

The Neurodiverse City

DESIGN TRUST
FOR PUBLIC SPACE

The Neurodiverse City



The Neurodiverse City (2021-2026) is a research and design initiative to reimagine New York City public spaces to better support neurodiversity. A joint initiative between the architecture practices WIP Collaborative (WIP) and Verona Carpenter Architects (VCA), the project engages neurodivergent children, teenagers, and adult self-advocates, as well as families and facilitators, in creating prototypes to make NYC streets and playgrounds more neuroinclusive. The Neurodiverse City was selected as the winner of the 2021 "The Restorative City" Request for Proposals (RFP) organized by the Design Trust for Public Space; the project received support from the National Endowment for the Arts and Trinity Church Wall Street Philanthropies. Working in parallel over the course of a multi-year, phased research and design process, WIP's project activities focus on the design of public streets, while VCA's work focuses on play spaces.

The Neurodiverse City team includes:

Design Trust for Public Space

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Verona Carpenter Architects (VCA)

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Support for the Neurodiverse City comes from:

Trinity Church Wall Street Philanthropies

The National Endowment for the Arts

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Verona Carpenter Architects (VCA) is an architecture and interior design firm based in New York City. Led by principals Irina Verona and Jennifer Carpenter, our firm creates inclusive and resilient spaces spanning diverse typologies and scales, from education and community to workplace and wellness. We use design to reimagine access and to recognize disability and neurodivergence as valuable facets of our shared humanity. Across projects, research, and advocacy, VCA creates environments with more affordances to welcome a broad range of bodies and minds.

WIP Collaborative (WIP) is a shared practice of independent designers who work together on projects that engage community and the public realm. Comprised of Abby Coover, Bryony Roberts, Elsa Ponce, Lindsay Harkema, Ryan Brooke Thomas, Sera Ghadaki, and Sonya Gimon, WIP creates vibrant public-facing projects that engage local communities and contexts through a highly intentional design and research process. For the Neurodiverse City, the WIP team also included Sasha Topolnytska (FARMMM Studio). WIP project team for the Neurodiverse City was led by Lindsay Harkema, Sonya Gimon, and Bryony Roberts.

Design Trust for Public Space (DTPS) The Design Trust for Public Space is a non-profit organization that unlocks the potential of New York's public spaces. Our unique model catalyzes design ideas into action for a more just and equitable city. Established in 1995 by Andrea Woodner, the Design Trust was founded with a mission to bring design expertise to the public realm, when public space was often considered an afterthought. Since our inaugural project to develop design guidelines for the Brooklyn Public Library, the Design Trust and its collaborative initiatives can be felt and experienced across the city, from parks and plazas to streets and public buildings.



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Graphic design by MTWTF
Typography ES Peak Rounded

Edition V1.1

Published by the Design Trust for Public Space
40 Worth Street, Suite 603
New York, NY 10013
www.designtrust.org

Table of Contents

8 Neurodiversity and Public Space

16 Stories from the Field

18 Streetscapes

30 Play Spaces

42 Expanding the Impact

Neurodiversity and Public Space

Defining Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the infinite variation of neurocognitive functioning within our species—the different ways that people think, feel, and process information about the world around them (Walker, 2021). The term originated in the 1990s within the Autism Rights Movement and through the work of autistic scholar Judy Singer, and gained broader usage in the early 2000s alongside the rise of the Neurodiversity Movement and the articulation of the Neurodiversity Paradigm (Walker). Activists and self-advocates introduced the terms neurodivergent and neurotypical to challenge dominant assumptions about what is considered "normal" and to expose the biases embedded in those norms. Neurodivergent describes people whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant societal norms, including those who are autistic, dyslexic or dyspraxic, individuals with ADHD or epilepsy, and those with anxiety, depression, or PTSD. Neurotypical refers to people whose neurocognitive functioning aligns with dominant societal norms. Neurodiversity therefore encompasses both neurodivergent and neurotypical people: the full diversity of human experiences.

The Neurodiversity Movement aligns with the Disability Justice movement in many ways, including in its shift from a "medical model" to a "social model" of disability. While the medical model pathologizes differences and seeks to "cure" them, the social model celebrates differences and directs attention to the social and environmental conditions that can exclude and disable individuals. While not all neurodivergent people identify as disabled, many may be disabled by specific contexts or environments, and some hold one or more formal diagnoses. Estimates suggest that 15–20% of the population is neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020). The Neurodiverse City project embraces three key elements of neuroinclusion activism:

- The Neurodiversity Paradigm: the belief that neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity, and, by extension, there is no "right way" to be (Walker).

- **The Neurodiversity Movement:** a social justice movement that seeks inclusion and participation of neurominorities, including in the design process.
- **The Social Model of Disability:** which defines society and the environment as enabling or disabling people, exposing culturally dominant behavior norms, and seeking to dismantle barriers. This stands in opposition to the medical model of disability, which treats disability as inherent in the individual.

How Design Can Support Neurodiversity

Every individual has a unique response to sensory input from the surrounding environment. People do not experience space in the same way, in part because sensory processing varies widely—some individuals are more likely to experience heightened sensitivity to sound, light, or touch, while others have lower sensitivity to the same stimuli. Even within a single person, responses can fluctuate from day to day. Over-responsive sensory processing can render spaces overwhelming when they are saturated with loud noises, bright lights, and constant movement. Conversely, individuals who seek greater sensory input may find limited opportunities for active, playful movement or tactile exploration. Most indoor and outdoor environments lack the range of sensory experiences necessary to support neurodiverse populations.



Design choices have an enormous impact. Lighting, acoustics, shade structures, and planting greatly affect the sensory conditions of a space. Research from psychiatry, sociology, design, and environmental science has deepened understanding of how the design of the built environment can support a wider range of spatial experiences. This research has also been translated into practice, such as in corporate and educational settings (Waisman-Nitzan, 2021; Jean-Baptiste, 2019; Volkers, 2019). Some architects have begun to design interior spaces that are attentive to neurodivergence by reducing noise and light variability, using color to improve wayfinding, and creating areas for focused and quiet work. However, the goals of these approaches to neuroinclusive design—for example, advocating for "versatile environments that provide for a range of preferences [that] make differences less apparent" (HOK 2019)—can serve to reinforce the normative biases that neurodiversity stands to resist. Instead of striving for assimilation, maximizing productivity, or neutralizing sensory inputs (Doyle 2025), the Neurodiverse City project has intentionally sought references for spaces where people can be themselves and find joy in their daily experiences.

Public Spaces

Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible, without systemic barriers of discrimination or inaccessibility. Public health experts and medical professionals

agree that public spaces are necessary for physical health (movement, exercise, play), mental health (release, social connection), and community health (interaction, support, intergenerational contact, access to arts and culture). Accessible public transportation is essential for many to reach school or employment and to participate in social gatherings and activities—all crucial to individual development and independence. Without equitable access to public space and transit, there is no health equity.

Every individual has a unique response to sensory input from the surrounding environment.

While there is an expanding body of knowledge about supporting neurodiversity in interior environments such as schools, offices, and health care spaces, there is limited discourse about neurodiversity and the design of public spaces. Most public spaces lack the variety of sensory experiences needed to support neurodiversity. Public spaces are designed primarily for normative bodies, minds, and experiences. While Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 requires public spaces to

be accessible to disabled people, these requirements focus primarily on physical accessibility features such as curb cuts and ramps. Sensory accessibility is not covered by the ADA or any other uniformly adopted code or design standard. Inclusive design guidelines, such as the Inclusive Design Guidelines for New York (2010), are typically recommended but not required, and are narrow in scope. For instance, in the NYC guidelines, mentions of sensory experience are limited to recommendations that signage be provided in multiple formats.

Public spaces do pose some inherent challenges, such as their exposure to unpredictable noises, lights, traffic, and weather changes, as well as to unpredictable social interactions. Nonetheless, introducing a greater range of sensory conditions—from quiet areas to active zones—can make them far more inviting and accessible. Most importantly, offering sensory options empowers people to have choice and agency in shaping their experience of the public realm. Furthermore, introducing a neuroinclusive design process to the creation and improvement of public spaces can make an enormous difference in supporting neurodivergent individuals. A collaborative process and tailored design changes can introduce crucial respite, sensory variety, and opportunities for play in the essential infrastructure of public streets, plazas, and playgrounds. By designing public spaces with the needs of neurodivergent people at the forefront, the Neurodiverse City team invokes

the "Curb-Cut Effect"—improvements made for vulnerable communities that ultimately benefit everyone (Blackwell, 2017). This means going beyond merely accommodating "difference" and instead welcoming the full range of thinking, moving, and playing styles in public space.

Approach

The Neurodiverse City project aims to contribute examples of engagement processes and design strategies for improving public spaces and expanding inclusive design standards. Rather than a roster of dos and don'ts, this project underlines the importance of a locally-based inclusive engagement process to identify the challenges and opportunities in specific spaces, and offers prototypical examples of built applications that respond to these findings. The Neurodiverse City project foregrounds dialogue with neurodivergent children, teenagers, adult self-advocates, and caregivers in a co-creative process, as well as insights from contemporary neuroinclusive design discourse.

Key Influences

Verona Carpenter Architects: In exploring how to make play spaces more neuroinclusive, VCA drew on prior research and projects, including the 2023 article "Neurodiversity, Sustainability, and Inclusion: A Case for Redundancy in Architecture" and the 2019 Learning Lab School project, which formalized a design approach of sensory redundancy. VCA also examined the historical relationship

between disability and play (discussed in the following sections), including the 1984 Playground for All Children, a key historical precedent proposing a bold and experimental vision for an inclusive play environment shared equally by disabled and non-disabled children. A deeper exploration of the relationship between disability and play emerged from a design studio that VCA co-taught at Columbia on this subject and through partnerships with disabled and neurodivergent creatives. David Gissen's book *Architecture of Disability*, though not specific to neurodivergence, was also an important reference, as it reframes disability as an opportunity and as a starting point for both design itself and for the design process.

WIP Collaborative:

In exploring how to make public streets more neuroinclusive, WIP drew from research by self-advocates and architects, as well as from previous experiences collaborating with neurodivergent individuals on designing public spaces. WIP was inspired by the Sensory Responsive Design Framework created by Kathryn Finnigan (Finnigan, 2024) and the ASPECTSS Autism Design Index developed by Magda Mostafa (Mostafa, 2014). Finnigan brings awareness to the ways in which individual sensory sensitivities can trigger experiences of synesthesia or difficulty processing environmental conditions, often causing an uncomfortable or hostile experience of built environments, particularly public spaces. Mostafa's

ASPECTSS Autism Design Index offers spatial design guidelines to support neurodivergent users by increasing the range of environmental conditions available. These include considerations for acoustics, spatial sequencing, compartmentalization, transitions, sensory zoning, and escape spaces for individuals to seek refuge when feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated.

Expertise lives in the minds and bodies of people who navigate space and invent their own adaptations to obstructive environments.

Taken together, Finnigan and Mostafa's work offer precedents for analyzing existing spaces, identifying challenges, and imagining a greater range of sensory conditions. In addition to these precedents, WIP Collaborative also draws from previous work exploring how a differentiated spectrum of sensory environments can enable greater choice and accessibility in public space. In the project *Restorative Ground* in Manhattan,

NY, supported by the Urban Design Forum and the Hudson Square BID, WIP introduced a streetscape with three zones of sensory experience: focused, active, and calm. The project emerged from conversations with neurodivergent self-advocates who expressed a desire for spaces of both respite and play in the public realm.

Co-Creative Process

Central to the Neurodiverse City project were the perspectives and contributions of neurodivergent individuals. The design process was rooted in co-creation with community partners. Expertise lives in the minds and bodies of people who navigate space and invent their own adaptations to obstructive environments. WIP and VCA each initiated several partnerships with local organizations whose work advocates for the needs of neurodivergent communities. Some organizations connected neurodivergent individuals to project activities, helping to coordinate and facilitate their participation, while others provided essential contextual knowledge about legal advocacy after several decades in

operation. Organizational leaders and staff members also served as members of the NC Advisory Committee that offered expert oversight as project goals and methods were developed. By prioritizing community expertise first and foremost, this process cultivated models for designing together.

Working in parallel over the course of a multi-year, phased research and design process, WIP and VCA developed participatory projects with local community organizations supporting neurodivergent populations. WIP's project activities focused on the design of public streets, while VCA's work focused on public play spaces. The WIP and VCA teams both moved through two phases: sensory audits and design prototypes. The teams collaborated with local community organizations to conduct sensory audits of existing public spaces to identify shortcomings and opportunities. The teams then collaborated with neurodivergent stakeholders and self-advocates to imagine, install, and test design interventions and prototypes.





**Stories from
the Field**

**Streetscapes by
WIP Collaborative**

**Play Spaces by
Verona Carpenter Architects**

Streetscapes by WIP Collaborative

For the Streetscapes research and co-design process, WIP engaged community organizations including INCLUDEnyc and AHRC New York City to assemble self-advocate groups who participated in on-the-ground project activities. Self-advocates are individuals who speak on their own behalf about their unique needs, experiences, and desires in order to bring essential lived knowledge and expertise to the research and design process. INCLUDEnyc connects young people with disabilities to resources and helps them thrive in school, at work, and in the community. AHRC New York City advocates for people with intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities to lead full and equitable lives.

Initial project workshops, called "Sensory Audits," aimed to survey the existing conditions of city streets from the perspectives of neurodivergent individuals to learn which aspects they perceived positively or negatively, and to identify areas for improvement. Participants documented their impressions of experiential criteria such as noise levels, shade, greenery, and crowding, utilizing a range of hands-on tools including physical materials, independent and guided activities, written surveys, and digital cameras. Feedback and observations from earlier workshops also informed and improved engagement formats in subsequent ones. Provided with multiple participation options at each workshop, individual participants could choose those that felt comfortable for them, which led to greater diversity in responses.



Later workshops with self-advocates focused on the design of physical prototypes for improving the street environment. These built outcomes were installed over a several-week period at a pedestrian plaza in Lower Manhattan and tested by self-advocates, many of whom had participated in earlier NC workshops.

Street Sensory Audit - Fall 2023

The first Street Sensory Audit workshop was conducted by WIP with a self-advocate group organized by INCLUDEnyc in Downtown Brooklyn, a location selected by participants for its convenient access to public transit. During the workshop, the self-advocates, accompanied by WIP facilitators, walked a pre-determined route and recorded their observations and impressions of street conditions through written surveys and verbal comments. The route included streets ranging from wide, commercial corridors to quiet, residential blocks with typical components such as bus stops, tree pits, pocket parks, and play structures. Pausing at planned stops along the way, self-advocates were asked to identify aspects of their surroundings as positive, negative, or neutral, highlighting them with colored markers on paper surveys. Additional comments were written or spoken and documented through notes and photos taken by WIP facilitators.

The Street Sensory Audit findings indicated participants' appreciation for familiar landmarks, signage, overhead canopies, and buffering

elements such as bus shelters and street trees. Crowding and excessive noise were commonly reported as negative experiences. The findings also revealed areas for improvement in the workshop methodology, including the need for simplified language and greater independence and flexibility for neurodivergent contributors. Reflecting on the workshop process, WIP members felt the written surveys were too prescriptive and their own facilitation at times more overbearing than helpful. Rather than asking participants to respond to a list of specific features, could the process enable more open-ended and self-guided observations and reactions to the street? Instead of asking direct questions that sometimes elicited objective responses (i.e., noting the presence or absence of something), could the engagement process invite more subjective feedback (i.e., describing how something makes one feel)? These questions informed the more open-ended engagement approach taken in subsequent workshops.

Site Sensory Audit - Fall 2024

WIP organized the second Sensory Audit workshop with AHRC New York at a site in Lower Manhattan—the block of 200 Water Street, where a high-rise commercial tower and a large privately owned plaza sit adjacent to the public sidewalk and street. Privately owned public spaces are ubiquitous along streets in NYC's commercial districts due to a zoning incentive that grants increased building volume to developers

in exchange for publicly accessible spaces at the street level. At 200 Water Street, the privately owned plaza includes a covered arcade in front of the building, which provided convenient, semi-protected space for the group to gather during the workshop. The four street lengths of the block have distinct characteristics, as well as common street fixtures such as trees, newsstands, public seating, bus stops, bike racks, loading areas, signage, and traffic signals, making it a suitable research site for testing a variety of street conditions. The site is also located near AHRC's headquarters, which provided nearby indoor space where the group could reconvene after completing the on-site activities.

Could the process enable more open-ended observations and reactions to the street?

During the Site Sensory Audit, participants walked around the full block, individually or in small groups, and photographed aspects of the streetscape that stood out to them with instant cameras. Using custom handheld frames created by WIP

Figure XX (Top): asdfasdfa



in three shapes, they identified street elements or areas as comfortable (cloud), uncomfortable (triangle), or extremely uncomfortable (starburst). Participants held the shapes in front of their cameras to "frame" the street elements they wanted to highlight in photos taken by themselves or their peers. Compared to the handwritten surveys used in earlier workshops, these tools allowed self-advocates a greater degree of autonomy and self-determination.

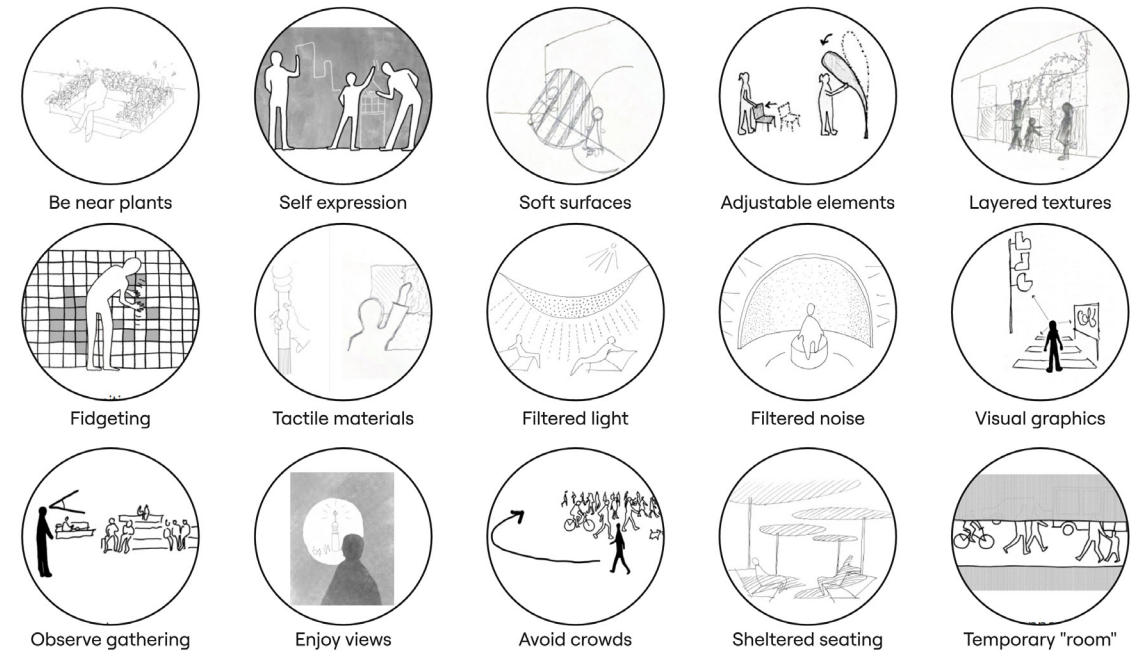
After circling the block, all workshop participants gathered to discuss their findings. Using printed photos, sticky notes, and large sheets of paper, the groups collectively organized materials and compared their individual impressions. Common trends emerged, including appreciation for long views (e.g., landmarks or tall buildings in the distance), the importance of strong visual elements (e.g., graphics or signage), and particular interest in the street trees and plants. Stand-alone comments included: enjoying the sight of a new car, liking a smokestack because of its functionality, and feeling relieved that a bus had finally moved after being still for a while. The groups assembled the printed photos from the instant cameras onto poster boards, with handwritten notes added to document self-advocates' verbal comments during the discussion. What emerged from the discussion was not a concise list of problems to solve, but a shared sense of appreciation for aspects of the street that capture neurodivergent individuals' attention,

inviting them to pause, touch, or observe their surroundings in focused ways before continuing on their way. These findings suggested that design opportunities to make NYC streets more neuroinclusive might focus more on enhancing access to these positive characteristics than on overcoming or shielding from negative ones.

Visioning Workshop - Fall 2024

Two weeks later, the same group reassembled at 200 Water Street for a Visioning Workshop that invited self-advocates to participate in hands-on making activities—creating small, makeshift interventions on site with soft materials. WIP provided an array of reclaimed fabric scraps, scarves, string, chalk, and foam pads for participants to use to reimagine the streetscape as a more neuroinclusive environment through small, physical alterations. Participants worked in three designated locations around the plaza and street—under the building canopy, near the street edge, and between street tree pits in a quieter area. Working individually or in small groups, participants wrapped poles and fixtures, wove string around tree pit guards, stretched fabric canopies across bike racks, and propped up foam cushions for leaning to comfortably observe the street. While some were drawn to the active process of creating interventions, others focused on handling materials and exploring their sensory characteristics.

Members of WIP documented the ad hoc interventions in notes and photographs



taken during the workshop, which they later translated into a series of sketches identifying neuroinclusive design opportunities for NYC streets based on the self-advocates' ideas. These addressed both common trends and stand-alone comments from participants, and encompassed active and passive ways of engaging with the street surroundings. This variety of opportunities was important to reflect both the diversity of preferences among the self-advocate group and the recognition that neurodivergent experience cannot be reduced to a singular way of being. The sketches also focused on ways of enhancing access to existing conditions of the streets, as the findings from earlier Sensory Audits had suggested. The resulting catalog of sketches became a menu of possibilities for the physical design prototypes that WIP created and installed the following year.

Street Design Prototype Installation + Testing Workshop, Fall 2025

WIP's Street Design Prototype was installed for several weeks in a public pedestrian plaza flanked by Maiden Lane, Liberty Street, and William Street and populated with several permanent sculptures by artist Louise Nevelson in Lower Manhattan's Financial District. The installation consisted of wooden architectural elements, a variety of plants in soft containers, and a graphic layer of bright yellow dots adhered to the plaza's hardscape surface. Fabricated by Thirdkind Studio, the architectural elements invited visitors to touch, sit, lean,

lie down, or climb—and to enjoy those experiential opportunities. The plants, curated by local artist and gardener Landon Newton, included grasses, perennials, and small shrubs selected to provide layered sensory experiences through sight, sound, touch, and smell—creating environments that are both stimulating and restorative. Graphic dots applied on the ground enticed passersby to step, wander, or hop closer to the elements and to pause from the hustle of city life. Sounds and surface vibrations introduced by biodesigner Mischa Kuma added another dimension, immersing visitors in natural soundscapes and grounding rhythms.

The fabricated installation pieces were designed in two types: low, angular wedges for leaning, lying, and climbing, and upright A-frames with interior benches and stretched rope backing sized to fit one or two people. Arranged in a circle, the six A-frame structures provide both nook-like individual spaces and a communal environment in which occupants can be simultaneously alone and together, with the opportunity to observe the street from the semi-enclosed spaces. The wedges, created in 5-foot and 7.5-foot lengths rising to 30 inches tall with speckled, teal-green recycled rubber surfaces, were positioned in multiple locations around the plaza. Two wedges were located close to busier sidewalk edges near the plaza's largest and most prominent Nevelson sculpture, nestled among groups of planters and graphic dot clusters. Two others were



placed in a quieter area of the plaza and tethered with ropes to the large cylindrical forms of nearby sculptures, creating a soft, curtain-like attachment to existing fixtures (in other site contexts, these could attach to building columns or street posts). The wedges enabled users to lean back and gaze upward, toward the tree canopy directly above, the many tall buildings nearby, or the geometric, cropped views of the sky overhead. Younger visitors enjoyed climbing and jumping on the wedges or posing for pictures on their angular forms. Altogether, the installation's material

layers offered a range of multisensory opportunities for visitors to engage with the prototype in both active and passive ways. The design elements created opportunities for individuals to experience the street differently, whether by pausing to sit or recline and enjoy a change of position or perspective, or through tactile interaction with the plants and architectural elements. In these ways, the goal of the prototype was to translate the design opportunities identified through the Audits and Visioning Workshop into physical forms for testing in the live street. Once the prototype was installed, WIP

invited the AHRC self-advocate group back to conduct a workshop for testing the elements. Using the instant-print cameras from earlier workshops, the participants documented themselves, their experiences, and installation details they appreciated or disliked while engaging with the built elements. As in the earlier Site Audit workshops, the self-guided activities with the prototypes were followed by a group discussion and reflection session.

While sharing their impressions of the Street Design Prototype during the Testing Workshop, self-advocates noted appreciation for the sounds, plants, and various tactile components of the built structures, including the rope and wood materials. They enjoyed taking photos of each other posing on the wedge elements and in the nook-like enclosures of the A-frame seating. One participant remarked that the pieces felt "intimate, but still connected to the plaza." Others expressed feelings of being able to relax and "be themselves" while in the space. Meaningfully, many self-advocates who had been involved in multiple workshops throughout the process recognized the ways that the activities of earlier project events had led to the physical outcome. Others learned about the project for the first time at the Testing Workshop through conversations with peers and facilitators during the event. Later that day, at a public opening of the installation hosted by the Design

Trust for Public Space, other groups of neurodivergent individuals stopped by after hearing about the project through their involvement with AHRC.

Together, the research-backed frameworks and the co-design process of the Neurodiverse City underscore the critical role of designers as stewards of co-creative processes that center the agency of neurodivergent participants, interdisciplinary research and expertise, and organizational partners. They also emphasize the importance of a multiplicity of research methods, perspectives, contributors, and design outcomes. This multiplicity is fitting because there is no singular human neurological experience, nor a single consensus about neurodivergent experience. The experiential needs and preferences of people who identify as neurodivergent cannot be generalized or assimilated, but there is much to learn from their differences. Creating neuroinclusive public spaces requires recurring engagement throughout the process and the development of multiple environmental options rather than a one-size-fits-all design approach. Interactive, hands-on processes with multiple engagement modes elicit varied results that in turn inform flexible and open-ended design responses. A key finding of the Neurodiverse City is therefore the importance of versatility—in co-creative practices as well as in their physical and experiential outcomes.





Play Spaces by Verona Carpenter Architects

Research and Background

The history of neurodiversity and playgrounds overlaps with the story of disability and public play spaces. Though the term "neurodiversity" did not enter the language until 1998, early twentieth-century playground reform movements are useful for understanding neuroinclusion and play.

From their appearance in the early 1900s in the United States, urban playgrounds were a network of support spaces for children where ideas of health, education, community, and social reform came together. In New York City, when public play spaces proliferated under Robert Moses's tenure as Parks Commissioner between 1934 and 1960, playgrounds contained equipment such as swings, sandboxes, and seesaws alongside areas for organized recreational and didactic activities under the supervision of adult play leaders. Disabled children were not visible on these playgrounds. They were part of a separate realm, either in individual homes or in specialized schools and facilities that focused on rehabilitation and treatment. The prevalent cultural attitude, shaped in part by the polio epidemic from the 1910s into the mid-1950s, treated disability as something to be overcome and cured, with the goal of achieving re-integration into the non-disabled world.

Starting in the late 1960s, new attitudes toward disability and play emerged as part of a broader advocacy for adventure, thrill, and agency in children's play. Two key moments in this period are the publication

of Richard Dattner's book *Design for Play* (1968), which has a dedicated chapter on disabled play, and the construction of the Playground for All Children (PFAC, 1974–1984). Led by the NYC Department of City Planning, this built project was intended as the prototype for a playground "specifically designed for the integrated recreational enjoyment of children with disabilities as well as able-bodied youngsters." The Playground for All Children was a bold proposal—not only in its design ambition for a shared environment but also in its successful engagement of disabled children and their families.

Paradoxically, the momentum of this experiment faltered shortly after the playground's inauguration. The publication of the US Consumer Playground Handbook in 1980 (US Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2015) and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 fundamentally altered the direction of public playground design. As safety and accessibility requirements emerged, and as fear of injury and litigation grew, design became standardized and fell under the purview of large manufacturers that performed the necessary testing and certifications and shouldered the legal risk. If the PFAC was an environment where disabled and non-disabled children shared space equally, it was an isolated example. Its vision was replaced by a compliance-based model where accessibility was met through specific equipment such as a modified swing.

Around the same time that the term neurodiversity emerged, and while public playgrounds were being reconfigured by new safety and accessibility regulations, private play spaces for neurodivergent children appeared. Many were private occupational therapy practices that incorporated gyms and play-based environments for neurodivergent children. Aspects from these environments would later inform the design of inclusive play equipment on public playgrounds.

At the heart of VCA's project is the belief that all children should be taken seriously.

NYC – Current Snapshot

In New York City, there are approximately 2,067 public playgrounds managed by NYC Parks (1,028), NYCHA (796), and the Department of Education (243). NYC Parks adopted the 2011 design directive "Universal Design Features for Playgrounds," which introduces several sensory recommendations—not requirements—including Multi-Sensory Play Experiences, Social Gathering Areas, Quiet/Cozy Spaces, and Shade.

In New York City and elsewhere, major play equipment manufacturers such as Kompan and Landscape Structures

continue to play a dominant role in the development, engineering, production, and installation of playground equipment. They also lead product innovation through their own research and testing. Inclusive design elements such as tactile panels or retreat nooks appear alongside required accessible components such as wheelchair platform swings and molded plastic JennSwings for children who need full body support. Yet because these inclusive elements are recommendations and not requirements, they are found only on new or newly renovated playgrounds.

Methodology, Evaluation, and Engagement

At the heart of VCA's project is the belief that all children should be taken seriously. They are broadly capable of understanding what they need and of communicating it when given a wide range of ways to do so. Whenever possible, VCA's engagements focused on the direct input of children.

During the first round of playground audits, VCA partnered with INCLUDEnyc, an organization that supports disabled young people and their families. VCA also partnered with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and worked under this department's IRB-approved research methodology. For additional community engagement and prototype installation, the firm worked with the Quad Preparatory School, an independent school serving neurodivergent children, and with PS112 and PS42, two New York

City public elementary schools that are part of the Autism Nest Program (NYCPS Nest), a program that supports autistic students.

Literature Review and Audit Methodology

Through a literature review of playground audit processes, VCA found that no single recommended method exists for auditing playgrounds for the inclusion of disabled or neurodivergent children, but SOPARC (System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities) emerged as a useful tool for documenting observations. VCA also used a mix of formats, including in-person interviews, digital surveys, and playground observation.

Playground Audit and Survey

VCA conducted two engagements focused on the playground experience: an in-person audit at the Luther Gulick Playground in Lower Manhattan, and a multi-language digital survey distributed via INCLUDEnyc to youth and their families. Six neurodivergent children ages six to thirteen joined the onsite audit, and twenty caregivers of children ages two to fourteen answered questions in the online survey. The small participant pool made these engagements useful for qualitative data, though not large enough to yield quantitative findings.

In the onsite audit, VCA observed the children at play, interviewed them and their families about their preferences, and set up a table with large drawing pads to allow for non-verbal input.



VCA later recorded the information in a sensory audit drawing. The project team publicized the event via INCLUDEnyc to families in their network and posted flyers in the three most common neighborhood languages in the playground vicinity, encouraging participation of children who receive Individualized Education Program (IEP) services, medical accommodations (Section 504 plan), or disability services at school or at home (US Department of Education). Participants received snacks and gift cards. The small group size allowed for in-depth conversations. One promising idea that emerged was the potential of a boundary to serve as more than a delineation between two zones—as a liminal, occupiable threshold that could allow modulated participation (not fully in, not fully out) more comfortable for some participants.

The project team distributed the digital survey in multiple languages and asked caregivers to involve their children in answering the questions, which focused on the children's preferences regarding play equipment and playground experience, with particular attention to sensory experiences. Sixteen respondents were from families whose children had an IEP, and sixteen noted that their children identified as neurodivergent, with some overlap between these two groups. The survey responses underscored that playgrounds are the site of complex interactions among children and adults that shape both access to the playground and the play experience itself. To the statement "my child feels welcome in most playgrounds we visit," forty percent agreed. To "my child finds being at the playground stressful," twenty

space. Each student was also invited to draw their own plan on provided blank site plan sheets. The day's final session was a discussion with teachers and staff, including an exit survey completed by forty-three teachers. While VCA anticipated that students would seek a range of higher and lower sensory-input options, the team was surprised by the students' widely shared enthusiasm for rest spaces—lying down, doing yoga, reading, and doing homework. While seventy-seven percent of teachers saw socialization as the main goal of students' playground time, it was clear that students also wanted quiet time alongside communal activities.

Concept and First Prototypes

The PS112 cul-de-sac site would need to operate under a temporary Open Streets permit, requiring that all project elements move frequently between the site and a nearby storage area with minimal setup effort. Earlier engagement had revealed that students wanted a range of activity options, including spaces that offered respite from nearby high-intensity environments. At the same time, the budget was extremely limited, so the challenge was to create a strong spatial impact with limited means.

VCA selected a ready-made element that could support multiple functions and form the basis of an outdoor sensory playscape: a mobile wheelbarrow bench that could move onto the street and back while transporting cushions and other site components. The team designed

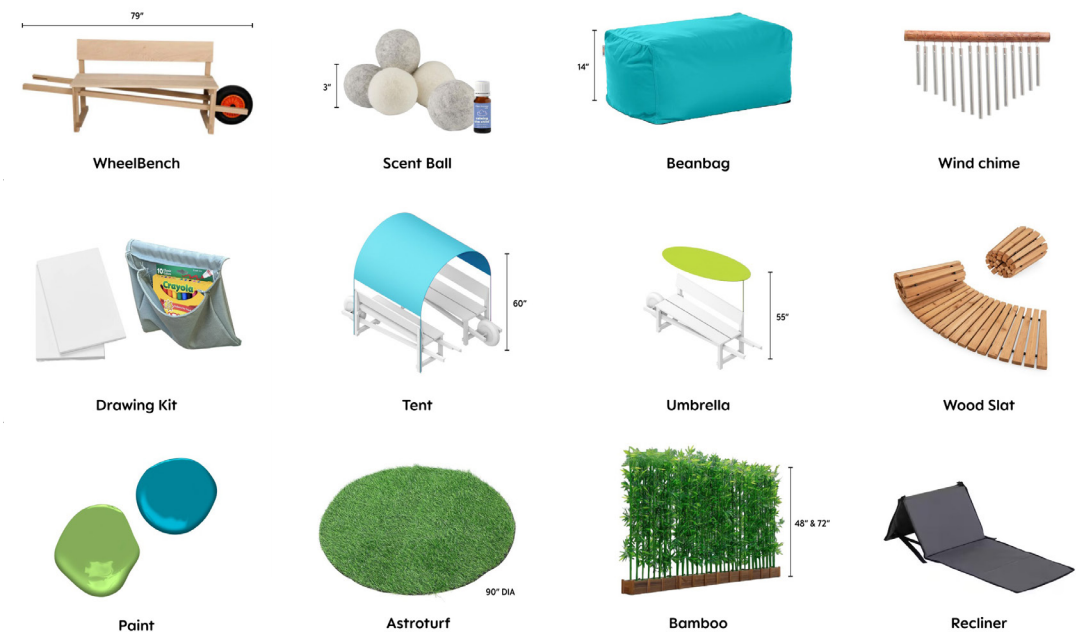


shade extensions, canopy structures, and cushions that could attach to and detach from the benches. Arranged individually or in small clusters, the benches formed occupiable boundaries between environments, an idea that emerged during the early playground audit work. The design also incorporated lawn-like outdoor rugs, cushions, beanbags, and mats where children could lie down or recline. What began as a logistical constraint—the need for mobility—evolved into a strategy that supported occupant agency. Because every element could move to, from, and within the site, children could actively reconfigure their environment.

PS42 Prototype Installation

After unexpected construction made the PS112 site infeasible, VCA adapted the design for PS42, another NYC public elementary school with an Autism Nest program. (VCA hopes that the students of PS112, who participated in the initial co-design sessions, will have the opportunity to experience the installation in the future.) Unlike the PS112 cul-de-sac, PS42's schoolyard consisted largely of an empty concrete expanse anchored by a single active play structure. School leadership welcomed the collaboration, having long recognized that the yard did not adequately support all students, particularly neurodivergent students.

The design team reviewed the kit-of-parts components with three students, who proposed adding pockets to the benches for books and other activities

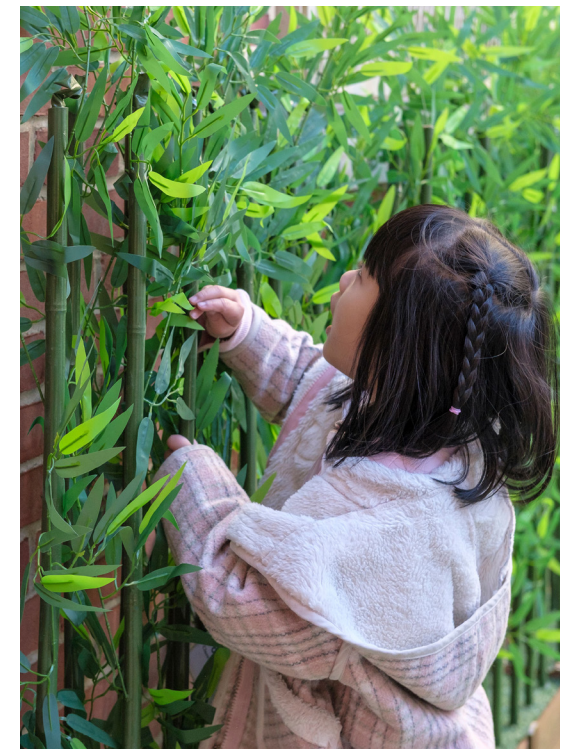


and encouraged the inclusion of nature-themed elements. In response, VCA incorporated book pockets and introduced smaller-scale sensory features such as wind chimes and scented stones. The team also installed replica bamboo along the brick and stucco walls that define two edges of the play yard, softening the hardscape and adding interactive texture.

At the time of writing, the school has assumed responsibility for the operation of the playscape, with the intention of maintaining it for as long as possible. In an interview, school leadership shared that students use the space "in a respectful way" and engage in "problem-solving on their own"—rather than fighting—when conflicts arise. Many students, they noted, experience the installation as "a safe space" that helps them recenter. Maintenance funding is essential and hard to secure, which limits the life of the project; the installation

relies on sensory elements that must be moved indoors in inclement weather and repaired when necessary.

Three months after the installation launch, VCA conducted two post-occupancy sessions with a neurodiverse group of about forty students across first through fifth grades. At the time of these sessions the playscape was not operating due to wet conditions, and multiple students remarked that they wished "The Garden" could be covered or completely enclosed so that it was always available and would feel even more "safe and cozy." It was notable that when students pointed out problems, they also offered solutions: "people fight for the beanbags" was noted by several children, and the group went on to suggest adding more beanbags, setting a timer, or making a sign-up sheet. This engagement provided further evidence of the wisdom of these young stakeholders and the importance of slowing down to hear them.



Expanding the Impact

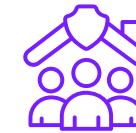
What's Next?

Throughout the community engagement, prototyping, and design process, the project confronted a foundational misconception: that all people experience public space in the same way. Neurodivergence has gained recognition in workplaces and schools, but not so much in the public realm. The absence of neurodiverse public space design precedents, the difficulty of creating public space in New York City, and low public awareness of the fact that spaces can be inaccessible from a sensory as well as a physical perspective, presented significant obstacles. These challenges led to a critical insight: the barriers are not insurmountable, but systemic and restructurable. The project identifies four strategic outcomes—spanning prototypical spaces, policy and design standards, strategic partnerships, and toolkits and resources—where intervention can catalyze the cultural shift necessary to embed neuroinclusion into New York City's public realm.

Four Strategic Outcomes



Technical Resources



Reimagined Spaces



Design Policies

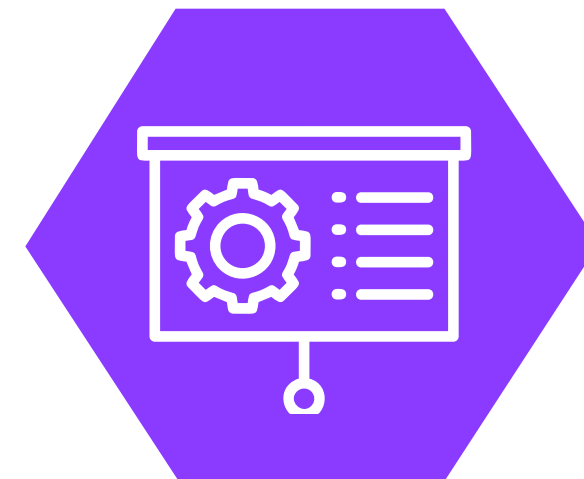


New Partnerships

Outcome A

Neuroinclusive engagement tools and educational resources give design teams more familiarity with neurodiverse perspectives and building design teams - and design teams include more neurodivergent people.

Despite growing awareness of neurodiversity within the design industry and beyond, resources that provide legible, usable context for professionals exist in very limited quantities. This outcome relies on existing professional networks and industry expertise to create more widely available toolkits and educational resources



Recommendation A.1 - Produce toolkits that give designers and professionals methods for engaging and collaborating with neurodivergent individuals.

Community engagement relies on standards that might not be accessible to neurodivergent participants. Building on established community engagement methodologies within architecture and urban planning practice, develop specific protocols for participation with advocacy organizations and neurodivergent individuals. Integrate these into existing engagement frameworks used by firms and agencies, providing contextual information on neurodivergent communities, communication strategies, workshop development guidelines, and self-directed, multimedia feedback processes that complement current best practices.

Recommendation A.2 - Create widely available “Continuing Education Courses” that teach professionals about neurodiversity and the built environment, in accredited fields such as architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, and engineering.

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) and other professional organizations already maintain robust continuing education libraries covering accessibility, universal design, and inclusive practice. Add a neuroinclusive design unit to this established framework, building on existing accessibility coursework while addressing the specific sensory, cognitive, and spatial needs of neurodivergent people. This positions neurodiversity not as a separate skillset but as the next step towards inclusive design competency—establishing industry-wide standards that treat neuroinclusive design as fundamental professional knowledge. The New York City AIA Chapter's Social Sciences committee has hosted CEU-credit-earning events centered on neuroinclusive design and provides a model for broader practice.

Recommendation A.3 - Open pathways for design teams that include more neurodivergent designers.

Just as the engagement with neurodivergent stakeholders is key in the process of designing accessible spaces, so too is it important for neurodivergent voices and neurodiverse perspectives to be part of design teams. This can include industry audits to better understand what barriers exist for neurodivergent people to being part of those teams and it can include recruiting practices that signal openness and inclusion of neurodiverse perspectives in their companies. Design schools can play an important role as well, by including neurodivergence and disability as design studio topics, recruiting neurodivergent and disabled practitioners and theorists. This can elevate the discussion of inclusion beyond accommodation, inspiring more neurodivergent students to make their mark and all students to be advocates for more neuroinclusive environments.



Outcome B

Spaces common throughout New York City are transformed with low-cost designs or pilots.

By embedding neuroinclusive design into existing infrastructure projects, the city can demonstrate impact without requiring new capital or initiatives. The following typologies offer immediate, scalable opportunities through existing programs and the managing organizations that run them.



Recommendation B.1 - Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) are identified as “restorative spaces,” offering respite in urban environments through updated signage and temporary furniture.

In New York City, Privately Owned Public Spaces, or POPS, have a long history as a tool to encourage greater public space access in denser parts of the city, while offering development bonuses for developers. In recent decades, these spaces have been challenged for the maintenance and stewardship needs. Relatedly, research has shown a need to create more restorative spaces, environments that can offer sensory reprieve, and make movement through the city less difficult for neurodivergent individuals. These two challenges can be mutually supportive: giving POPS spaces a greater sense of design direction and by offering a system of spaces that have a multisensory design. New POPS design standards can offer neuroinclusive environments and set new standards for public spaces.

Recommendation B.2 - Pilots are created for recurring transit infrastructure—such as bus shelters and subway signage—that offer spaces of rest and conditions that make navigation easier.

Transit systems in New York City and most large cities move people between their homes, workplaces, and school, but do so with an intense amount of noise, sound, smell, and disorder, creating barriers and uncertainty for many. With 4-5 million daily subway and bus riders, adopting these transitional spaces with sensory elements and better signage could serve a significant portion of the urban population. While wholesale change of the system is unfeasible, the MTA has shown willingness to explore low-cost pilots that have enormous impacts, such as new signage, better wayfinding, auditory installations, and reusing underutilized spaces. Above ground, the NYC Department of Transportation could reimagine its bus shelter network as a restorative space, with elements that could attune the sensorial environment through light, shade, sound, and touch.

Recommendation B.3 - Schoolyards and education outdoor spaces receive updated design guidelines to support sensory choice.

Integrate neuroinclusive design requirements into the School Construction Authority’s (SCA) Design Standards Manual and the schoolyards-to-playgrounds initiative, which already addresses accessibility under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Expand these standards to explicitly include sensory design elements—acoustic buffers, visual respite zones, tactile play surfaces—within the existing framework of playground safety surfacing requirements (ASTM F1292) and ADA-compliant accessible routes. Convene a cross-agency working group (SCA, NYC Parks, NYC Housing Authority, and the Department of Education) to establish shared neurodiversity design standards that align with existing procurement and construction protocols.

Recommendation B.4 - Review signage across a variety of user experiences to identify messaging that is more inclusive for neurodiversity and clearer for all.

NYC’s network of independent sign shops and fabricators—from traditional vinyl and neon manufacturers in Brooklyn and Queens to digital printing specialists—represents untapped creative infrastructure for neuroinclusive wayfinding. Partner with local fabricators to research and prototype signage systems that provide sensory regulation cues, create familiarity, and reduce overstimulation through color-coding, tactile elements, and clear visual hierarchies. This presents an opportunity for artistic exploration: commissioning neurodivergent artists to design signage that doubles as public art while serving functional sensory needs. Signage can communicate the affordances of a space, illuminating what you can do, as opposed to the typical list of prohibitions. By engaging NYC’s existing sign-making ecosystem, the city can rapidly prototype and scale solutions while supporting local manufacturers and establishing new social norms around spatial and sensory accommodation.

Outcome C

Existing policy frameworks and design codes are updated to include neuroinclusive design.

Since very few guidelines or codes require it, neuroinclusive design is most often presented as optional and with little context. All regulatory frameworks, especially those focused on the design of the physical environment, should include neuroinclusion as a core concept, just as physical accessibility an essential part of code compliance and best practices.



Recommendation C.1 - Integrate neurodiversity into the NYC Inclusive Design Guidelines (IDG) and other relevant accessibility codes.

The IDG currently provides voluntary technical guidance for multisensory environments serving people of all ages and abilities, organized around principles of wayfinding, acoustic comfort, visual comfort, and tactile experience. Strengthen this existing framework by adding explicit neuroinclusive provisions within each section—sensory regulation spaces under "spatial experience," flicker-free lighting specifications under "visual comfort," acoustic zoning under "sound," and tactile wayfinding under "touch"—with direct naming of neurodivergent people as intended beneficiaries. Research how precedent guides like London's Inclusive Design Standards and Australian Universal Design Guidelines have embedded neurodiversity into accessibility codes. Then transition these enhanced IDG provisions from voluntary guidance to mandatory requirements in the NYC Building Code and Zoning Resolution, positioning neurodiversity alongside existing accessibility mandates.

Recommendation C.2 - Engage the NYC Comptroller's Office as Strategic Fiscal Advocate

As Chief Financial Officer, the Comptroller occupies a unique position to advocate on behalf of neurodivergent New Yorkers, creating sustained support that extends beyond individual administrations. By leveraging authority over city expenditures, contract review, and agency audits, the Comptroller can ensure neuroinclusive design becomes fiscally integrated into standard practice. Secure formal support of the Comptroller's office, particularly through their Disability Liaison, to identify ways for NYC City government to better serve neurodivergent individuals and to use the pocketbook as a way to ensure that this happens.

Recommendation C.3 - Identify ways to incorporate neuroinclusion standards in school construction standards.

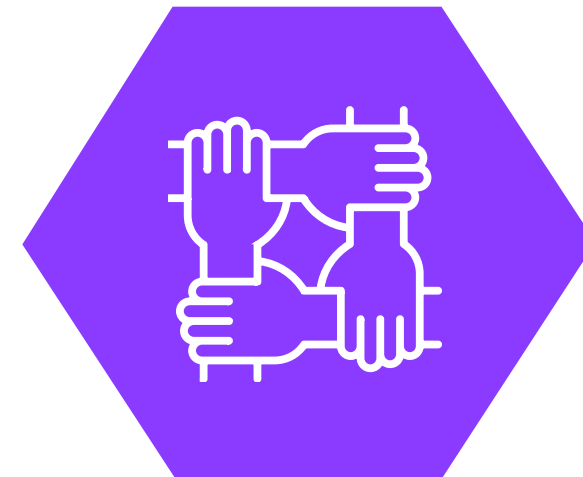
IRB processes and school system regulations currently prevent systematic data collection on neurodivergent student experiences in educational environments. Work with the Department of Education to develop expedited IRB approval pathways specifically for neurodiversity-focused spatial research, enabling universities and agencies to collect qualitative data on how students interact with sensory design elements in schoolyards and classrooms. This research can feed into neuroinclusive design guidelines for playgrounds and other school spaces within SCA's NYC public school construction standards.



Outcome D

Strong, multifaceted partnerships exist to advance important programmatic and research goals for neuroinclusion.

Establish formal partnerships across universities, community organizations, manufacturers, and agencies that embed neuroinclusion research into implementation, generating knowledge continuously.



Recommendation D.1 - Sustained Collaboration with Disability Advocacy Organizations

Building trust with neurodivergent-led community organizations requires long-term commitment, not transactional consultation. Establish formal partnerships—potentially coordinated through university research programs or the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD)—that provide:

- Dedicated funding for community organizations to participate meaningfully in design processes
- Regular feedback loops throughout project lifecycles, not just initial planning
- Co-governance models where neurodivergent advocates hold decision-making authority
- Training and capacity-building for advocates to engage technical design processes
- Recognition of lived expertise as equal to professional credentials

These partnerships should formalize neurodivergent voices as permanent stakeholders in public realm planning, with clear pathways for input through both mayoral office coordination and direct university-facilitated engagement.

Recommendation D.2 - Establish strong partnerships with higher education institutions to offer expanded programming to the field and to conduct important ongoing research.

Explore partnerships with higher education institutions and position them as project managers for citywide neurodiversity research, data collection, and pilot programs. The NYU Neurodiversity & Education Student Teaching (NEST) program demonstrates a prototypical model, partnering directly with NYC public schools to provide teacher training, conduct classroom-based research, and develop evidence-based strategies while maintaining long-term relationships with school communities. Expand this embedded research model to the built environment, tasking universities with coordinating longitudinal studies, managing data aggregation across pilot sites, convening interdisciplinary teams, and publishing findings that inform policy. These institutions offer sustained resources, institutional continuity beyond political cycles, and research capacity that outlasts individual mayoral administrations.

Recommendation D.3 - Establish research and prototyping relationships with playground manufacturers and other providers who could expand product accessibility.

Playground manufacturers already conduct extensive user research and have production infrastructure to scale solutions. Partner with manufacturers like Kompan and Landscape Structures to develop and commercialize neuroinclusive equipment, shifting from expensive custom solutions to standard product offerings accessible to all municipalities.

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Image Credits

- pg. 10**
Top: Briarwood Queens Community Library; VCA
Center: Restorative Ground, WIP Collaborative
Bottom: Seats at the Table; Luke O'Donovan
- pg. 15**
 Sensory Zones, PS 112; Verona Carpenter Architects (VCA)
- pg. 19**
Top: Street Sensory Audit; WIP (WIP) and Design Trust
Center: Street Sensory Audit; WIP Collaborative and Design Trust
Bottom: Street Sensory Audit; WIP Collaborative and Design Trust
- pg. 21**
Top: Site Audit Workshop; Katt Manzueta
Bottom left: Site Audit Workshop; Katt Manzueta
Bottom right: Site Audit Workshop; Katt Manzueta
- pg. 23**
Top: Design Opportunity Sketches; WIP Collaborative
Bottom: Visioning Workshop, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 25**
 Prototype Rendering; WIP
- pg. 27**
Top left: Prototype Testing Workshop, Katt Manzueta
Top right: Prototype Testing Workshop, Katt Manzueta
Bottom: Prototype Testing Workshop, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 28**
 Prototype Installation; Katt Manzueta
- pg. 29**
Top: Prototype Installation; Katt Manzueta
- Top center:* Prototype Installation; Katt Manzueta
Bottom center: Prototype Installation; Katt Manzueta
Bottom: Prototype Installation; Katt Manzueta
- pg. 33**
Left: Luther Gulick Audit Plan; VCA
Right: Luther Gulick Audit; VCA
- pg. 35**
Top: PS112 Process Plan; VCA
Bottom: P112 Site Plan; VCA
- pg. 37**
 Aerial View of Sensory Playscape; VCA
- pg. 38**
Top: PS42, Play with Wooden Slats; Katt Manzueta
Center: PS42, Reclining Student; Katt Manzueta
Bottom: PS 42, Tactile Plan, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 39**
Top: PS42, Sensory Pod, Katt Manzueta
Bottom: Kit of Parts, VCA
- pg. 40**
Left: PS42, Wind Chimes, Katt Manzueta
Right: PS42, Sensory Pod, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 41**
Top: PS42, Reclining Student
Bottom left: PS42, Post-occupancy workshop, VCA
Bottom right: PS42, Tactile Wall, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 47**
 Prototype Testing Workshop, Katt Manzueta
- pg. 55**
 PS 112 Engagement; Katt Manzueta

