

The THIRD Place

A Multi-Functional Social Space to Address an Emerging Issue Within the Neurodivergent Community

Neuro-normative Socialising is Exhausting.

With an estimated UK adult ADHD incidence rate around 3-4% and 2.21% of adults in the US having Autistic Spectrum Disorder, it's inevitable for neurodivergents feel somewhat outnumbered (ADHD UK, 2022) (CDC, 2020).

Communication between Neurotypical and Neurodivergent people often leads to misunderstandings and "social ditches", especially on the side of the minority (Greenwood and Engle, 2022). In order to avoid these conflicts, they have to put significant effort into appearing "normal". This is often at the expense of their own comfort. In spite of a "longing" for social connection, these obstacles have meant that loneliness is much more common in neurodivergent individuals.

The Root of the Problem

9 neurodivergent students were asked about their experiences with social interaction and connections (Morgan, 2023).

All of the responders said that it was easier for them to connect and engage with other neurodivergent people. But with so few others in their lives to create those relationships and since relying on their neurotypical peers to fulfill that need has been so disappointing, many have turned towards online communities.

The Alternative, However, is Destructive.

Certain corners of the internet are becoming "echo chambers" where outside opinion is forcibly rejected. What results is an aggression towards others because these communities are more exposed to posts painting them in a negative light (Rafley, Van Bavel and van der Linden, 2021).

Outrage content shared on social media naturally gets more user interaction so, these companies are incentivised to promote them. They have designed their platforms designed to trigger dopamine in an addictive fashion (Doyle, 2021).

People with ADHD don't have enough receptor sites within the brain's reward centres to produce enough dopamine (Illium et al., 2008).

In order to make up for this, the ADHD brain is constantly on the hunt for "high-stim" activities to get that dopamine "hit" and is much more likely to develop addictive behaviours (Dr. Littman, 2014). Because of this, and an existing inclination to "fight for justice", people with ADHD are more likely to get hooked on back-and-forth discourse (Doyle, 2021).

How Can We Fix This? An Offline Community Space for Neurodivergent People

The "Third Place" or "Third Space" refers to a tangible, physical environment away from home (the first place) or work/school (the second) - whose primary purpose is conversation. This idea was born in the 80's from the sociologist Ray Oldenburg (Conti, 2022).



35 Flookgate Street

35, 40 and 44 Flookgate Street together make up the Flookgate Factory project, providing flexible, open plan offices spaces for creative businesses of various sizes (Belverie Regan Limited and BPA Architects, 2019) (Flookgate Factory, n.d.).

The current owners (Belverie Regan 5 Limited) purchased the building to become part of the creative quarter in Digbeth. The Custard Factory is a converted factory spaces that have been renovated into TV studios, rehearsal spaces, office and incubation spaces. The developers have focused specifically on branding the area as a creative and cultural visitor destination.

The original reverse factory had been built between 1848 and 1922 by Alfred Bird to manufacture his invention - Epsom Custard (Norton, 2021). In 1984, production moved to Banbury following the effects of production limitations which had been imposed during the Second World War and the factory's "fall from grace".

While the building itself is not listed, it falls within the Digbeth and Deritend Conservation Area and some of its surrounding buildings have been locally listed. The area is mostly comprised of industrial buildings which are used as offices, auto repairs and sales, storage and distribution. These buildings are typically no more than 2 storeys tall (Belverie Regan 5 Limited and BPA Architects, n.d.).

A visit to the site and its surrounding area helped to understand its character. What was found were string lights that had been hung between the buildings. This is a charming detail that can be found around the Custard Factory "quarter", much like the graffiti, that makes it feel like a neighbourhood.

The building's facade, having been vacant for so long, has been subject to graffiti artists. This is not unusual to the area and has even been encouraged in places around Digbeth.

Strengths

- Existing building
- Historical character but not too unique to impose into a proposal
- Has plenty of windows but also plenty of dim spaces
- Located in an area with lots of life but it's not too busy - necessary for the demo
- Slaking facade thanks to the graffiti.

Weaknesses

- First floor of the south wing has a ceiling height of only 2250mm in comparison to 2600-2800mm height of the rest of the story.
- First and second storey windows at the rear half of the building are mostly obstructed by the existing building.

Opportunities

- Flat roofs
- Courtyards
- Natural logging circulation
- Proximity to HS2, City Centre
- In an area popular amongst young people because of its night life and activities.
- Because of its location and proximity to Birmingham City and Aston University, a relationship could be made with the schools, faculties, societies and student unions.
- It's also within a business dense area, so this proposal could become an "after work" activity or help educate companies on neurodiversity.

Threats

- The west wing has different floor levels to the rest of the building.
- Access to the building is only possible via the road/street side.
- There are very few images or renderings of the current scheme and access is not possible. Therefore, it will be more difficult to visualise the spaces.

Target Demographic: ADHD Adults

Calculation of Birmingham's over 16 years ADHD population based on city population:

15-19 years:	6825
30-44 years:	140
45-59 years:	680
60 plus years:	9090
Total:	29,950

One of the frustrating aspects about being a neurodivergent adult is that, until far too recently, almost every service for neurodivergent people has focused on children over adults or teens. This proposal has the opportunity to fill the support gap for this age range of the ADHD community. This issue is also one that doesn't affect neurodivergent children, given that they should not be able to access social media.

The Game

A healthy brain should be able to "derive a reward" from primary activities which reinforces and motivates to keep completing these tasks. For someone with ADHD, these activities aren't enough to produce a sufficient reward. They need additional stimulation to pick up the slack and "gain the brain's undivided attention" (Littman, 2014).

Gamification is the infusion of gamely elements into "non-gaming settings". It is used across disciplines to better engage an audience. The designer can add fun and interactive components such as leader boards to grab the user's attention (Interaction Design Foundation, 2012).

The underlying point is to reward progression, thereby encouraging the user to keep going. As an incentive concept, gamification is therefore an excellent method of mental stimulation for people with ADHD.

Gameification

The Third Place is divided into two main functions - one dedicated to building connections, and one to a material experience depicting shared memories and feelings. By infusing gamification into the latter, this space will be interacting with both the mind and senses.

Users can "hide the dopamine hit" created by this game to support engagement with the conversation activity or their own work. This can be done in a separate café/seating area - the third function.

If this game is one that also must be done with others, throwing a newly introduced group into an active teaming exercise can help them open up to each other.

Finally, this game can act as an advertising agent: an "Instagrammable" immersive experience to draw in users, especially ones that spend a lot of time on social media.

User Journey

The Set-Up | The Confrontation | The Resolution

Childhood | Young Adulthood | Adulthood | Reflection Progression

Expectation | Plot Point 1 | Plot Point 2

Beginning with an immersive *literary scene*, bringing to life an age specific feeling or memory.

Following this room is a *task*, more loosely based on that life stage but could be relevant to any age. This is to blur the boundaries of past, present and future.

Finally, every section will end in an *action* of the same *task*, which is based on an issue relevant at any age.

As against various other forms of architecture, visual arts - a written, long-term text is linear. In a narrative text, it is even possible to speak of a double linearity, that of the narrator, and that of the reader, the series of events.

In a linear sequence, the user would walk through scenes or tasks in chronological order.

In a double linear sequence, the order could be customized. This could create a sense of confusion or represent memory.

Metaphors and visual metaphors represent one idea by comparing it to another. They can help audiences relate to stories, move them forward and establish a sense of their significance (MasterClass, 2021).

This scheme features a string motif throughout both communication areas (reference order to wheel). It also uses a variety of unique spaces into a harmonious scheme.

"Perception, however, is a psychoanalytic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body; a small child sees things in a totally different way from an adult" (Dill, 1997).

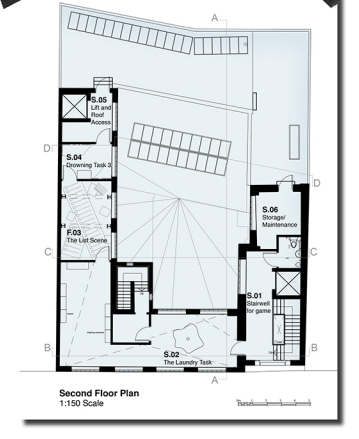
Scenes can be distorted in some way to disrupt the memory and see it in a new light.

Elements of some scenes are distorted in some way to emphasise their significance or create confusion.

Both metaphors and analogies make comparisons between two things, often painting a more accurate picture of what the author is describing. When they differ in their purpose, metaphors are mostly illustrative, analogies are used to make a point they explain the significance of why the two things are similar (MasterClass, 2021b).

For some users, non-linear communication can be confusing. A visual analogy can reinforce it with an immersive recreation of the feeling, as well as a point that they can relate to it.

The Site



Childhood

Imagine the ADHD brain is filled with hundreds of different coloured strings, all constantly moving around.

When the brain is prompted to communicate an idea like a question being asked, you then have to pull the right coloured string out of a hole in your head.

Before you can do that, you have to organise all of the strings into neat, colour-coded piles.

The problem is that they don't stop moving. Before long, you'll have to give up and just start pulling on the string you need and hope for the best.

As you pull, all the other strings will start to tangle around it. They'll look together and stopper the hole. No matter how hard you pull the string, it won't be released.

Eventually, you'll just have to cut it and nobody will ever know you were really trying to say.

Young Adulthood

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Adulthood

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Literary Devices

3 individuals with ADHD were interviewed about how the condition had appeared throughout their lives. These participants were all between the ages 25-35 and had been diagnosed as adults. The purpose of this study was to identify some common feelings or experiences that could be translated into visual analogies.

The Drowning Task...

This is meant to summarise the ideas that the users will observe in the Drowning Task rooms - where the interior space is flooded with violent, crashing water.

The image of dew drops collecting on a spider's web inspired a physical transition from this overwhelming atmosphere to a calming one.

Inspiration: The Chubby Cloud

The fashion brand held this temporary presentation for London Fashion Week to "speak to their customers" and bring them away from their homes and computers. Set inside Ingo Jones Banqueting House in London, modern architecture (Leicht, 2018).

It featured a giant white bean bag, inspired by the brands own cloud motif, spanning across the floor. The manner in which the guests interacted with the installation what described in phases:

- Messing around, climbing and jumping on the bean bag.
- Setting in, observing the architecture above and the series of Reuters canvases on the ceiling.
- Guided meditation exercises.
- Acute readings.
- Choir singing from above.
- Finally, the guests were lead into a small pop-up shop.

The use of the ceiling, however, was what sparked an idea. As stated, some neurodivergent people have trouble maintaining eye contact when speaking to others. By allowing the users to recline and providing an alternate focal point, this problem is negated. This suspended focal point is also used to show conversation prompts.

The Drowning Task...

Projection mapping allows a designer to turn any surface or collection of surfaces into a projector screen. The software will be used to identify the planes and compile them into one surface to project an image onto (Healy, n.d.). While lens projectors are suspended to cast visuals onto the walls with the help of this technique.

As the users enter the Drowning Task rooms, the walls will begin to "flood" with dark and aggressive water visuals. The task objective will be projected, and the users will be prompted to write their answer in a scanning cabinet before they are completely submerged (Beze Creative, n.d.). The projector will cast the scanned answer onto the wall and show it floating towards the window.

The Conversation Dome

The Conversation Dome works similarly to a Conversation Dome. Black-out fabric is stretched across a lightweight frame to create a 360° screen. Once again using projection mapping, wide lens projectors are suspended at the centre to create an immersive atmosphere.

Openings in the dome are made to allow movement in and out. In order to keep the space as dark as possible for the projection, blue window tint film will be applied to the skylights above and Creative glazed doors to the courtyard. The café will also be kept in low light and some entrances have been blocked off.

This technique will be used for many of the string elements within the scheme. It will also create a shadow gap to hide an LED strip for practical illumination of the dome. The bottom hem of the fabric panels will adhere to a pocket and Creative glazed doors to the courtyard. This rod can be pushed into the gap between the string form and the profile to keep the fabric in place.

A Guided Conversation Space to Support the Birth of New Friendships

This research has highlighted the neurodivergent community's increasing need for office spaces to improve the quality of their social connections and conversations, i.e., a third place.

The Conversation Dome helps engage users in constructive and supportive face-to-face discussions.

In each iteration of the Drowning Task, users are asked to write down things that they struggle with. These notes are later projected within the dome to prompt a conversation amongst the team.

This will encourage them to share similar struggles and give advice to each other.

The atmosphere within the dome is carefully curated to be safe and comfortable. With its large beanbag seating to recline back on and ceiling projected visuals to look up at, users will not have to make eye contact to engage in conversation.

The comfort of this space will vastly determine the user's openness to the activity and others.

In this installation, what made the users so receptive to each other was the ability to mess around and let off some of their energy.

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Aluminium Bending

Aluminium is a strong, yet light metal that can be recycled again and again, making it an excellent material to construct the dome's frame (MG Metals, n.d.).

The frame will need a number of grooves to be able to bend these profiles into the correct corners. However, the shorter the profile, the more successful this process is likely to be (Allica and Abu-bend, 2021). Therefore, the base will be constructed from 2500-3000mm profiles and the verticals being cut to size.

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The Conversation Dome

Fabric Connection

In order to connect the fabric to the frame, the individual panels will be sewn together with a pocket hem. 13mm stainless steel banding is then pushed into these pockets. The flexibility of this banding allows it to be fed into the vertical frame pieces.

Over time, the stretched fabric will become looser. This allows the fabric to be removed and altered without needing to completely disassemble the dome.

