journal of Architectural Research: ArchNet-IJAR

⁴⁷ Turner, Jonathan. 2020. Neurodiversity in Architecture: Confronting the Agency of Autism Within the Built Environment. University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

Figure 30



CRITICAL REFLECTION: MANIFESTO

Architecture is not just walls, floors, and ceilings; it is the canvas of human experience. Every space shapes how we feel, think, and interact. My research into inclusive and neurodiversity-aware design highlights how traditional approaches often prioritise uniformity over individuality, aesthetics over empathy, and efficiency over well-being. Designers should create spaces that adapt to people, using human-centred emotional and cognitive empathy to support psychological wellbeing. Most environments favour the neurotypical majority, often overlooking neurodivergent sensory needs, limiting choice, and affecting focus, creativity, and comfort. Empathetic, adaptive design can heal, empower, and connect, benefiting neurodivergent and neurotypical users alike.

Empathy in design means striving to understand the world from another person's perspective, yet it is often treated as a formal step in human-centred or design thinking processes rather than a sustained, meaningful engagement. As the Feminist Designer notes, empathy "can also carry bias," favouring those like ourselves while overlooking wider systemic issues.⁴⁸ Care is not just a "warm pleasant affection or moralistic feel-good attitude"; it is essential to societal survival and demands attentiveness to complex relationships between human and non-human actors. Designing with care requires listening, experimenting, learning from mistakes, and continually adapting, ensuring inclusive, thoughtful design goes beyond token gestures.

1. Sensory choices over standardised control_
Providing variation in options for lighting, auditory elements and spatial density so individuals are empowered to regulate their own experience.
2. Flexibility in workspaces_
Designing spaces that allow for movement, retreat, collaboration, or focus as required by the individual.
3. Material and spatial empathy_
Using textures, colours and forms that support wellbeing, comfort and inclusivity.
4. Zoned environments_
Balancing dynamic, stimulating areas with quiet, contemplative spaces to support diverse cognitive and emotional needs for self-regulation.
5. Predictable wayfinding_
Clear layouts, intuitive signage and visual cues reduce cognitive overstimulation and enhance confidence and comfort within a space.
6. Psychological safety_
Prioritising retreat spaces with natural light, biophilic elements, and human-scale proportions to reduce stress and foster autonomy, comfort, and inclusion.

This manifesto positions design as a forward-looking practice that shapes not only spaces but experiences, possibilities, and the ways communities engage with them. It encourages designers to consider architecture as a dynamic framework for connection and exploration, rather than merely a backdrop for human activity. By prioritising adaptability, flexibility, and well-being, designers can create environments that respond to diverse needs, rhythms, and ways of thinking, enabling belonging across all users.

Through my research, I have explored how conventional architectural models limit potential for inclusive engagement, and how intentional design can expand it. In future projects, including my final semester design project, I aim to translate this understanding into practice by approaching each space with foresight, curiosity, and responsiveness. My goal is to craft environments that support comfort, creativity, and psychological well-being, cultivating experiences where all users, regardless of cognitive style, sensory preference, or background, can thrive, interact meaningfully, and feel a genuine sense of place.

⁴⁸ Place, Alison. 2003. Feminist Designer. MIT Press.

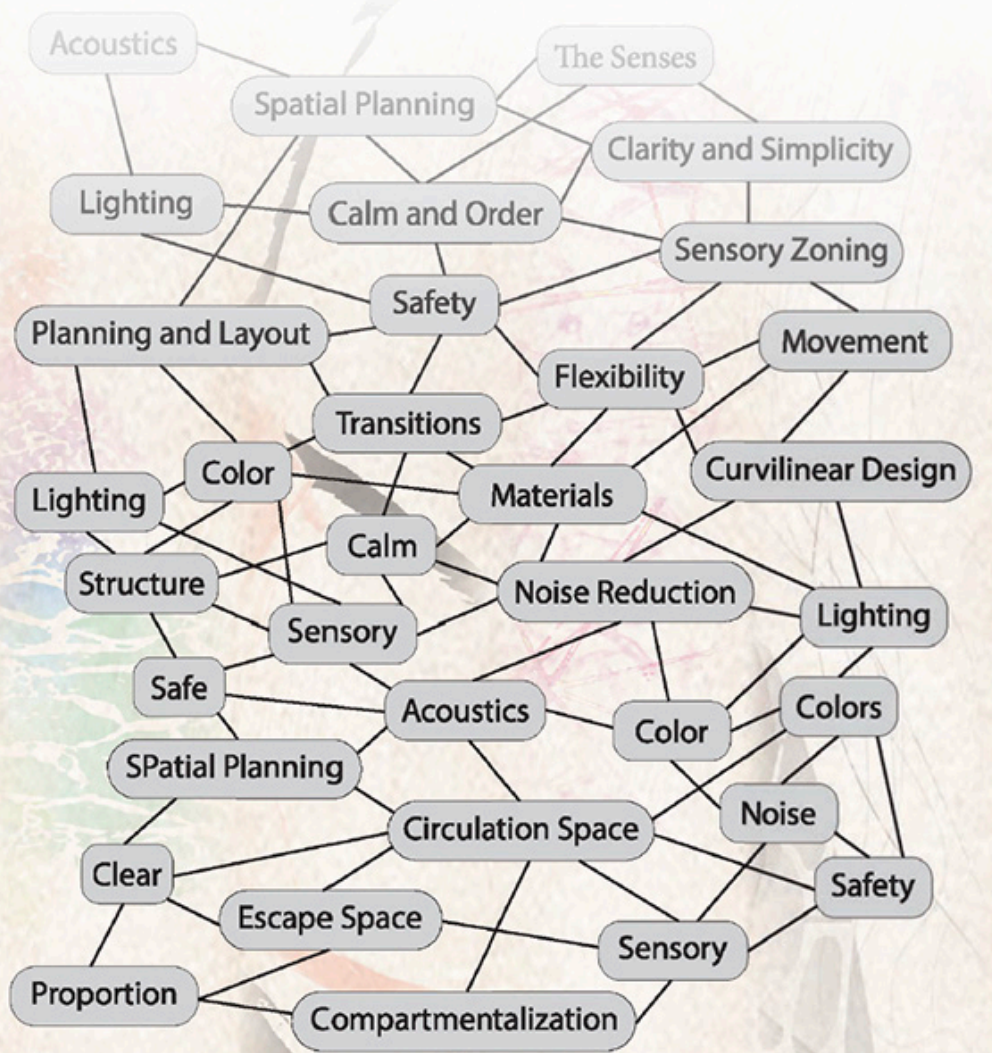


Figure 31

KEY QUOTES

1_ “We spend more than 80% of our time in buildings... and these buildings can affect our mood both positively and negatively”

2_ “Research into the psychology of mess has now shown a direct link between untidiness and stress”

3_ “Neurodiversity challenges the traditional medical model, which often frames neurodivergence as a disorder. Instead, it aligns with the social model of disability, emphasising inclusion, accessibility, and the importance of designing environments that accommodate diverse ways of thinking and experiencing the world”

4_ “Many people are out of touch with sensory stimulation because we’ve learned to mask and suffer through environments we can’t control... Our philosophy is ‘when we design for the extreme, we benefit the mean.’”

5_ “A piece of furniture that forms a part of a person’s daily habitat should not cause excessive glare from light reflection... it should not be disadvantageous in terms of sound etc... a piece that comes into the most contact with man, as a chair does, should not be constructed of materials that are especially good conductors of heat.”

6_ “The senses are aggressively seeking mechanisms rather than passive receivers”.

7_ “Instead of the five detached senses, humans have thirty systems of sensing and psychologists are only beginning to understand the complex functions of these in terms of mediating one’s relationship with the environment”.

8_ “Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless.”

9_ “In a sense the landscape [the painter] must almost look at the landscape as if it were himself.”

10_ “The senses are not merely passive receptors... but actively involved in the structuring of information... sight paints a picture of life, but sound, touch, taste and smell are actually life itself.”

¹ Channon, Ben. 2018. Happy by Design : A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing.

² Channon, Ben. 2018. Happy by Design : A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing.

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⁵ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley. Quotation: Alvar Aalto

⁶ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley. Quotation: James Gibson

⁷ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley. Quotation: David Howes

⁸ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley.

⁹ Pallasmaa, J. 1996. The Eyes of the Skin. Chichester Wiley. Quotation: Graham Sutherland

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FIGURES LIST

1. Self edited from Neurodiversity Planning
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3. Self edited from Neurodiversity Planning
4. Rafael A. Garcia
5. Courtesy of Adrianse
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