

THINK DIFFERENT

The Streets for Diversity report provides an eye-opening glimpse into what life is like for neurodivergent people in the urban environment

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To understand the link between the Royal College of Art (RCA) and transport, you have to go back a long way. The original Transport for London logo was designed by the head of the RCA's School of Communications, while London Underground's moquette seating was designed by textile designers from the college. The signage for the UK's motorway system also came from RCA designers, while the latest London Bus and Elizabeth Line trains were designed by recent RCA alumni.

The RCA's inclusive approach to design means that we're very interested in the small stories and individual experiences that people have. It's learning from these stories rather than creating quantifiable objects of knowledge that can create richer and more meaningful design responses.



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LISTEN AND LEARN

We feel that genuine inclusive design is about including everybody, which means everyone designs together and not as separate factions. Before the project began, there were lots of conversations about increasing safety on the roads, including a panel at the Parliamentary Advisory Committee for Transport Safety that we were part of.

Also on that panel was Dr Suzy

Charman, the executive director of the Road Safety Foundation, who is interested in design for neurodiversity. She set up a working group to investigate neurodivergent issues and asked us if we'd like to be involved. Initially, there were conversations about what we need to change, but we took a few steps back and thought what we actually need to do before we make any assumptions is understand how neurodivergent people experience the streets.

So we set up a project funded by the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund to investigate this, listening to neurodivergent people (for example, those that are autistic, dyslexic, dyspraxic or have ADHD) and inviting them to take part in a range of activities to help us understand the challenges and opportunities on our streets. These activities included creative workshops, interviews, an online survey, and walks and talks, in which individual participants chatted to a researcher about their thoughts and feelings when walking around their local streets.

OUTSIDE INSIGHTS

Neurodivergent people can be sensitive to the sensory qualities of their surroundings. For example, some will find flashing lights on bicycles or lights at Christmas challenging. Things that a lot of people would never consider to be a problem can actually be a big challenge for many of the people we worked with.

The project highlighted that a lot of the anxiety that some of the participants experienced around the urban environment happens before they even open their front door. There's a lot of anxiety building up at the thought of not



WALK AND TALK
Neurodivergent people were invited to explain how they felt when walking around streets



"We should listen to neurodivergent people because what they tell us could help everyone"

knowing what's going to happen, the unpredictability, the worry about getting lost. Some participants went to great lengths to make sure they had their own support mechanisms to help them on the street, whether it's sunglasses, sound-dampening headphones, a particular type of music or a scent.

One participant talked about how artwork on the walls helps him with his anxiety when he's passing strangers on the street. He can focus on the artwork and it takes his mind away from what's happening that's causing anxiety.

Sitting is also a coping mechanism, to be able to sit down and pause. But the amazing thing is people would sit down anywhere, even if there wasn't a seat. That showed that we need to have more seats on our streets, and they shouldn't be designed to stop people from sitting or lying down. If you design for the people at

the edge of society, you include everyone. When we design for the perfect driver, the perfect pedestrian, the wealthy person or the young person, we're not practising inclusive design, we're ignoring much of the world.

A key takeaway from the project is that some neurodivergent people can be hyper-responsive to their surroundings and have extraordinary sensory perception. That sensory perception is the canary in the coal mine. We should listen to neurodivergent people, because what they tell us could help everyone.

THE JOY OF STREETS

The other side to the project is promoting the joys of streets. As designers, we are often told that we are problem-solvers, but we're also interested in finding the opportunities and seeing what's possible by exploring positive experiences. It's actually through

the delight that many design opportunities come out.

A lot of people spoke about the joys of nature on the streets. One participant spoke about her son seeing a worm and being excited by it. But there are many different levels of joy that come from space – a bit of quiet, more space to breathe, a seat that you can sit on and take a rest. There are a number of positive things that can be done to improve a journey for everyone.

So when we talk about design solutions, it's not about just solving problems. It's also about enhancing the delights of the street. Because if you want people to use something, it's not enough to say that we've solved all the problems. You must make it a delightful experience – and why shouldn't our streets be delightful?



Streets for Diversity explores the urban experiences of neurodivergent people

READ THE REPORT
The RCA's Streets for Diversity report can be downloaded at bit.ly/RCA-Streets-report