





RETHINKING URBAN SPACES: DESIGNING CITIES FOR EVERY MIND

Insights and Outcomes from the Roundtable

An initiative of Neuropower World and Institute of Neurodiversity

FORFWORD

Neurodiversity is a difference, not a deficit. It is a natural variation in how people think, feel, and process the world.

One in five people today identify as neurodivergent, yet our cities, workplaces, and systems are rarely designed with these minds in mind.

At the same time, organizations and societies face converging pressures: ageing populations, talent shortages, demographic shifts, and rising expectations for equity and belonging.

Neuro-inclusive design is a timely response. By addressing the sensory and cognitive needs of those most at risk of exclusion, we create environments that are healthier and more resilient for everyone. And the business case is clear: a recent Accenture report found that when we are more inclusive, organizations can achieve 28% higher revenue, 30% better profit margins, and even double their net income. The opportunity is right in front of us. We just need to create environments and organizations where that potential can be realized.

This whitepaper is an important first step in that process. It brings science, lived experience, and design together to show why neurodesign matters and how it can reshape the spaces where we live, work, and connect. Neurodesign is not a trend or a luxury. It is both smart economics and a moral imperative.



KAY SARGENT,
FASID, FIIDA, CID, LEED® AP, MCR.W, WELL AP
Senior Principal | Director of Thought Leadership,
Interiors - HOK

CITIES OF POTENTIAL, CITIES OF STRESS

URBAN DESIGN, BUILT FOR EFFICIENCY, INCREASINGLY WORKS AGAINST THE BRAIN'S NATURAL RHYTHMS.



Cities are where human potential and human stress collide. Many global cities are celebrated for efficiency, density, and smart infrastructure. Yet, the same features that drive progress often undermine well-being. Modern urban environments cause overstimulation that erodes focus, drains energy, and widens the gap between those who can adapt and those who cannot. (1)

Globally, the World Health Organization has named urban stress and mental well-being as central public health concerns. Studies link constant sensory overload with impaired attention, reduced productivity, and higher burnout rates. (2)

Everyday triggers – from the layered sounds of coffee machines and conversations in cafés, to flickering digital signage on train platforms – strain attention for anyone. For people with different sensory thresholds, the impact can be overwhelming. For neurodivergent people (individuals with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, sensory processing differences, etc.), these challenges are compounded, leading to exclusion, underemployment, and diminished quality of life. More than 15–20% of the population is neurodivergent, yet most urban spaces are not designed with them in mind. (3)

WHAT IS MILDLY DISTRACTING FOR ONE PERSON CAN BE DEBILITATING FOR ANOTHER, LEADING TO ANXIETY, FATIGUE, OR EVEN WITHDRAWAL FROM PUBLIC LIFE.

ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROVIDE CHOICE, CLARITY, AND CALM CREATE THRIVING CONDITIONS ACROSS THE SPECTRUM OF HUMAN COGNITION.



The Next Frontier: Design for the Brain

This is where neurodesign – the science-led practice of shaping environments that align with how the brain works – comes in. Just as sustainable design became non-negotiable, neurodesign is emerging as the next frontier in shaping cities and workplaces.₍₄₎

At its simplest, neurodesign means designing for the brain – creating environments where every mind can thrive.

Neurodesign is not an abstract science, but a practical shift: shaping lighting, acoustics, textures, and rhythms to reduce overload, restore attention, and foster belonging. It draws on neuroscience, psychology and design to create spaces that support cognitive health, emotional safety, and human performance for all. At its heart lies the principle of choice - the ability to dim a light, step into green space, or find quiet amid noise. These are not luxuries; they are design baselines for dignity and inclusion.

The Economics of Brain-Friendly Environments

Designing with the brain in mind is not only humane – it is smart economics. (5) The global economic burden of brain–health conditions is already estimated at \$2.5 trillion annually, projected to reach \$6 trillion by 2030 (MCKINSEY, 2023). The concept of brain capital highlights that human cognitive health – attention, creativity, adaptability – is now as vital an asset as physical infrastructure or financial markets. (6)

Cities that invest in inclusive, restorative environments have not only been linked to lower healthcare costs and improved community resilience, but also strengthening their economic competitiveness. (5) Singapore's City in Nature initiative demonstrates how urban planning can directly support cognitive and emotional health. (7) Globally, cities from Copenhagen to Melbourne are embedding mental well-being into planning codes, recognizing that resilient minds build resilient economies. (8)

BRAIN CAPITAL IS THE NEW ECONOMIC CAPITAL: RESILIENT MINDS BUILD RESILIENT CITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS.



A workspace that limits glare for someone with ADHD also helps an executive manage stress.

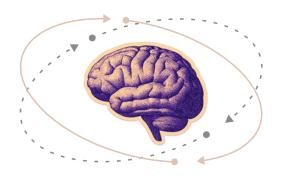


Wayfinding icons, created for autistic or dyslexic users, also guide tourists and the elderly. (12)



Restorative micro-spaces proven to reduce sensory fatigue support the well-being of the entire community. (13)

In workplaces, World Green Building Council studies show that healthy, inclusive environments can reduce absenteeism by up to 25% and increase productivity by 10–15%. (9) Companies that integrate well-being into office design report higher retention and faster time-to-competence. (10) Recent WELL certification research shows similar results, with ~30% higher occupant satisfaction, ~26% greater reported well-being, ~10% higher reported mental health, and ~10 points median productivity improvement (NREL, 2023).



DESIGNING FOR THE EDGES STRENGTHENS THE CENTER.

Neurodesign Matters for Everyone

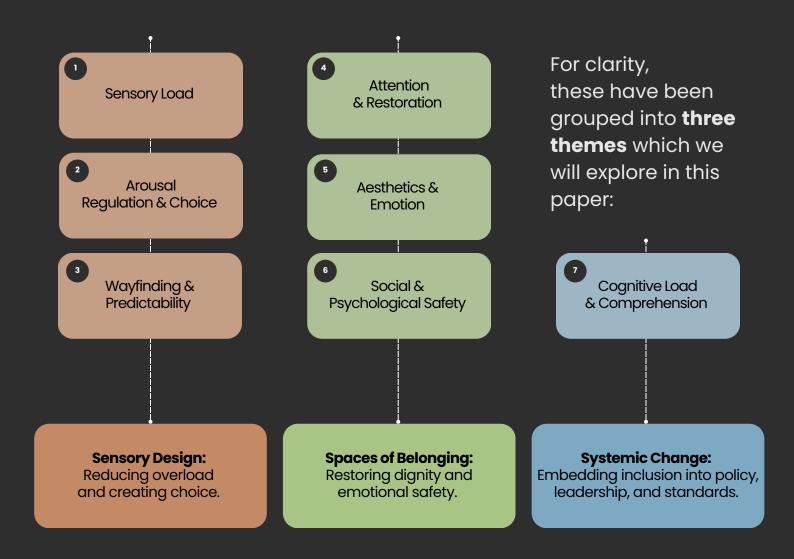
For decades, design has focused on the "average" user. Neurodesign flips this script: by designing for those most at risk of overload, we raise the baseline of usability and comfort for everyone. Design that accommodates neurodivergent needs tends to reduce stress, improve focus, and enhance comfort for all users. (11)

Environments should not dictate a single way to work, move, or rest, but offer multiple entry points to comfort and focus. This is design for the edges - and when we design for the edges, everyone benefits.

The Seven Pillars of Neurodesign



At the heart of neurodesign are **seven pillars**, drawn from neuroscience and design practice. These principles work together to reduce overload, restore focus, and foster belonging.



When all seven pillars are incorporated in design, they give every individual - neurodivergent or neurotypical - the ability to shape how they engage with their environments.

Rethinking Urban Spaces: Designing Cities for Every Mind

GOOD DESIGN BUILDS BELONGING, BRAINS, AND ECONOMIES.



Kay Sargent

Director of Thought Leadership, Interiors, HOK.
Author of Designing Neuroinclusive Workplaces:
Advancing Sensory Processing and Cognitive
Well-Being in the Built Environment

This whitepaper draws not only from global research and frameworks, but also from the insights of a landmark roundtable held in Singapore: Re-thinking Urban Spaces: Designing Cities for Every Mind. The discussion brought together architects, planners, psychologists, community leaders, and corporate innovators in Singapore to explore how neurodesign principles can reshape the city. Their perspectives validate the urgency of this field and enrich the practical pathways we outline here.

What emerged was a strong consensus: good design fosters belonging, belonging supports healthier brains, healthier brains strengthen communities and economies.

ROUNDTABLE PANELISTS



Hazleen Ahmad

Founder, Neuropower World
Deputy CEO, Institute of
Neurodiversity (ION)
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Fred Zikry

Neurodivergent
Strategist, Tech & Data
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Jasmine Palardy
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Network

SENSORY DESIGN

Chanai Airport Sinaanore





The First Layer of Experience: Senses

Design begins with the senses. Sound, light, texture, and rhythm shape how our brains meet the world. Yet modern cities often push these inputs beyond healthy thresholds. (15)

Everyday life illustrates this well: the layered sounds of a subway station - announcements, brakes, crowd noise - can overwhelm commuters. Contrast this with Changi Airport's sensory zoning, where quiet gardens and acoustic buffering offer calm amidst transit.

"Sound governs how we move and feel in cities, and cities today are not healthy for people. The soundscapes we design are often stressful - and this stress builds up in the body and the mind," observed **Eva Tisnikar,** Architectural Researcher & Associate Lecturer during the roundtable.

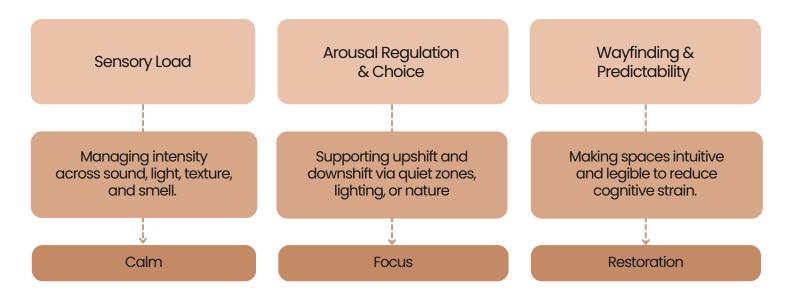
Sensory design is not about removing stimulation, but about balancing it. Acoustic zoning, adaptable lighting, tactile materials, and predictable navigation give people agency over their environment. These are not aesthetic upgrades; they are the building blocks of accessibility.

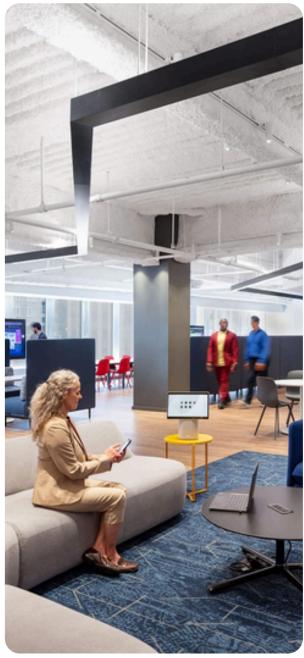
As **Dr. Anuj Jain**, of bioSEA and the Biomimicry Singapore Network observed: "Nature is one of the few regulators we have, and it must be integrated into urban life."

Singapore's NParks therapeutic gardens show this principle at scale: access to greenery is linked to reduced stress and improved attention restoration. (16)

OVERLOAD, UNDERLOAD, AND MISMATCH - WHEN SENSORY INPUTS DON'T ALIGN WITH THE BRAIN'S THRESHOLDS, ENVIRONMENTS BECOME BARRIERS.

The Three Pillars of Sensory Design





Cisco's New York City Talent and Collaboration Center (31)

Each pillar works across contexts:

- A quiet pod in a workplace may be a sanctuary for someone with autism, but it is equally valuable for a parent balancing fatigue or an employee under pressure.
- Circadian lighting aids both ADHD learners and jet-lagged executives. (17)
- Textured materials in walkways guide the visually impaired while making streets more engaging for everyone.
- Intuitive signage supports autistic users while helping tourists or elderly residents navigate confidently. (18)

Cisco's redesigned Penn 1 office in New York applies this at workplace scale: layered lighting, soundscaping, and zoning reduce overstimulation while boosting productivity.

> GOOD SENSORY DESIGN REDUCES BURNOUT, SUPPORTS COGNITION, AND IMPROVES LEARNING AND WORK OUTCOMES.

Neurodesign for Sensory Health

Sensory design is not a luxury. It is a baseline responsibility for those who shape cities and workplaces.

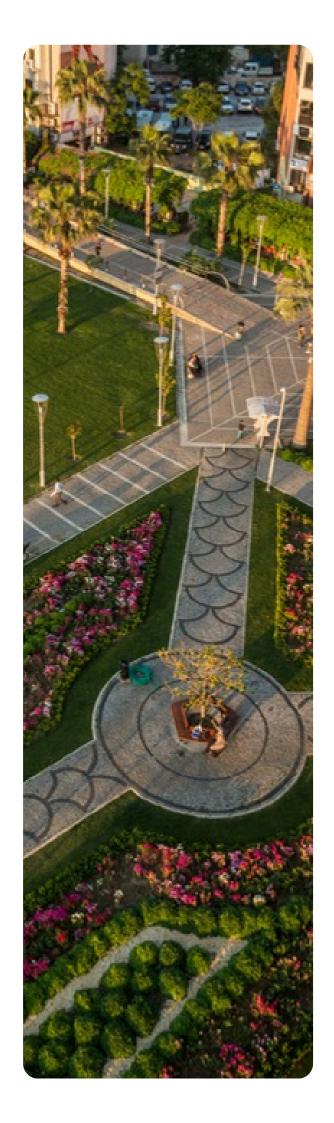
"People have very different sensory thresholds. What calms one person might overstimulate another. That's why choice - the ability to adapt your environment - is fundamental," stressed **Jin Chan** of Bartlett School of Architecture.

When sensory design is embedded into daily environments, its benefits ripple outward. These interventions not only improve individual well-being but elevate collective creativity and performance.

As Edwin Lim from Limington Design concluded at the roundtable: "From decibel levels to glare indices, sensory health can be tracked with the same rigour as air quality. If we measure emotional health the way we measure air quality, our buildings and cities would look very different."

When sensory health is treated as public health, we create the conditions for connection and cohesion - the social fabric of belonging.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN
BEGINS AT THE
SENSORY LEVEL
EVERY CHOICE IS A
CHOICE ABOUT
WHO BELONGS.



SPACES OF BELONGING: SOCIAL DESIGN

BELONGING IS NOT ABSTRACT - IT IS BUILT THROUGH EVERYDAY SPACES THAT INVITE CONNECTION AND DIGNITY.

Third Places: Where Community Happens

Humans are wired for connection. Isolation erodes brain health, while environments that foster social interaction build resilience. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg called these "third places" — the cafés, libraries, coworking hubs, and parks that sit between home and work. (19) They are the social infrastructure of belonging, strengthening not only individuals but entire communities.

Singapore's void decks, community parks, and hawker centres already function this way. When designed with inclusivity in mind, such spaces become anchors of social cohesion, bridging generations and cultures.





BELONGING IS NOT ABSTRACT. IT IS BUILT - OR DENIED - THROUGH DESIGN.



Dementia-friendly signage, Nee Soon South and Chong Pang Town Council, Singapore (30)

SPACES THAT CREATE
BELONGING ACROSS
GENERATIONS AND COGNITIVE
STYLES TRANSFORM
INFRASTRUCTURE INTO SOCIAL
FABRIC.

Designing for Relational Belonging

A space is only inclusive if it fosters connection. A library, park, or workplace lounge may exist structurally, but without design that signals welcome, dignity, and trust, it risks becoming sterile.

Fred Zikry, from Neuropower, noted: "We can create spaces and systems, but unless there is the heart to include people, the spaces will not be lived inclusively."

This distinction matters at work. A co-working hub with breakout areas, nooks, and communal kitchens encourages spontaneous collaboration and psychological safety - a direct contrast to isolated cubicles that reinforce loneliness. (20)

Designing Across Generations

Belonging must extend across time as well as space. Communities thrive when design honors ancestry, enables intergenerational gathering, and carries resilience forward.

Singapore's dementia-friendly HDB blocks embody this thinking. Wayfinding cues, clear signage, and communal courtyards reduce confusion and build safety - enabling residents to remain independent while staying connected to neighbors. (21)

Intergenerational design acknowledges that architecture outlives us – and its impacts ripple forward. Intergenerational housing, for example, ensures that children, adults, and the elderly can coexist, share resources, and sustain traditions. (22)

As **Shalaka Samant** reminded the group: "Architecture casts a longer shadow than our lifetimes - into the future and onto the human minds."



DESIGNING FOR EMPATHY
AND BELONGING =
EMOTIONAL + SOCIAL SAFETY,
NOT JUST ACCESS.

BELONGING IS BUILT WHEN RESTORATION, EMPATHY, AND SAFETY COME TOGETHER IN PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS.

Belonging as a Design Principle

Belonging is often described as an emotion, but it is delivered through design choices: the width of a doorway, the layout of a bench, the presence of safe gathering places. These cues either dignify or exclude, welcome or alienate. True inclusion requires both physical access and emotional safety. (23)

Kay Sargent, Director of Thought Leadership, HOK, explained: "Design is also about making people feel psychologically safe. If someone feels watched, exposed, or unwelcome, they will never truly belong."

Edwin Lim from Limington Design added: "If we can walk into a space and feel well, feel safe, feel a sense of belonging — then the design has succeeded."

The Three Social Pillars of Neurodesign



BELONGING

SOCIAL

COHESION

RESILIENT

SOCIETIES.

From Belonging to Social Cohesion

At the social level, neurodesign strengthens social cohesion - reducing polarization, supporting trust, and building resilience. Cohesive societies are more stable, more innovative, and more attractive for talent.

Belonging is not just good for individuals; it is good for economies. Cities that embed belonging into parks, housing, workplaces, and transits build stronger brains, and stronger brains build more resilient societies.

SYSTEMIC DESIGN

From Fixes to Frameworks

Right now, design defaults to efficiency, speed, and averages. Policies set minimum accessibility standards, workplaces reward output over restoration, and planning codes focus on mobility, not cognition.

The result is fragmented fixes - quiet pods here, a sensory garden or green courtyard there - that don't change the larger picture.

Systemic adoption of neurodesign changes this.

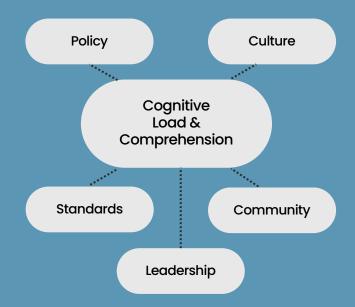
Neurodesign must scale into the standards, codes, and policies that shape cities and economies. (24)

Just as fire safety or sustainability became embedded into planning, **brain health and inclusion must become part of the baseline.**

THE SHIFT TO NEURODESIGN MUST GO FROM OPTIONAL FEATURES TO NON-NEGOTIABLE STANDARDS.

Neurodesign as Infrastructure

Cognitive health is now an economic asset. This is why frameworks like the OECD's Brain Capital Agenda, WELL Building certifications, and the UK's PAS 6463:2022 standard are expanding the definition of infrastructure to include mental well-being. (25) Singapore's accessibility codes and City in Nature initiatives show how this thinking can be extended toward systemic neuro-inclusion — but adoption must be broader.



BRAIN-FRIENDLY
WORKPLACES REPORT LOWER
TURNOVER AND FASTER TIMETO-COMPETENCE.

CITIES THAT EMBED
INCLUSION INTO PLANNING
ATTRACT AND RETAIN TALENT,
REDUCE HEALTHCARE COSTS,
AND STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE.

NEURODESIGN IS NOT A TREND. IT IS A PATHWAY TO RESILIENT, INCLUSIVE CITIES AND ECONOMIES.

Neurodesign must be embedded in policies, economies, and organizational cultures for true impact. Systemic adoption requires policy frameworks that treat cognitive and emotional wellbeing as non-negotiable.



LEADERS SHAPE
SYSTEMS. CHOOSING
EMPATHY OVER
SPEED SETS THE TONE
FOR NEUROINCLUSIVE FUTURES.



Leadership and Culture Shift

Embedding neurodesign is not just compliance. It requires a cultural shift: moving from valuing only efficiency and speed to recognizing empathy, restoration, and inclusion as leadership priorities. Leaders shape the systems around them and when they reward awareness and calmness, they set the tone for whether those values are taken seriously. (26)

Communities as Co-Authors

Systemic inclusion cannot be top-down alone. Communities must be part of the process - not as afterthoughts, but as co-authors. As **Jasmine Palardy** from WRLDCTY mentioned: "Communities must be part of the systemic process, not just consulted after the fact."

Futures that work are participatory: designed with people, not just for them, and capable of evolving as needs change.



Designing Beyond a Lifetime

Systemic neurodesign must resist quick fixes. Policy and planning should support regenerative, long-term design, not just temporary interventions.

Mustapha Kamal cautioned: "Our designs should not be just for today. Look at traditional townships, or the wind towers of Yazd - they last centuries. Policy must support long-term, regenerative design, not just short-term fixes."

Designing with continuity ensures that inclusion is not a project but a legacy.

FOR NEURODESIGN TO LAST, IT MUST BE EMBEDDED IN STANDARDS, PROCESSES, AND LEADERSHIP - AND OWNED BY EVERYONE WHO SHAPES THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT.



Towards building Neuro-Inclusive Futures

When policies, standards, leadership, and communities align, neurodesign becomes infrastructure. Every regulation, every specification, every cultural choice signals either welcome or exclusion. For neurodesign to last, it must be owned by everyone who shapes environments – architects, planners, policymakers, users and business leaders alike.

It is also worth highlighting visionary frameworks such as Sussex 2035, the University of Sussex's strategic vision for its 75th anniversary. Anchored by the Sussex School for Progressive Futures, this initiative addresses three interlinked global imperatives essential to creating a better world in the 21st century: environmental sustainability, human flourishing, and digital & data futures.

Neurodesign offers a practical, evidence-based pathway to realizing these ambitions, translating Sussex 2035's call for sustainability, innovation, and human well-being into lived experience. Applied thoughtfully, it enables spaces and systems that enhance cognition, creativity, and resilience.

As **Kay Sargent** concluded at the roundtable: "It's not just a business case — it's a moral imperative."

THE ROAD AHEAD

A Vision of Neuro-Inclusive Cities

Imagine cities where noise is regulated like air quality, where lighting follows natural rhythms, and where wayfinding is intuitive to a child, an elder, or a neurodivergent commuter alike.



Workplaces where choice is embedded - quiet zones, restorative spaces, areas for collaboration and reflection.



Schools where learning environments adapt to varied attention spans.



Communities where public housing, parks, and transit are designed to foster connection across generations.



For individuals, this means no longer needing to constantly adapt or withdraw.

For societies, it means lower burnout, stronger social cohesion, and greater creativity. (27)

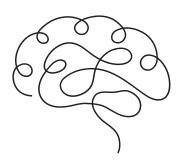
For cities and economies, it means resilience: healthier citizens, talent that stays, communities that thrive even under pressure.

And for the planet, it means design that respects natural cycles - quieter nights, gentler lighting, habitats that sustain biodiversity alongside human life.

This is not utopian.

It is the logical outcome when sensory balance, social belonging, and systemic adoption move from the margins to the mainstream.

HEALTHIER BRAINS BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND STRONGER ECONOMIES.



Healthier Minds, Healthier Economies

A world where environments support brains means more people can show up, learn, work and belong. At scale, these human gains become economic advantages.

Cities that embed cognitive well-being attract and keep talent, reduce pressure on health services, and strengthen social cohesion - all of which make urban economies more resilient. (28)

Employers and institutions that treat cognitive health as part of infrastructure see better productivity, lower turnover, and faster onboarding. (29)

The logic is simple but profound:

- Design that reduces cognitive overload creates belonging.
- Belonging supports healthier, more adaptive brains.
- Healthier brains power more creative, resilient economies.

COGNITIVE OVERLOAD



BELONGING



ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

NEURODESIGN IS MOVING FROM PILOTS TO POLICY — A FRONTIER TAKING ROOT.



From Roundtable to Roadmap

The Singapore roundtable was one step in this trajectory, proof that leaders across design, policy, and business recognize both the urgency and the possibility of change. The next steps are already visible: embedding neurodesign into standards, launching masterclasses to equip leaders, and integrating these principles into policy and practice.



THE PATH AHEAD



Imagined using AI

Neurodesign is no longer a niche consideration; it is the inevitable next chapter in how we shape our cities, workplaces, and communities. Just as sustainability shifted design from optional to essential, designing for the brain will become the baseline on which social cohesion, innovation, and economic resilience are built.

This is not an abstract future – it is a practical agenda. The road ahead asks for pilots that prove value, lightweight tools that make decisions visible, and policies that treat belonging as baseline infrastructure.

Neurodesign can give us a future where cities are not just places we live, but environments that help us thrive. The question is no longer *if* we will design for the brain, but *how quickly* we choose to make it the standard.

In the 20th century, we designed cities for machines. In the 21st, we designed them for sustainability.

In the decades ahead, we will design them for mindsand in doing so, unlock the full potential of humanity.



Imagined using AI

CLOSING NOTE

Global Systems Architect for Progressive Futures

The insights and pathways outlined in this whitepaper make one truth clear: neurodesign is no longer optional. It is becoming foundational to resilient economies, thriving communities, human flourishing, and a critical driver of both Cognitive and Consciousness value in the decade ahead.

The systems we create from learning environments and workplaces, to cities and digital ecosystems are the architecture of our collective future. They determine who gets to contribute, who can thrive, and whose talents remain unseen. By designing for the brain for attention, agency, and diverse neurocognitive strengths we are not simply improving spaces; we are engineering the conditions for societal progress, economic resilience, and future competitiveness.

When these environments align with the brain's natural rhythms and cognitive diversity, human potential expands. Artificial Intelligence is now a major co-architect, shaping how we think, learn, and connect. The question is no longer whether AI will influence cognition but whether it will enhance it.

Co-creation is essential. Spaces and Minds, a youth-led venture, shows that inclusion works best when it is built with communities, embedding belonging, purpose, and agency at the heart of development. Through empathy-driven design and shared ownership, they are cultivating conditions where young people truly thrive.

This is how neurodesign moves from concept to baseline for societal progress:

- * Environmental well-being through regenerative, brain-aligned spaces
- * Human flourishing through systems that nurture dignity, creativity, and connection
- * AI and digital futures that elevate cognition, collaboration, and compassionate intelligence

The future belongs to societies that invest in how people think, feel, learn, and connect – physically, digitally, and socially.

Together, let us design human and artificial environments where every mind belongs, every community thrives, and humanity rises to its fullest cognitive and conscious potential.



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Chair and Founder, ION Singapore

ION Singapore

An initiative in Singapore in association with Neuropower World and Spaces & Minds

INSTITUTE OF NEURODIVERSITY ION SINGAPORE

The Institute of Neurodiversity (ION) is a global organization dedicated to advancing understanding, acceptance, and representation of neurodivergent individuals worldwide.

WE BELIEVE IN A KIND WORLD FOR ALL MINDS — ONE WHERE NEURODIVERGENCE IS NOT A CHALLENGE TO BE ACCOMMODATED, BUT A SOURCE OF INNOVATION, CREATIVITY AND RESILIENCE.

ION Singapore brings this mission to the region through advocacy, collaboration, and community-driven leadership. In Singapore, ION connects lived experience with science and policy to shape systems that enable inclusion across workplaces, education, and health. Our work also highlights the importance of environments that support *neurohealth* and *sensory well-being*, fostering conditions where every mind can thrive.



Neuropower World serves as the social enterprise partner of ION Singapore, translating this vision into local action through applied research, training, and partnerships that strengthen inclusion across sectors.

With Neuropower's support, **Spaces & Minds** is exploring how neurodesign principles come alive in real environments. By working with young people to co-create spaces that feel safe, comfortable, and welcoming, the initiative shows how belonging can be designed into everyday life. These pilots are less about building new structures and more about proving what is possible when communities themselves shape the environments they inhabit.

This whitepaper is a starting point. The road ahead will be shaped by those willing to test, measure, and adapt. If you are ready to explore what neurodesign means in your context – public, private, or community – we're ready to walk with you.

We're excited to work with:

- Policymakers exploring pilots for neuro-inclusive public spaces, from transit hubs to parks.
- Employers who want to understand how design choices can improve productivity, retention, and well-being.
- Designers and architects seeking collaborators to shape the next design frontier, embedding inclusion into the fabric of projects.

THE ROAD TO NEURO-INCLUSIVE CITIES BEGINS WITH CO-CREATION — ALIGNING COGNITION, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND AI FOR A THRIVING WORLD.

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