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# Designing for autism

A remarkable new facility creates an environment in which people with mental disabilities feel comfortable

By [Ginger McGuire](#)

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This article was published on [02.19.09](#).

**Hunter Armstrong spins in circles** at the grocery store checkout. He has trouble focusing and battles anxiety when he's in a crowded place. The 7-year-old, who was diagnosed with autism two years ago, usually attaches himself to his mother's hip in any strange environment.

Yet that didn't happen when he and his mom, Summer Armstrong, went to the COVE building in Paradise for its grand opening in December. COVE, which stands for Community Opportunity for Vocational Experience, is a day program for people with autism or other mental disabilities, and its new recreation center and gathering spot on Pearson Road is designed with them in mind.

The man responsible for its striking look is Kijeong Jeon, a Chico State University associate professor of art who provided the interior design after he researched behavioral studies and conducted interviews with people involved or afflicted with autism. To the best of his knowledge, it's one of the first spaces in the country so designed.

Hunter and his mother, who works in the Department of Art and Art History at Chico State, attended the opening with Jeon, who said he had never seen Hunter mingle in an environment where he didn't know many people. After five minutes, "he was everywhere, playing. [His mother] said she had never seen him that way before."

The building has three rooms: a main sensory room, a quiet room (called the "pink room") and a computer lab. Much of it is filled with "snoezelen" (pronounced SNOO-ze-len), which is a Dutch term that refers to the lighting effects, colors, sounds, music and even scents used to expose people with mental disabilities to both soothing and stimulating environments.

The COVE building makes use of soft, multicolored fiberoptic lighting and lava lamps that change colors, bubble mirrors and a cork floor that absorbs sound. A fountain in the center of the main sensory



**3-D DESIGN**  
Kijeong Jeon chose elements like bubble mirrors for the COVE facility.  
PHOTO BY GINGER MCGUIRE

**More info:**  
For more information about COVE or California Vocations, see [www.calvoc.org](http://www.calvoc.org) or call 877-0937. COVE is located at 565 Pearson Road in Paradise.

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room creates the sound of rhythmic water dropping, and there's a "3-D wall" — a multilayered, boxed platform — on which movies can be projected, giving them a kind of broken or underwater effect.

"I designed the space to stimulate the senses of these patients, to help them calm down — for a little peace of mind," Jeon said.

**Jeon, the coordinator of the Interior Design Program** at Chico State, was born in Korea. He moved to the United States roughly 25 years ago, after a stint in the Korean military, to study interior architecture. He earned a bachelor of fine art degree at the California College of the Arts, in San Francisco, and a master's in interior architecture from the University of Oregon.

He has always been interested in designing space inside buildings because that is where people interact, where their lives take form, he says.

"The finished interior environment [of the COVE building] incorporates spatial volumes, architectural details, colors, lighting and sounds that respond to the particular sensory needs of the clients, while still functioning as an educational environment," Jeon explained.



The two-year project originated when Jeon was contacted by Bob Irvine, executive director of California Vocations, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing residential and vocational support to developmentally disabled individuals.

Originally, Irvine asked Jeon if he would help with basic decorating details, such as choosing the color of the carpet for the new building. But Jeon decided the project offered a greater challenge than that.

He was overwhelmed at first. He didn't understand autism, and "none of the information [gathered during research was] about interior design or the environment," he said. Rather, it was based on behavioral research, and Jeon had to somehow incorporate it into interior-design concepts.

Jeon learned that people with autism have social and communication impairments, as well as restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. "Their sensory levels are much greater than other people's," Jeon said, though not every patient has the same symptoms and "some of them have completely opposite behaviors."

So he was left to create a space that would appeal to a wide assortment of individuals. Rather than use carpet, Jeon had a cork floor put down to eliminate noise and echoes that often irritate people with autism. The walls are double-layered because some people with autism are violent and kick or hit their surroundings.

**SENSORY DELIGHTS**

This is the magical main room at the new COVE building in Paradise. It is filled with what is known as "controlled multisensory stimulation" designed for people with mental disabilities. Parents of children with autism say they love it and immediately start acting like normal kids. COURTESY OF KIJEONG JEON

A wooden bench encircles a water fountain designed to create a soothing continuous rhythmic sound, one that is appealing to people with autism. Clients can use touchscreen computers, relax in vibrating bean bag chairs and interact with colorful, tactile images along the walls.

The "pink room" tends to be the favorite of everyone, including Hunter Armstrong. A projector displays various interactive patterns along the wall and ceiling, some resembling cells in a Petri dish, and the lighting fades in and out.

During an interview in Jeon's office at Chico State, Summer Armstrong said her son was completely at ease in the COVE rooms and for the first time wandered off on his own and interacted with other children. He enjoyed playing the xylophone and watched a scene from *Finding Nemo* on the 3-D wall, she said.

"Sometimes I don't take [Hunter] places. I don't worry about his safety, but I worry about him being uncomfortable," she added.

Hunter isn't the only individual who has reacted positively to the site. Terry Kozloff, director of the day program, described one client who never sat down and socialized with any of his peers. But now, "in just a couple of months, he is more social, walks around the facility and uses the touchscreen computers."

Irvine said one client is an 11-year-old boy who screams and yells constantly and is often restrained at school. But after a short visit to the new facility, "his mom almost left crying," Irvine said. "He acted just like a kid. He wasn't kicking. He wasn't yelling. He was just an 11-year-old boy."

Jeon plans to remain involved with the agency and will participate in further evaluations to refine and develop new design solutions to help those with autism feel more comfortable in their skin. He is searching for grants or other funding to integrate his designs into residential applications for people with autism as well.

The COVE building, Jeon said, is "the most fulfilling design project in my professional career, not just for the aesthetic value of the design, but also for the impact it could have on the lives of those who could be served by such adaptations in the environment."

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Posted 02/19/2009 1:41PM by **Keister7**

This environment would naturally coincide with the normal functioning of the autistic brain. I am sure the child

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