



Royal College of Art

THE HELEN HAMLYN CENTRE FOR DESIGN

**Space in Mind: Design advice
for public spaces at the RCA,
in response to neurodivergent
staff and students**

'I think different public spaces definitely influenced my emotional wellbeing, to the extent that I actively avoided certain spaces, to avoid being triggered or overwhelmed. Sometimes my experience in certain spaces could ruin my entire day. And there were also places that I visited as frequently as possible, since I felt relaxed when I was there.'

Space in Mind participant

About the project

Space in Mind went beyond the accessibility and functionality of public spaces to explore the intangible; the sensory, social and emotional experience. In collaboration with neurodivergent staff and students at the Royal College of Art (RCA), we visually documented the invisible qualities of public spaces such as the corridors, seating, social spaces and the journeys through them.

We ask whether these spaces support or hinder our emotional wellbeing. How could design consider neurodivergent experiences to better design public space? And can these insights go beyond physical design changes, to influence how we welcome and are welcomed into buildings, like universities, through to the facilitation of 'reasonable adjustments'?

Space in Mind followed the principle of "nothing about us without us," emphasising the importance of involving people. This project was not a simple survey, or about the number of responses received. Instead, it recognised the complexity of human experience and the challenge of articulating feelings and perceptions about a space. The research team used a range of engagement methods across the three campuses to explore the sensory, social and emotional responses to public spaces that are often unique, multifaceted, and difficult to put into words.

Themes

This document is framed around five themes, informed by the insights and experiences of the neurodivergent staff and students who participated in this project.

IDENTITY, BELONGING, PURPOSE	4
SOCIAL & QUIET SPACES	6
ARRIVING & MOVING AROUND	9
LIGHTING, TEMPERATURE, SOUND	11
COLOUR, PATTERN, TEXTURE	13

IDENTITY, BELONGING, PURPOSE

When spaces reflect the unique character of the RCA - through materials that tell a story, creative displays, and room for personal expression - they help individuals feel connected to the community and its history.

Inclusive, welcoming environments that support positive social interactions can reduce feelings of being an outsider. Purposeful design, clear signage, and structured areas also reduce sensory overload and support confidence in navigating the space. By celebrating creativity, embracing quirks, and allowing people to leave their mark, these spaces can move beyond being simply functional - they become places where people feel seen, safe, and part of something meaningful.



'It should feel like you're walking into a space of creative learning, something that is special, that is automatically inclusive and actually more containing.'

'I think we should enjoy the fact that we are an art school and all the quirkiness that that brings, and allow people to have spaces that they can make their own and enjoy.'

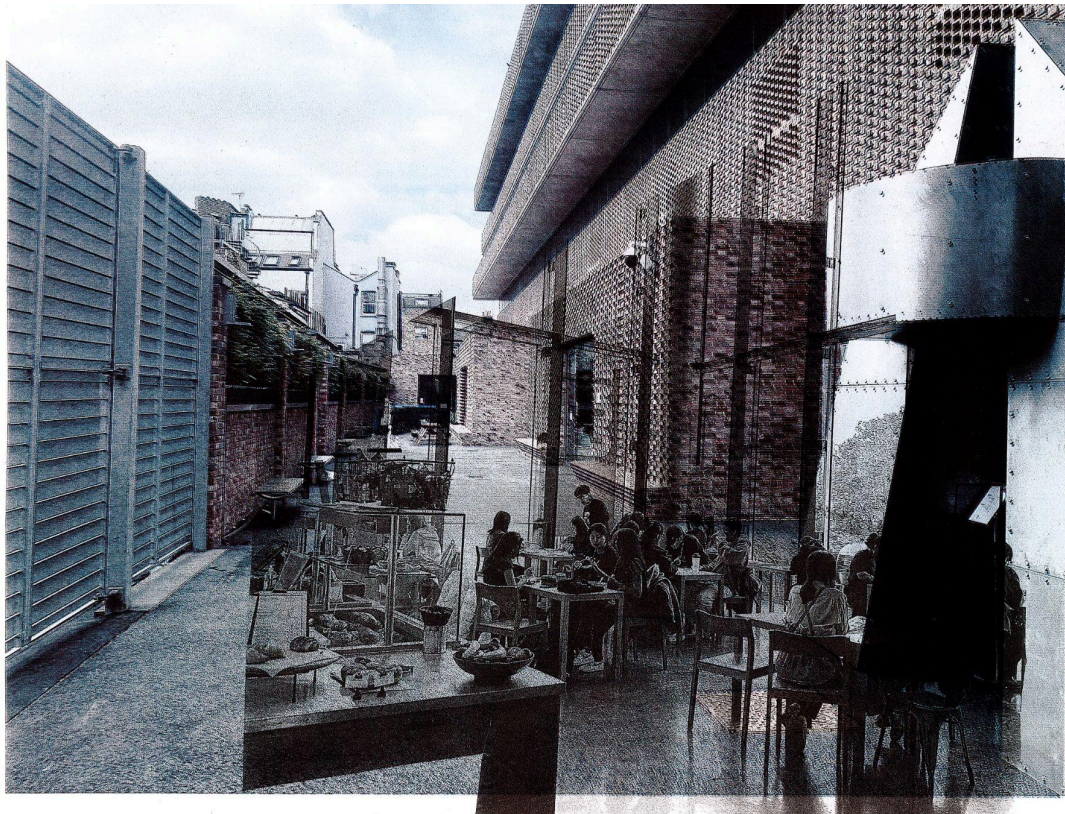
'It's nice to see the students making use of that courtyard space... taking over space and doing something with it. I think it really gives a sense of identity to it.'

Think about:

- **Connect spaces to the past:** Use materials and designs that tell a story. For example, wooden elements that age over time or spaces that feel like they have seen history help students connect to the building.
- **Supportive social interactions:** Spaces should promote inclusive and supportive social interactions. When students and staff feel welcomed by others and the environment, they feel they belong.(see: arriving & moving around)
- **Embrace the quirks:** Celebrate the unique and quirky nature of an art school. Create spaces people can make their own, reflecting the RCA's creative spirit.
- **Create a sense of belonging:** Avoid bland, empty spaces. If there's a lack of identity or warmth, it can feel like you're passing through, not part of something special.
- **Create community:** Encourage staff and students to use spaces for their own posters, communications, artwork, or exhibitions. Some public areas are more suitable. Visual noise can be minimised by formal or informal signalling where spaces should be left or reset after use, and where people have freedom to make their mark.
- **Celebrate creativity:** Highlight the variety of students and staff work and ideas. Letting creativity shine through in design choices, adaptations, and formal or informal displays of projects or exhibitions, makes everyone feel they belong to a unique community.
- **Create structured spaces:** Keep spaces organised and avoid mixing too many functions in one area. Clear, purposeful design will help staff and students feel more at ease and less overwhelmed.
- **Clarify space usage:** make it obvious when and how spaces are available. For example, café hours should be clear, so staff and students know whether they can enter or use the space.
- **Encourage exploration:** Design spaces that encourage staff and students to explore. Little surprises or intriguing corners encourage people to discover more of the campuses.
- **Break up large spaces:** Instead of one big room, divide larger areas into smaller, connected sections, to avoid feelings of being overwhelmed or lost.

SOCIAL & QUIET SPACES

Public spaces meet many social needs; to talk quietly, for bigger groups to work or socialise, for chance encounters, and to be alone. These different levels of interaction also have different levels of privacy. We may wish to be alone in public, noisy behind closed doors, or vice-versa. Some spaces are needed spontaneously; some meetings can be planned. A variety of spaces, and consideration behind them, will help everyone to find the space they need.



'I think when you're in a tutorial, when you're in a seminar or a lecture and working, you put all your nervous energy into that. So when you break from it, for me with my kind of wiring, I need to be quiet. That is not always an easy thing.'

'Sometimes I can't help but think it's a shame I can't / won't / don't think it's a good idea to go to certain places, such as the bar. I don't think I can deal with the noise or the crowd, so I've never once visited during opening time.'

'[The building] doesn't get you to run into people, to collaborate more, to do more work between departments and staff.'

'I really enjoyed being in the library, because the noise level was always quite low, and there were many "nooks" in which I could at least temporarily hide.'

Think about:

- **Social spaces for all types of interaction:** Not everyone feels comfortable with casual greetings or big social gatherings. Provide a mix of social spaces – some for one-on-one or small group interactions, and others open and lively for larger social activities.
- **Think about glazing:** In public spaces, people enjoy views outside or onto other spaces in the RCA. In spaces for private meetings, diffused glazing can help create a calm and focused space.
- **Create relaxed social zones:** Keep social areas like the café or canteen welcoming, with a mix of dining settings to allow people to both group and retreat. Some may seek peace or solitude within the wider social setting.
- **Encourage casual encounters without pressure:** Create public spaces or corridors for people to cross paths, with space to linger, for moments of serendipity. Too much prescription and control in the routes we take and spaces we use can be isolating.
- **Make spaces feel private:** Offer areas where staff and students can feel a bit more private, so they don't feel watched. Small, enclosed spaces can be really calming, especially if they're quiet and private.
- **Create rest spots:** Have areas where people can relax, socialise, or work, without the pressure to keep moving. Flexible seating helps people reconfigure spaces for them.
- **Create quiet zones:** Designate certain areas as quiet spaces, set up for relaxation or work, especially for staff and students who need a break from noise. A mix of rooms and quiet nooks will help people who need to escape the hustle and bustle.
- **Informal quiet space:** A balance of quieter, calmer public space in general, for individual or group use, will reduce demand on rooms such as sensory or multi-faith rooms, keeping these spaces for their intended purpose.
- **Offer private spaces:** Private spaces, both bookable and for spontaneous use, allow quiet time, calls or private conversations, away from the sight, sound and interaction of others.
- **Provide quiet spots in busy areas:** a quiet space near to a lecture theatre or bar can allow someone overwhelmed by crowds to move away, such as when waiting for a talk to start.
- **Quiet space outdoors:** The same mix of spaces can be applied outside. Some outdoor spaces can invite interaction, some group socialising, and some offer peace and solitude, even in busy months. This way, everyone can benefit from outdoor space.
- **Make the most of nature:** The RCA's most popular spaces tend to have lots of

natural light and/or views of nature. Add more windows or open spaces so staff and students can enjoy trees, gardens, and nature.

- **Provide more outdoor access:** Open up terraces and create outdoor spaces that are easy to reach. A diversity of outdoor spaces, with different levels of privacy and social interaction, can mimic internal public spaces.
- **Add shelters or canopies** for rainy or sunny days to make outdoor public spaces usable throughout the year.
- **Create a designated smoking area** so those who do not smoke can enjoy the fresh air and a space to have lunch outside.
- **Provide comfortable seating:** Add comfy chairs or soft benches near windows and/or in quieter areas, so staff and students can relax and unwind.
- **Make doors easier to use:** adjust heavy doors, especially in high-traffic areas like the cafeteria, to be more inclusive, more welcoming and less tiring for people passing through.

ARRIVING & MOVING AROUND

When arriving and moving around public spaces at the RCA, neurodivergent staff and students value clear, intuitive design that reduces stress and improves navigation. Key suggestions include creating easily identifiable pathways, with consistent wayfinding symbols and minimal visual clutter. Sensory maps could highlight quieter areas, and entrances should feel open and welcoming to reduce anxiety. Familiarity with the space is essential, so design should support exploration and minimise disruptions. Entrances and wayfinding must also work for first-time visitors and the RCA's local communities. The aim is to create a cohesive, inviting environment where everyone feels welcome and at ease.



'It's always fascinating to be up here and looking down on the workshops and seeing people working. That's amazing, I think. It's a really beautiful feeling.'

'Once we get into this building it starts to get really confusing - finding your way around - because it all looks the same.'

'The nature of the building is that it changes so constantly. It's the only place I've ever worked where a wall can be put up, and I'm suddenly faced with brand new wayfinding in a way that I haven't experienced before. That can be really challenging'

Think about:

- **Create clear pathways:** Ensure that entrances and exits, stairways, lifts and toilets are easy to find, and the layout of spaces intuitive so people don't feel lost or stressed when moving around.
- **Visual consistency:** Keep a consistent design style across all wayfinding. This will make spaces easier to navigate and feel more cohesive. When you know where everything is and how it all connects, it's easier to feel at home.
- **Intuitive wayfinding:** Use clear, consistent symbols and colour to guide people. Consider spaces with permanent use and those that may need updating more frequently. Show which spaces are public, and where the use or access to spaces is significantly different (workshops, studios)
- **Individual Access:** Access cards create anxiety around where we are allowed to be. Consider where card-access is needed, if access is as inclusive as possible, and how to show individuals the extent of RCA spaces they can enjoy.
- **Reduce visual clutter:** Minimise random signs and words around the space. Instead, keep RCA visual communication simple and focused to avoid overstimulation.
- **Create sensory maps:** this could highlight the quiet spaces, busier spaces, or where to find nature and fresh air.
- **Minimise disruptions:** Avoid constant construction or noise that could disrupt routine pathways or spaces. Provide clear information in advance (both in the space and online) about changes, the length of the disruption, and alternative routes and spaces.
- **Create a visual journey** of the different spaces at the RCA - so that anyone can see what that space looks like before they arrive.
- **Different audiences:** Consider the different understanding, access and sense of belonging in public space for staff, students and visitors. All need to feel welcome, enabled and relaxed, whether here for a day, a year or a decade.
- **Less text, more sensory design:** At entrances, keep words and other visual noise to a minimum, to avoid overloading the senses and give new people time to understand the space.
- **Avoid entrance crowding:** Keep entrances spacious so staff and students don't feel trapped or overwhelmed. An open entryway can help reduce that intense feeling in a busy transition space.
- **A welcoming feel:** Entrances should feel special, not just a door. Make them stand out and inviting, so staff, students and visitors feel welcomed and belonging to a meaningful space that is supportive, curious and joyful.

LIGHTING, TEMPERATURE, SOUND

Neurodivergent staff and students would benefit from environments that offer and invite control over lighting, temperature, and sound, whether that's flexible and adjustable lighting options, such as desk lamps, windows that can be opened for personal comfort, or autonomy over local heating systems.

Approaches to sound can be zoned in space or time, such as quieter music-free moments or noise-reducing elements. We all enjoy different levels, which adjust with time, season and activity. More individual and community autonomy can create a sense of control for everyone, itself another way to enhance wellbeing.



'All the RCA campuses are quite echoey and quite open spaces to make big projects and do big things. But it means that going through spaces can be quite overwhelming.'

'In our studio, it gets very noisy. It's even, I'd say, expected to be noisy. Whereas the library, It's a space where it's not. It's interesting when those rules emerge instead of being predicated by a sticker on the door.'

'Within the workshops, I'm almost never the only one wearing ear defenders, so I became just like everyone else. It's a good feeling.'

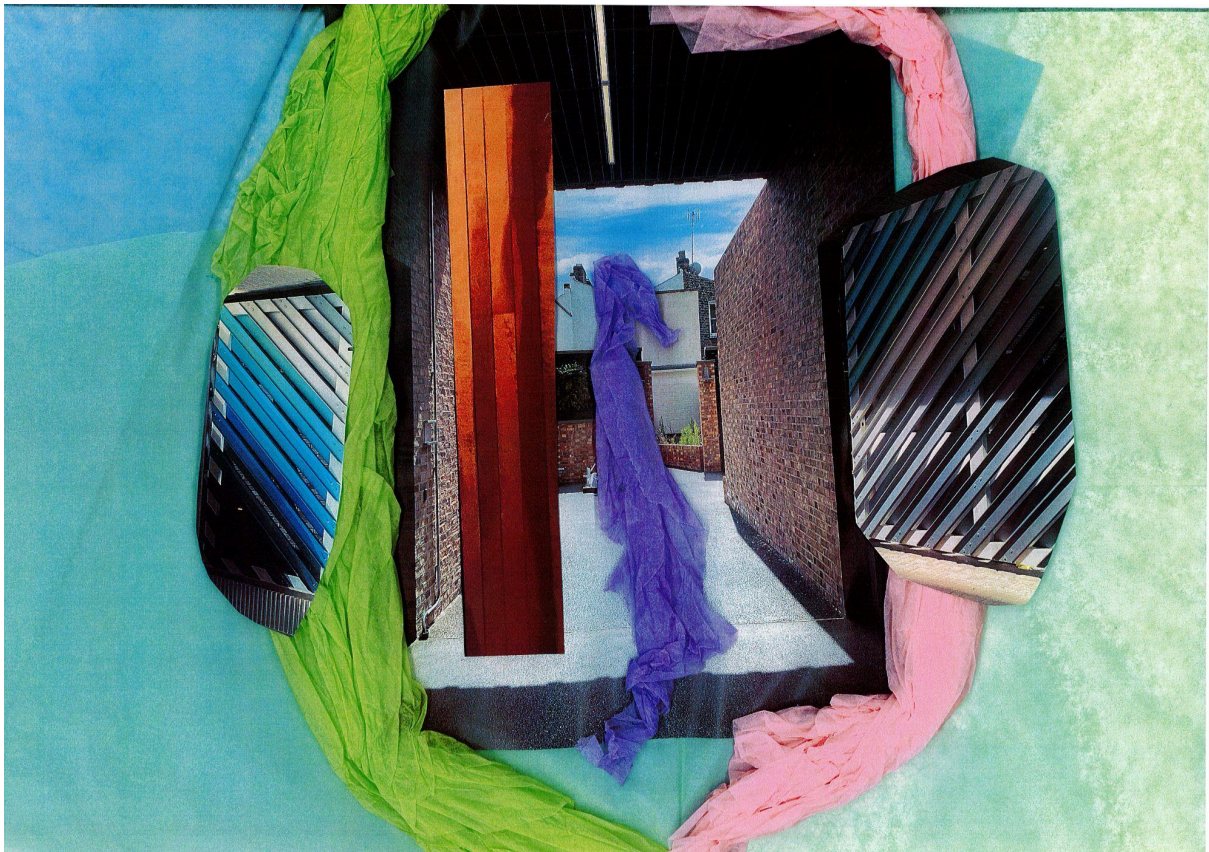
Think about:

- **Flexible and adjustable lighting options:** Provide more options for adjustable lighting in different areas, for example, lamps or desk lights available in study areas so people can change the lighting for the individual and the task.
- **Soft, diffused lighting:** Use softer, diffused lighting instead of harsh strip lighting to reduce discomfort. Warm lighting can also create a more pleasant atmosphere.
- **More natural light:** Where possible, increase the amount of natural light. Large windows or skylights can make the space feel brighter on cloudy or dark days. It also gives staff and students the chance to connect with the outdoors. Provide blinds so people can also control temperature and glare.
- **Keep the air fresh:** Make sure there's good internal airflow to keep the environment feeling fresh and energising for everyone.
- **Adaptable environment:** Give staff and students the autonomy to open and close windows.
- **Control background music:** Be mindful of the music playing in public spaces. Some staff and students find it distracting. Consider times when and where music is played and offer quieter, music-free zones.
- **More quiet spaces in workshops:** While noise is expected in studios and workshops, quieter areas within these or soundproof booths could help those who feel overstimulated.
- **Reduce sudden noises:** Be mindful of loud, unpredictable noises like coffee machines, hand dryers and tills. Consider quieter appliances or place noise-reducing elements around these areas.
- **Improve temperature control:** Giving people more autonomy to adjust heating and cooling systems will make spaces more comfortable for everyone.

COLOUR, PATTERN, TEXTURE

Colour, pattern, and texture play a key role in creating a welcoming and harmonious environment. Soft, vibrant colours bring warmth and inspiration to areas, while carefully chosen artwork and patterns enhance the atmosphere without being overwhelming.

Continuity in materials and colours helps make transitions between spaces feel seamless. The use of textures, such as wood or softer finishes, adds depth and creates a more inviting and comfortable 'lived-in' feel. Homely materials and soft furnishings in communal areas promote comfort, reduce noise, and a sense of belonging. Thoughtful design choices help create a balanced, stimulating environment that respects individual sensory needs.



'It needs to be friendlier here, in terms of colour. A colour other than polar white.'

'We've not a single soft surface to sit or lay down. I sometimes go to the library because there are armchairs, although they're not soft.'

'I love the stair railings. The resonance of the metal ringing underneath a hand, when knocked on, enriches my experience of the space.'

Think about:

- **Add colour and warmth:** Bring in more colour to brighten up spaces. Avoid too much grey; incorporate softer tones and vibrant colours where relevant to make areas inviting and inspiring.
- **Bring harmony to spaces:** Create a more harmonious feel by blending colours and materials that complement each other to feel unified.
- **Enhance with art or patterns:** Add artwork or pattern to blank walls to inspire and reflect the art school. Be mindful of the positioning of the artwork so that it is not too confronting and a person has the choice to look at it or not. Invite staff and students to have a say in what artworks to put on the walls.
- **Create continuity:** Consider how materials and colours flow together throughout the space. A soft, consistent design can make transitions between areas feel seamless, drawing people into different spaces.
- **Communicate intention:** Consider where art, graphics, pattern and colour are appropriate, to create feelings of stimulation and belonging, as well as communicating the intention of spaces, as staff and students move through.
- **Focus on texture and materials:** Use a variety of textures, like brick or softer finishes, to add depth and visual interest. Softer colours, textured materials and those that wear make spaces feel less sterile and more 'lived-in'.
- **Tone down overhead clutter:** Remove or hide wires and systems in the ceiling where possible to create a cleaner, calmer environment.
- **Use materials that age well:** Choose materials that get better with age and allow for wear and tear, like wood or brass. This gives new spaces character and makes them feel more lived-in and welcoming.
- **Sensory materials:** Think about the textures, temperature and finishes of surfaces people touch: handrails, door panels, seats; to communicate identity and belonging through warmth, quality and heritage.
- **Use homely materials:** Create a homely vibe in communal areas like the canteens, cafes and kitchens by using warm, inviting materials like wood or soft fabrics to avoid a sterile environment.
- **Add soft furnishings:** To reduce noise and create a more comfortable atmosphere, add soft furnishings like cushions, rugs, and padded booths.
- **Comfortable seating:** Avoid seating that feels uncomfortable, like hard, cold metal. Options with soft, durable materials invite people to stop for longer.

The Team

Space in Mind was led by Dr Katie Gaudion and Gail Ramster, with Beatrice Sangster, Tristan Webber, Anne Toomey, Richard Nash and Alkesh Palmer. We would like to thank all the staff and students who took part and generously shared their different experiences. We would also like to thank the RCA for funding this project as part of the RCA Research Impact Development Fund.

The images featured in this document are collages made by neurodivergent staff and students during a *Space in Mind* workshop, accompanied by quotes in their own words. It is their creative response to the mass of photographs and words generated throughout this project using a humble photocopier.

This publication is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC-BY-ND 4.0 Licence](#).

This license enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use. CC BY-ND includes the following elements:

BY: credit must be given to the creator.

ND: No derivatives or adaptations of the work are permitted. May, 2025