



designing for neurodiversity

a report from Crown Paints



Welcome

If you are not neurodivergent yourself, then you will undoubtedly know someone who is.

Around one in seven people in the UK are thought to be neurodivergent in some way¹ and they all have different strengths, as well as things that they can find challenging.

Over time, an increased awareness and deeper understanding of neurodiversity has meant more people have been diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions, which can help them to understand why and how they think differently.

This has led to a growing appreciation of the challenges that neurodivergent people can experience, and also of the important contribution that they can make to society and the economy.

Neurodivergent people might experience the world differently, and this diversity of thought can be a huge asset, with many employers now actively working to recruit neurodivergent colleagues.

And this has resulted in greater advocacy for neurodivergent people, alongside a concerted effort to create environments where they can thrive and achieve their full potential.

That could be at work, in education or just in their everyday lives.

At Crown, we think neurodiversity is something to be celebrated, so we wanted to better understand the challenges and opportunities that architects and specifiers – who provide detailed technical specifications for projects – experience when designing neuro-inclusive environments.

So, we commissioned a survey of 250 architects and specifiers with prior knowledge of designing spaces that are supportive of neurodiverse needs, to learn from their experiences and expertise.

We also carried out extensive desk research, and spoke to a panel of four external experts from the worlds of architecture and interior design, to incorporate wider qualitative insights and experience.

The survey and insights in this report results don't necessarily reflect Crown's views, but our aim is to inspire more conversations and creative thinking, and to help push the issue up the agenda for the benefit not just of neurodivergent people, but of society.

It's a topic that we would like to explore further in the future, in particular by giving a voice to neurodivergent people, and we'd love to hear your feedback.

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For now, I hope you find this report interesting and inspiring!

Jemma Saunders
Colour Specialist at Crown Paints



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Meet the experts

Jemma Saunders

Crown Colour Specialist

As a key member of Crown's Colour Services team, Jemma works with professional customers to create schemes for education, housing and commercial properties.



Dr Katie Gaudian

Designer and Senior Research Associate at The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art

With more than 20 years of experience collaborating with autistic and neurodivergent individuals, Katie is a designer and researcher whose work celebrates neurodiversity. Her practice focuses on co-designing with neurodivergent communities to create meaningful improvements in everyday life.

Hannah Cooper

Interior Fit-out Lead at Cygnet Group

An integral member of the team at Cygnet, Hannah leads the design of a wide range of health and social care facilities for young people and adults with mental health needs, acquired brain injuries, eating disorders, autism and learning disabilities.



**Dr Maria Xirou,
Interior Designer at Xirou Katyal**

A doctor with more than 20 years of experience with neurodiverse individuals. Maria is now an interior design consultant, specialising in designing spaces for those with neurodiverse needs.

Henrietta Walters

Architect, Principal at GA Architects

Experienced in designing environments for children and adults with autism and other learning difficulties for new build educational and residential projects, as well as the adaptation and conversion of existing buildings.





What is
neurodiversity?



Neurodiversity recognises the natural differences in how people's brains can behave and process information.

That includes people who are neurotypical – whose brains function in a similar way to most of their peers – and people who are neurodivergent.

'Neurodivergent' is an umbrella term for people whose brains function differently.

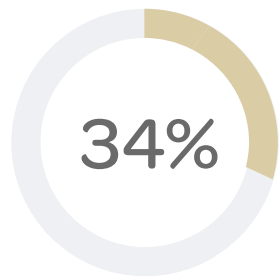
This can include a range of conditions, from what is considered 'typical' or 'neuro-typical' including autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and Tourette's.

These conditions often exist on a spectrum and can affect different people to different degrees and in different ways.

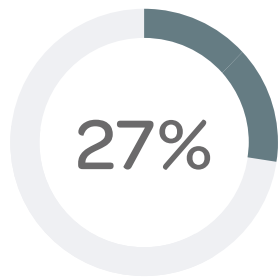
While neurodivergence is classed as a disability, some neurodivergent people do not identify as disabled.

And while there can be some characteristics that are common to neurodivergent people, it's important not to rely on stereotypes and to recognise that everyone is an individual².

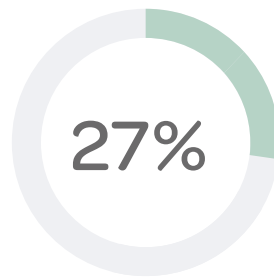
Designing for neurodiversity is...



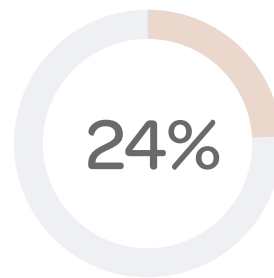
Creative



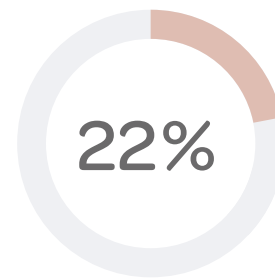
Exciting



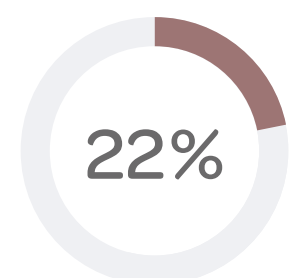
Useful



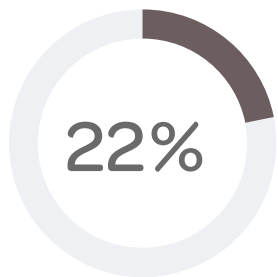
Inspirational



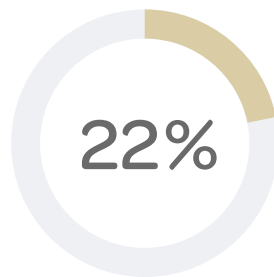
Rewarding



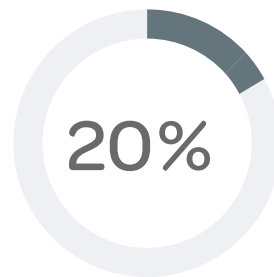
Challenging



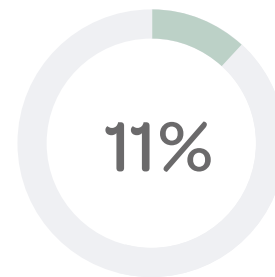
Complex



Necessary



Informative



Unnecessary



State of the nation

Thankfully, with increased awareness and understanding, society's approach to neurodiversity is changing.

But there is still a way to go when it comes to creating neuro-inclusive environments, where neurodivergent people can be their best selves.

While it's mandatory that new or refurbished buildings must be [designed to be accessible for those with physical disabilities](#), that's generally not the case for neurodivergent people.

Some neurodivergent people can find noisy environments with bright or contrasting colour schemes to be particularly challenging, for example, causing sensory overload and mental fatigue.

This is known as hyper-sensitivity.

But calming colours, natural light, minimal clutter and clear signage can help someone who is hyper-sensitive to feel more comfortable and focused.

Under the Equality Act employers are now required to make reasonable adjustments so neurodivergent colleagues aren't put at a significant disadvantage.

And as a result, there have been some innovative initiatives across society.



Understanding autism and sensory sensitivity in environmental design

Dr Katie Gaudian is a Designer and Senior Research Associate at The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art. She is a global leader in inclusive design, working with government, business, academia and the third sector

One of the most common questions I'm asked is: "What colour do autistic people prefer?" My response is always the same: "It depends on the individual." Just like anyone else, autistic people have diverse and personal preferences when it comes to colour, light, texture and spatial experience.

It's crucial to remember the saying: "When you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."

Autism is not a one-size-fits-all diagnosis, and sensory preferences vary widely from person to person.

However, from both professional and personal experience, I've observed that the sensory environment can have a more extreme impact on autistic individuals.

For example, I once met an autistic man with synaesthesia who was unable to use a specific stairwell at his workplace because the yellow walls triggered an overwhelming sensory response. This illustrates just how powerfully environmental design can affect autistic people – in ways that might not be immediately visible or understood.

We are still in the early stages of fully understanding the relationship between autism and the built environment. That's why it is essential that designers take the time to listen, observe, engage and co-design with individuals before making design decisions. Lived experience should guide choices, especially when designing sensory-sensitive environments.

We must not underestimate the profound influence that light, colour, texture, sound and spatial layout can have on autistic individuals. Inclusive design must go beyond compliance and aesthetics; it should be rooted in empathy and collaboration with those who will use the space.



Personalisation and sensory control: lessons from multisensory environments

More than 20 years ago, I supported neurodivergent individuals in multisensory environments. At the time, typically purpose-built rooms were often found in schools and were designed to enable a person to have control over various sensory elements such as lighting, sound and texture. These spaces were intentionally flexible, and each space was tailored to the individual's sensory profile, interests and needs.

The key principle was personalisation. Individuals were empowered to explore and adapt their environment in a way that suited them – promoting autonomy, comfort and engagement.

It wasn't just about stimulation; it was about offering choice and control over **how the space was experienced**.

This approach remains highly relevant today. As we move towards more inclusive environments, we should be striving to design adaptable spaces that allow for personal sensory modulation, especially in shared settings. This presents a compelling design challenge: how can we embed flexibility and personalisation into environments used by many, while ensuring that no-one's needs are compromised?



Easier environments

Many UK supermarkets now have regular ‘quiet hours’, designed to create an easier environment for people with conditions like autism, when lights are dimmed and background music and checkout beep noises are switched off.

High Street bank Barclays’ Glasgow campus has been designed to be as neurodivergent-friendly as possible, which has informed the choice of finishes, the acoustics and the lighting.

And Dublin City University has become the world’s first designated autism-friendly university, incorporating design features including colour-coding based navigation.

This is a field that has seen a growing amount of academic research, particularly regarding the worlds of work and education.

And it’s reassuring to learn that our survey of 250 UK architects and specifiers found that 99% said they had prior knowledge of designing spaces that are supportive of neurodivergent needs.

Nearly half (48%) of respondents said they relish the opportunity to design for the neurodivergent community, saying they see it as a chance to express their creativity, but a similar proportion – two in five (42%) – said they found it restrictive.

Two thirds (66%) are already accommodating the needs of neurodivergent people in all their work, and only 1% say it is not something that they consider.

And more than nine in ten (93%) have even appointed a colleague whose remit is to champion inclusion and diversity in their practice’s offering to clients.

Stepping up

The architects and specifiers we surveyed believe that they are well equipped to design for neurodiversity and that their professions are stepping up to serve the needs of neurodivergent people.

More than nine in ten (92%) believe that this is an area that’s growing in importance. And three in five (62%) told our survey that neurodiversity is being cited more prominently in the projects that they bid for.

If you are not already designing for neurodivergence, it’s time to start, or risk being left behind.

Indeed, designing for neurodiversity is now so fundamental to their work that 86% of the architects and specifiers we surveyed said they would be open to changing the interior designers they tend to work with if someone new could bring knowledge and experience of inclusive design for the mind to the table.

But, while the professionals we surveyed seem convinced they have what it takes to design for neurodiversity, is this confidence misplaced?

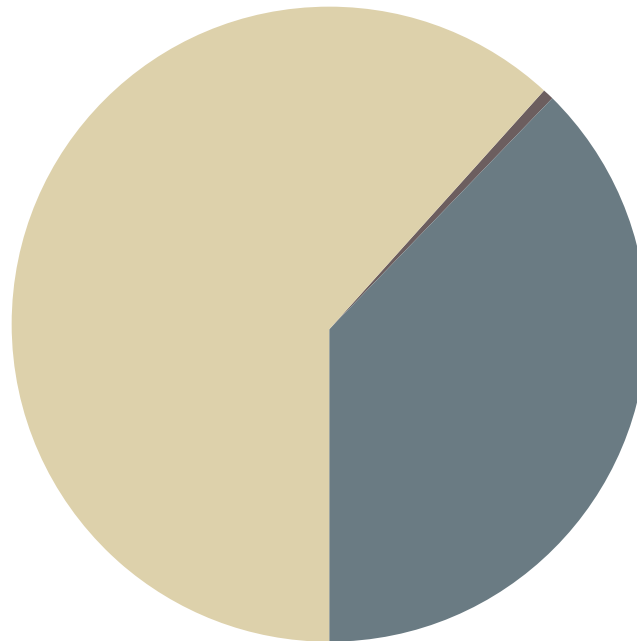
“People say you can’t meet everybody’s needs. But an environment that’s very calming and designed with sensory sensitivity in mind is actually beneficial to everybody³.”

Sara Darwin, Principal, phi Architects

99%

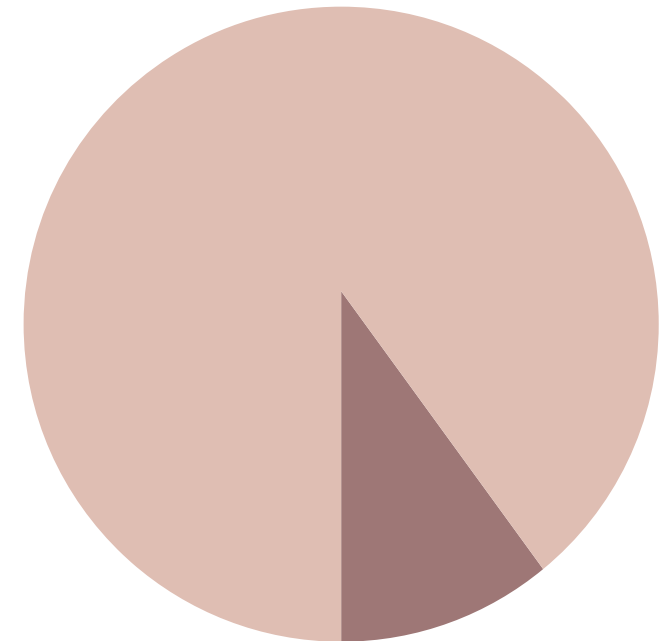
of architects and specifiers have prior knowledge of designing spaces that are supportive of neurodivergent needs.

When working on a project, do you consider how the design will support individuals with neurodivergent needs?



Yes, always	66%
Yes, sometimes	33%
No	1%

Do you think designing inclusive spaces for people with neurodiversity is growing in importance?



Yes	92%
No	8%



A careful and informed approach

Henrietta Walters, Architect, Principle at GA Architects, which specialises in the design of environments for children and adults with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and other learning difficulties.

When designing interiors, we often focus on visual elements like colour, texture and layout.

However, the auditory environment plays a crucial role in comfort and usability.

For an autistic person, for instance, sound reverberation – the echo created by sounds bouncing off surfaces – can make it difficult to follow a conversation and focus.

Therefore, designing inclusive spaces requires careful consideration of how to mitigate noise and control reverberation.

This involves looking at the external building fabric, internal separating elements like walls, ceilings and floors, and applying targeted acoustic treatments.

Strategies to control noise and reverberation through appropriate material choices and construction methods can create environments

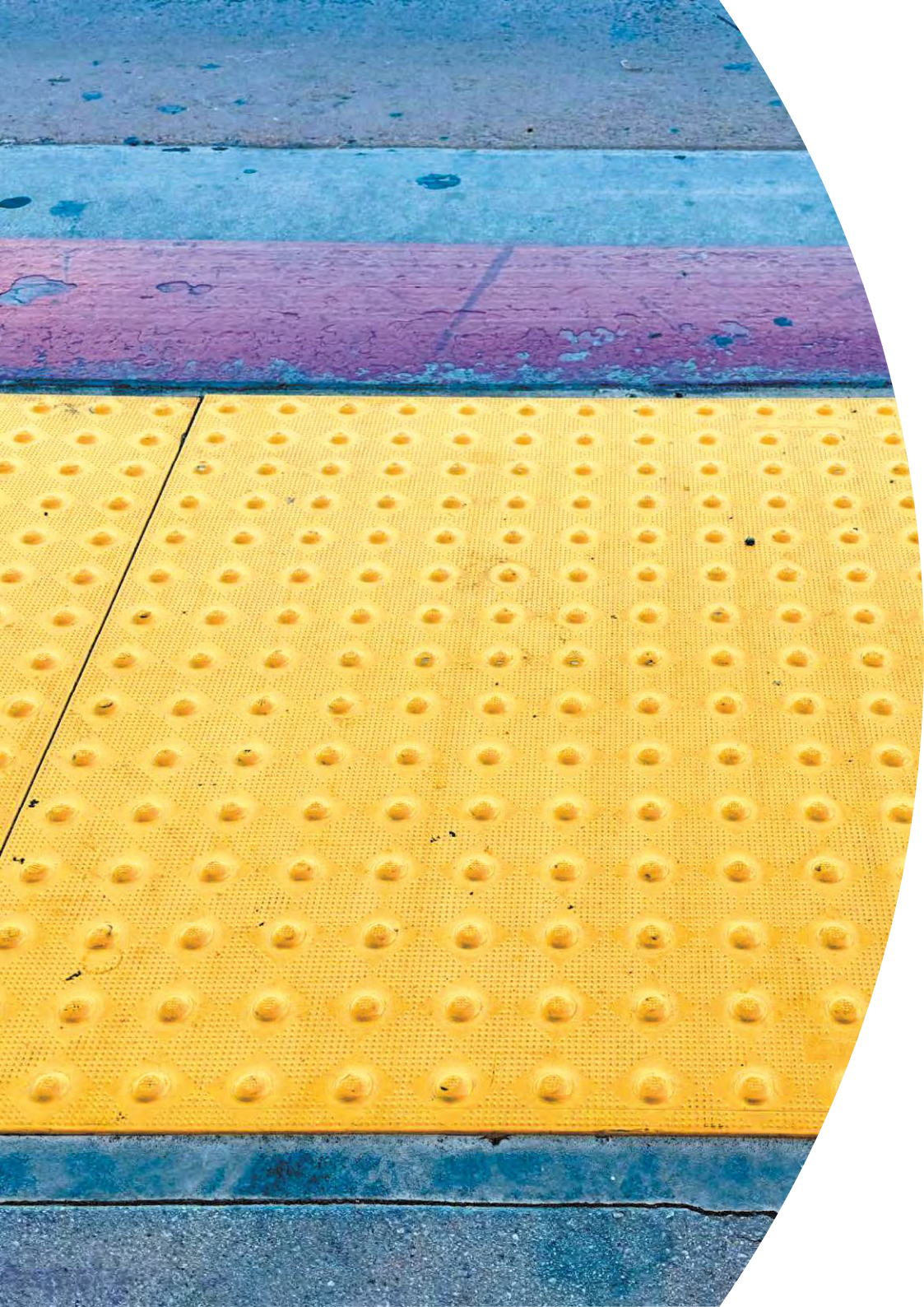
that support better focus, comfort and intelligibility, truly making spaces inclusive.

Designing **inclusive spaces** also requires a careful and informed approach to lighting.

For example, glare – whether direct or reflected from glossy or shiny surfaces – can cause discomfort and visual fatigue, and strong shadows can be misinterpreted as obstacles or holes, potentially affecting movement.

A key principle is to provide 'adjustability' wherever possible, allowing users to tailor light levels to their specific needs.

Ultimately, creating truly inclusive environments demands a nuanced understanding of these sensitivities, making engagement with experts in inclusive design and the end user a critical priority.



Form and function

It is a longstanding principle of design that form follows function.

In other words: purpose should take priority over aesthetic.

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In reality, almost every project that an architect or specifier takes on must achieve a balance between being pleasing to the eye and practical.

While aesthetics are driven by factors including personal preference and prevailing fashions, functionality is all about how an environment satisfies the needs of its users.

Ideally, this would be informed through in-depth collaboration with the client in order to fully understand how they experience the environment and identify opportunities to optimise spaces for their benefit.

But that is not always possible.

Still, while much of the guidance available to the design community relates to ensuring accessibility for people with physical disabilities, there is also a growing body of research relating to neurodiversity.

For example, Magda Mostafa, autism design consultant at Progressive Architects and associate professor of design at the American University in Cairo has published the Autism ASPECTSS Design Index, a research-based framework of architectural concepts for autism.

And there is now a BSI standard, PAS 6463, which provides guidance on designing the built environment to include the needs of people with sensory and/or neurological processing differences.

It includes buildings and external spaces for public and commercial use, and residential accommodation for independent or supported living, covering everything from décor to flooring, layout and lighting.

Reassuringly, 97% of the respondents to our survey said it was a document that they were already familiar with.



Bridging the knowledge gap

Despite all of the progress made to date in terms of knowledge, understanding and accommodation, accessibility remains a big issue for the neurodivergent community.

Even though most autistic people want to work, just three in 10 are currently in employment due to a lack of understanding of their need⁴, for example.

And researchers have also found that supermarkets are losing out on more than £700 million in annual revenues because autistic people avoid them, finding them challenging environments⁵.

So, we asked respondents if there was a knowledge gap in their practice when it came to designing for neurodivergent people, and despite many making a concerted effort to be more considerate and inclusive, four in five (79%) admitted that this was still the case.

And they flagged this as an issue in the interior design firms they work with, with 78% saying there is a knowledge gap among interior designers when it comes to designing for people with neurodivergent needs.

We then asked architects and specifiers what support they thought the industry needs to drive even more progress when it comes to designing for neurodiversity.

Tellingly, not one respondent said no support was needed.

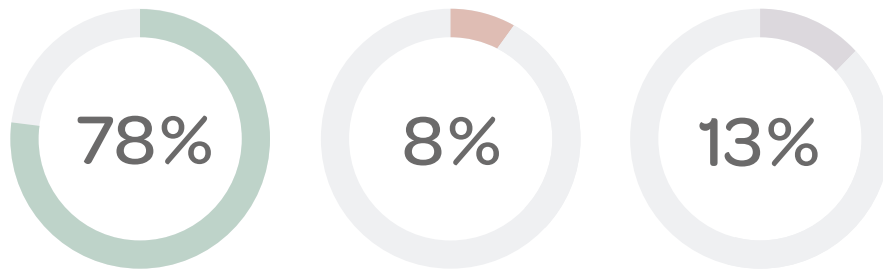
Instead, they cited a range of initiatives that they would welcome, from training and resources from brands and suppliers (44%) to access to neurodivergent people to gain feedback on designs (36%).

It is perhaps surprising that more architects and specifiers who are working on spaces that are supportive of neurodivergent needs are not involving and engaging with neurodivergent people as a priority.

This flags an opportunity for the industry to work together with the neurodivergent community and other stakeholders to advocate for users' needs and deliver real progress.

And it raises a potential opportunity; three quarters (74%) of architects and specifiers say there is a gap in the market for interior designers with an inclusive design specialism for neurodivergent needs.

There is a knowledge gap among interior designers when it comes to designing for people with neurodivergent needs?

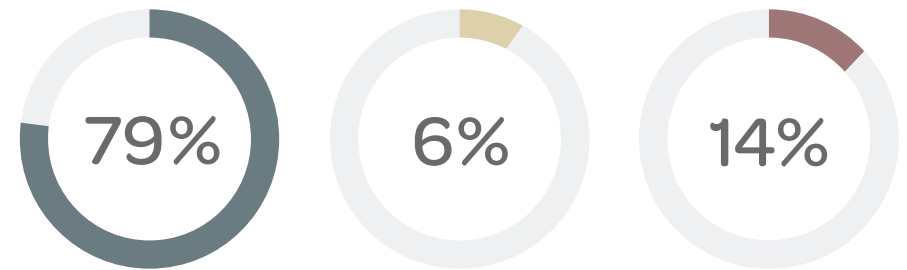


Agree

Neither agree
nor disagree

Disagree

My architectural practice has a knowledge gap when it comes to designing for people with neurodivergent needs.



Agree

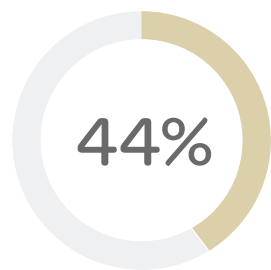
Neither agree
nor disagree

Disagree

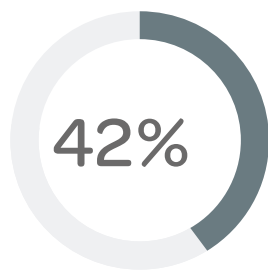
My architectural practice has a knowledge gap when it comes to designing for people with neurodivergent needs?

74%

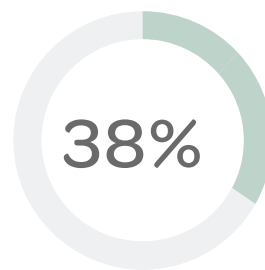
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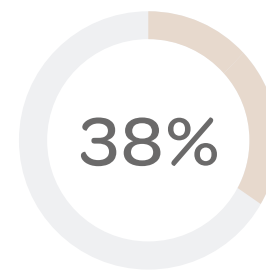
Training and resources from brands/suppliers



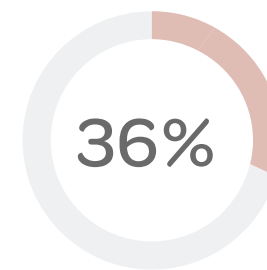
More opportunities to collaborate and learn from industry



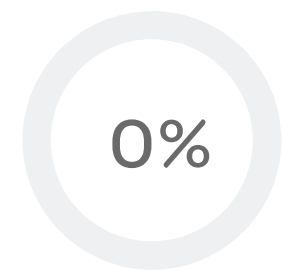
Training and resources from governing body



Open forum for conversation and sharing insights and learnings



Access to neurodivergent people to gain feedback on designs



Nothing



Welcoming, functional and enriching environments

Dr Maria Xirou is a Consultant in Neurodiversity and Interior Design tailored for the Neurodiverse and author of Interior designing for the Neurodiverse.

The design of a space significantly influences how neurodiverse individuals feel, behave and communicate.

Prioritising inclusive design ensures that neurodiverse individuals can access, engage with and fully participate in all aspects of society, helping them reach their fullest potential.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of conditions.

Each condition presents distinct characteristics that influence how individuals interact with their environment.

However, it is crucial to recognise that there is considerable overlap between these conditions.

No two neurodiverse individuals are exactly alike, even if they share the same diagnosis.

Designing truly inclusive spaces requires moving beyond assumptions and recognising the unique needs and strengths of each individual, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

A key strategy for creating truly inclusive environments is to engage neurodiverse individuals directly in the design process.

This includes forming focus groups, gathering feedback, and incorporating insights from people with lived experiences.

Additionally, consulting specialists with expertise in neurodiversity can offer critical guidance throughout the project, helping to identify design elements that accommodate a wide range of needs.

While designing for neurodiversity demands careful preparation, flexibility and continuous learning, the results are deeply rewarding. Inclusive spaces not only support neurodiverse users but also create more welcoming, functional and enriching environments for everyone.



Design advice

There's no denying that designing for neurodiversity requires a new way of thinking.

Design features that could barely register for neurotypical people could present major barriers to people on the neurodivergent spectrum.

For example, sudden changes in floor colour can be challenging for those with hypersensitivity.

But neurodivergence – as the name suggests – is not a single diagnosis. It includes a diverse spectrum of conditions and the challenges experienced by someone with ADHD can be very different from someone experiencing autism, for example.

Therefore, the right solution for one person might not be the best for another – which can make designing for neurodiversity to be challenging and complex – cited by one in five of the architects we surveyed.

But with challenge comes opportunity – with designing for neurodiversity also considered to be creative (34%), exciting (27%), useful (27%) and inspirational (24%).

More than nine in ten (93%) architects told us that they welcome the challenge of balancing aesthetics and practicality with inclusivity in their design work.

So, where are they focusing their efforts?

They recognise that colour is a fundamental aspect of designing for neurodiversity.

When we asked respondents what they believed were the most important things to consider when it comes to designing spaces used by neurodivergent people, colour came top of the list.

That's a view that's reflected in academic research on the subject, with a US study concluding that neutral tones and mellow shades are more autistic-friendly, providing a calming and soothing effect⁷.

At the same time, bright, bold and intense colors can be refreshing and energising⁸, but also over-stimulating and disturbing.



Design advice continued

Given those who are hypersensitive have increased sensitivity to colour – many see colours with greater intensity than neurotypical people⁹ – extra thought must be given to interior schemes.

Low intensity colours can be beneficial in environments where people need to focus, for example for work or education.

Low intensity colours can be beneficial in environments where people need to focus, for example for work or education¹⁰.

It seems architects and specifiers are well aware of these principles, saying they would incorporate soft, neutral tones (44%) low-sheen paints (43%) and plain walls (42%) when designing a space for a neurodivergent occupant.

This approach would clearly be suitable for people who are hyper-sensitive, though a different approach may be more appropriate for neurodivergent people who are hypo-sensitive and may enjoy bright colours, highlighting the need to consult with end users.

But what kind of colours are most appropriate for neurodivergent people?

There is some evidence that blues and greens can help reduce anxiety and aid concentration in people with ADHD¹¹ and autism, while pastel pinks and lilacs can also have a calming effect.

Soft yellows and oranges can also be beneficial, providing comfort while also stimulating mental activity and supporting engagement¹².

And neutral colours like beige and grey can also be calming, though white can be too bright and jarring, especially when combined with fluorescent lighting¹³.

It is perhaps surprising that the respondents to our survey ranked lighting rather low in the list of important considerations when designing for neurodiversity, given that autistic people commonly have lower tolerance for light and can find fluorescent and other artificial light disturbing¹⁴.

There should therefore be a preference towards natural light and softer, diffused lighting in order to minimize glare.

And building in some flexibility, like being able to adjust lighting in different areas can help people create an environment that best suits their preferences.

It is important to remember that there is not a one-size fits all approach, and where possible the design should be specific for the end users, who should be engaged directly in the design process where possible.



Colour brings joy

Hannah Cooper is interior fit out lead at Cygnet, a leading provider of health and social care services for young people and adults with mental health needs, acquired brain injuries, eating disorders, autism and learning disabilities within the UK.

"I've worked in the mental healthcare sector for nine years now, creating interiors for healthcare and social care environments.

Every project is a collaboration, and I start by sitting down with the team who'll be managing the location to get their input, as well as feedback from Experts by Experience, people with lived experience of inpatient settings.

I never want the space to feel clinical, so I avoid bright, brilliant white which is so common in healthcare but can feel institutional and cold.

If you can add some colour, it can soften the feel of the space, bring interest or even joy into that environment.

Striking a balance

With bedrooms, for example, I stick to very muted tones, because that's an individual's own personal space and retreat, and I don't want to intrude on that with bright colours that they might find overwhelming, too stimulating.

Installing adaptable features within the environment; such as dimmable lighting, which can be controlled by the individual creates autonomy over the space.

Acoustic panels that match the colour of the ceiling help to reduce the ambient noise which individuals can find overwhelming.

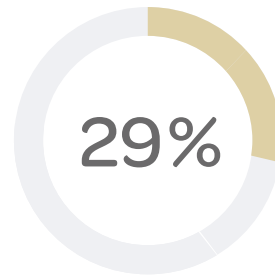
But in the communal areas, there can be an opportunity to use more colour and create an environment that is more stimulating a more vibrant environment, however ensuring there is variety in the spaces is important so there can be something for everyone.

You can't always just copy and paste a design and colour scheme; it has to be service specific. That means considering the local culture when choosing artwork, for example.

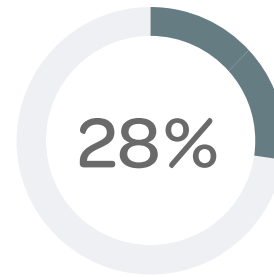
Art and colour can work hand in hand and should be sympathetic to the location, so it's familiar and doesn't feel alien; bustling cityscapes might not be appropriate in a coastal town, for example.

Ultimately, neurodiversity is a very wide spectrum, so it's about striking a balance by having variety and making spaces adaptable so it's inclusive for everyone."

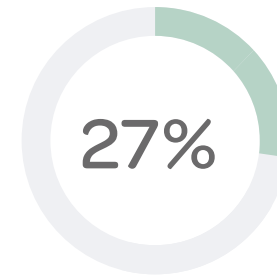
When it comes to designing spaces used by neurodivergent people, what, if anything, do you believe to be the most important things to consider?



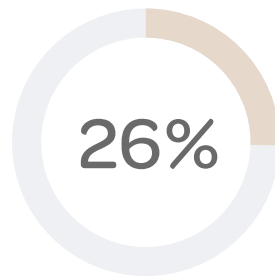
Colour



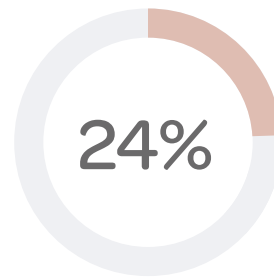
Size of space



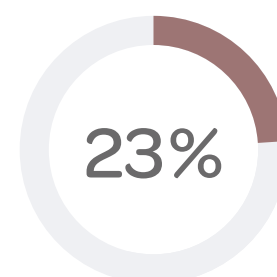
Safety



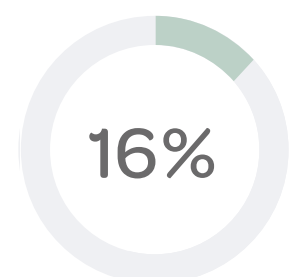
Consistency of aesthetic



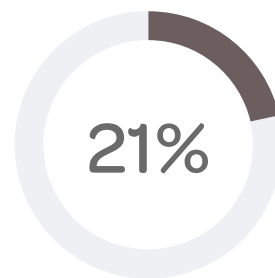
Furniture



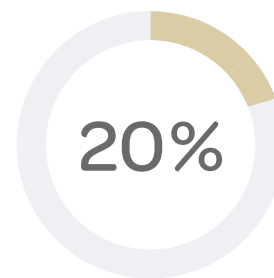
Layout/navigation



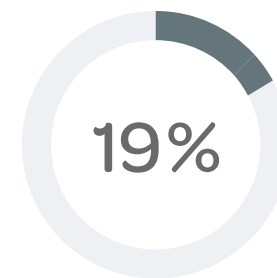
Acoustics



Variety of spaces



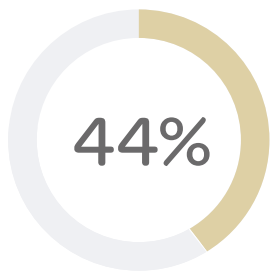
Connection with nature



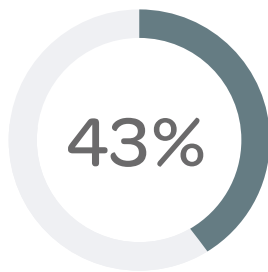
Lighting

When designing a space for a neurodivergent occupant, which of the following would you include?

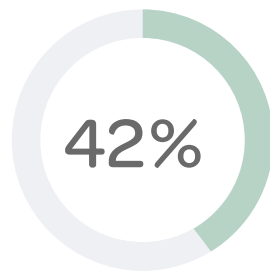
Which lighting would you be most likely to specify for environments with neurodivergent occupants?



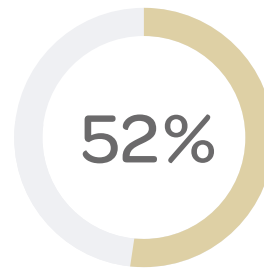
Soft, neutral tones



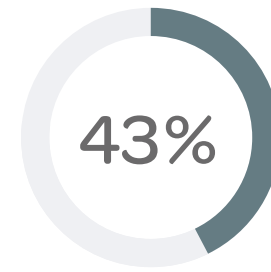
Low sheen paints



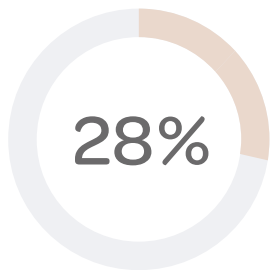
Plain walls



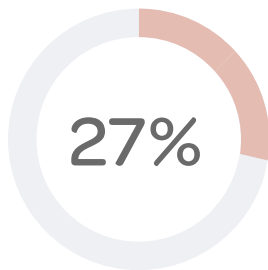
Natural lighting



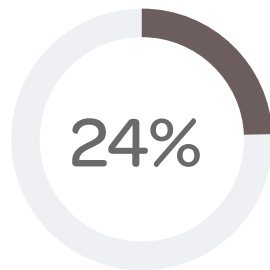
Dimming controls



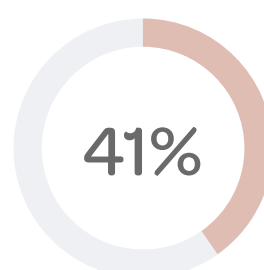
Bold, primary colours



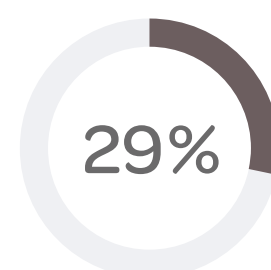
Reflective surfaces



Fussy patterns

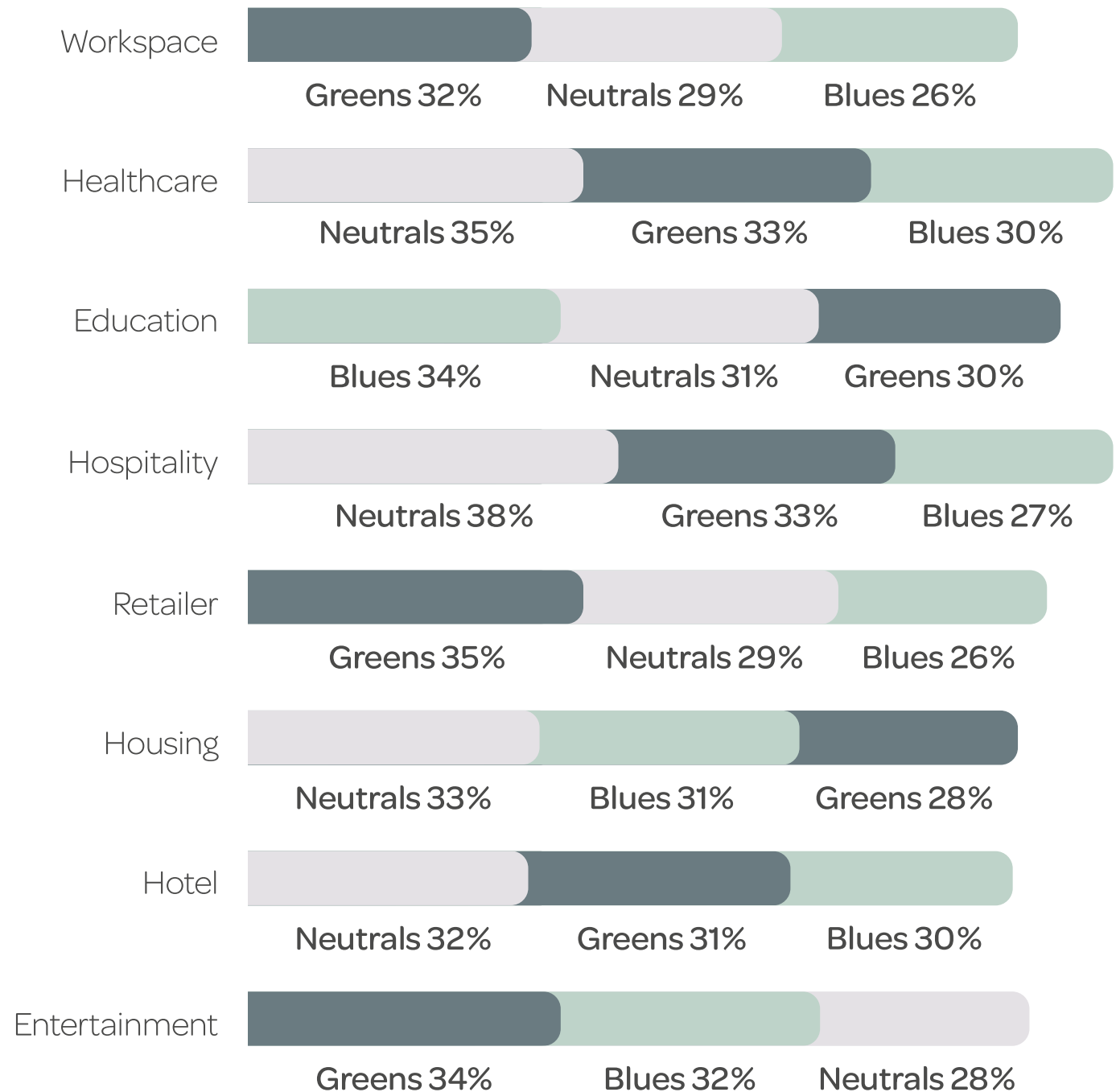


Colour changing lighting



Fluorescent lights

Which colours
would you be more
likely to use when
designing a space
that is used by
neurodivergent
people?





In summary

The starting point when designing a colour scheme for neurodivergent people is to understand who's using the space and what it is that they are using it for.

A scheme must be cohesive, with all aspects working together and complementing each other.

Ideally, this should be informed by discussions with the people who are going to use the space.

It may also be possible to trial a colour scheme in one area of a building and then get feedback before you roll it out further.

Often, you will be working on a mix of spaces, each of which has a different purpose.

This is where colour zoning can help, with different coloured flooring or doors to signify what activity happens in different spaces, like meeting rooms, quiet zones and creative areas, for example.

This kind of compartmentalisation can help people navigate spaces and influence how they use them.

And when it comes to designing for neurodiversity, there is sometimes a preconception that you can't use colour, or that any colour must be in pale tones.

That's not true; the important thing is to use colour in a way that complements the purpose of the space and supports the people who use it.

That's not true; the important thing is to use colour in a way that complements the purpose of the space and supports the people who use it.

At the end of the day, everyone loves colour; the challenge is to choose the right colour – or combination of colours – for the right purpose.

Jemma Saunders, Crown Colour Specialist

choreography

The colour palette throughout this report is based on Choreography, a theme from our 2025/26 Colour Insights report that features warm, muted tones, like soft lilacs and greens, alongside deeper shades, the palette offers a calming and cocooning effect, that evolves to the individual.

Choreography is flexibility embodied, it's about movement and adaptive design that supports different sensory experiences within a space.

There's lots of softness in the palette, and the complementary tones are purposely proportional, allowing for endless possibilities to combine and reinvent the colourways.

Download the full Colour Insights report and explore all of our theme.



scan to
download

colour
insights

2025/2026

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neurodiversity report

2025/2026

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