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# An interior designer explains how architecture can change autistic children's lives

Joan Scott Love has spent the past five years studying new ways to teach designers to create sensory-friendly spaces.



[Photo: Dan Forer/Getty Images]

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**BY JOAN SCOTT LOVE**

4 MINUTE READ

Imagine wearing a hearing aid on its highest setting and being unable to make any adjustment. You can hear the speech of the person next to you—but, at the same volume, you hear birdsong through an open window, the air-conditioning whirring above, and the traffic droning outside. The difference in the layers of sound cannot be filtered, and cacophony results. Combine this with some of your senses being crossed or



presents a challenge.

Within our living spaces, all of us are bombarded with an array of stimulating sensory inputs—sound, smell, touch, taste, movement—and a never-ending deluge of visual information. Many people manage to filter and cope, but people with autism encounter the world differently. Sensory difficulties can cause hypersensitivity (sense too much), hyposensitivity (sense too little), or **combinations of both**. The environment becomes a confusing place when one attempts to process “**too much information**.” Unexpected changes cause anxieties, which are challenging to manage, and the level of stimuli can tip the balance, to cause sensory overload, sometimes misinterpreted as a tantrum.

An **optimized learning environment** is vital for every child. For autistic children, the importance of environment is magnified, as are the benefits that can be achieved through appropriate architecture and design.

Over the past five years, I've been conducting **research** into how to teach the design of autism environments to future designers, with eight case-study schools and colleges. The research has identified a number of ways schools can adjust spaces to help children and young people with autism cope with their surroundings and, therefore, learn more effectively.

## HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP

In particular, the recommendations take into account the value to autistic people of preparation before an activity, as this allows information to be processed at an individual's required rate. This gives children time to understand what is expected of them. It also reduces anxieties, provides reassurance, and enhances learning receptivity.

### 1. PROVIDE PAUSE PLACES

Make the most of any open alcoves or recesses. Clear any small spaces “under the stairs” or in an outside area, providing an opportunity to stand back, process information, and recalibrate. It could mean removing a door from a shallow cupboard or locating a “pop up” tent. This is particularly important when moving from one building to another—when the difference between environments is significant.



An existing alcove providing an opportunity to pause and control the amount of incoming information. [Photo: courtesy of the author]

## 2. MULTIPLE ENTRANCES HELP

A main entrance may be too busy, so provide a quieter, alternative side entrance. Schools can also help by establishing a slow longer route from the playground to classrooms, as well as a quick short route—again, giving both choice and time to process information.

Equally, softening the boundary from an internal to an external space can also help. An external canopy, for example, can create an ideal outdoor learning space to help with anxieties surrounding sudden sensory change.