Designing neuroinclusive spaces

↗ Can differentiation enhance the potential of spaces, experiences, and people?

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DESIGN HUMAN LIFE

From principles to action: IDEA© as an operational framework

IDEA was conceived as a **value-based framework to rethink the relationship between design and diversity,** and its true contribution emerges when this **ethical foundation** becomes an **operational tool.** In the previous paper, the core values (Impact, Dignity, Empowerment, and Awareness—IDEA) were outlined, along with the need to reconsider **inclusive design as a method** rather than an end goal.

The next step is to understand **how this vision informs the design process;** how does it translate into **design choices and strategic decisions?** How does it guide the operational phase, where layouts are defined, lighting is selected, materials are chosen, and functions are distributed?

Written by:

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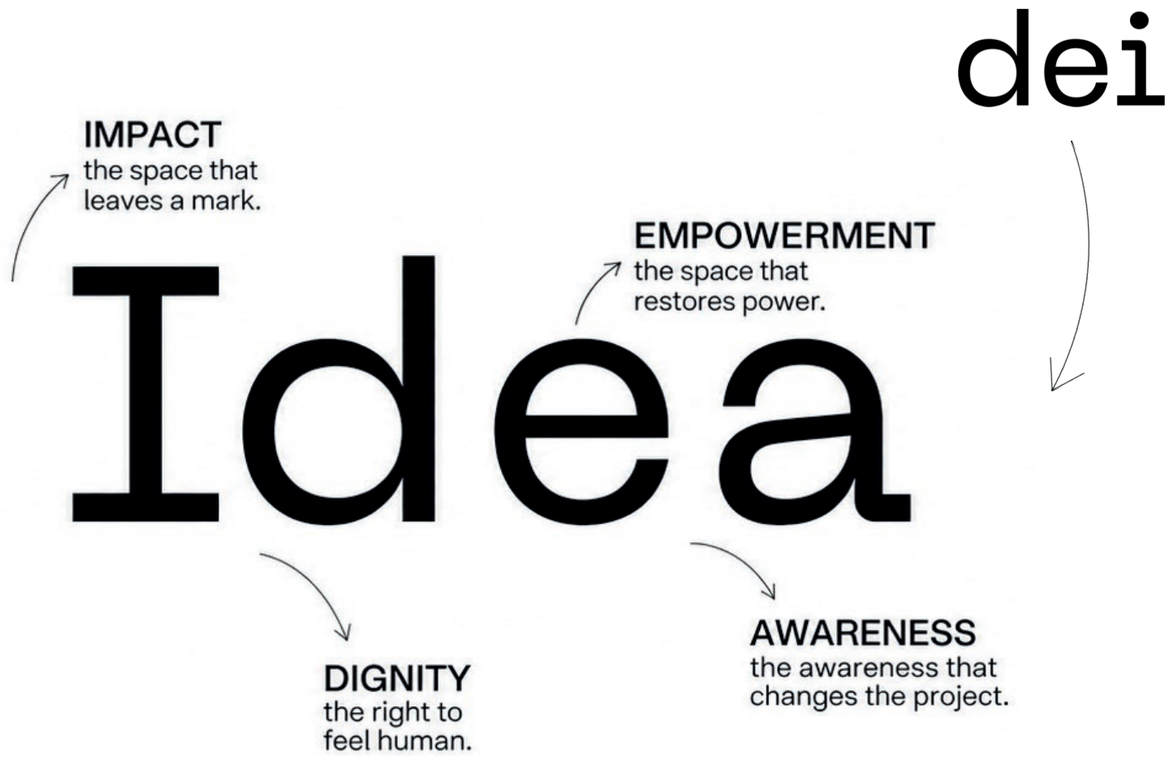
IDEA©'s operational approach starts from a fundamental premise: space must respond to a range of needs that go beyond the standard functions we are used to associating with it.

What do we mean by this? Let's look at a few examples:

1. A **corridor** is a **transitional** experience (not just a circulation element): a place where people **orient themselves, move and identify reference points**—doing so with minimal friction and maximum autonomy.
2. A **relaxation area** is a **relational** environment, acoustically balanced and visually welcoming, equipped with support surfaces and varied seating options to accommodate different attitudes—from more introverted to more dynamic personalities.
3. A **study room** helps users find their own level of **concentration:** light, acoustics, colors, and perceived distances work together to support attention while reducing environmental stress.



From *IDEA | A Performance-Based Framework for Inclusive Space,* a publication by Il Prisma.

IDEA© supports this shift. It helps translate spatial design into a system that actively enhances its function, making it as equitable and fluid as possible. Once the role of a space is defined, the next step is its **operational translation:** criteria and strategies that guide designers in making quality-driven choices. These are **design directions** that allow for flexible interpretation.

The set of strategies therefore unfolds as a **systemic approach,** one that must be integrated into an **organic line of thinking** from the earliest stages of design.

The operational dimension of **IDEA©** was developed to provide designers with a method that **helps reveal** aspects that might otherwise go unnoticed, enabling their integration into the design process.

The framework aims to simplify the process by **making the complexity of integrated design more understandable.** In this way, the core principle—that **human diversity** can **drive quality and innovation**—can be effectively translated into the creative process: **when a space works for many, it works better for everyone.**

It is a method that aspires to create places where each individual can find their own way of experiencing space, with safety, autonomy, and a sense of identity.

Neurodiversity

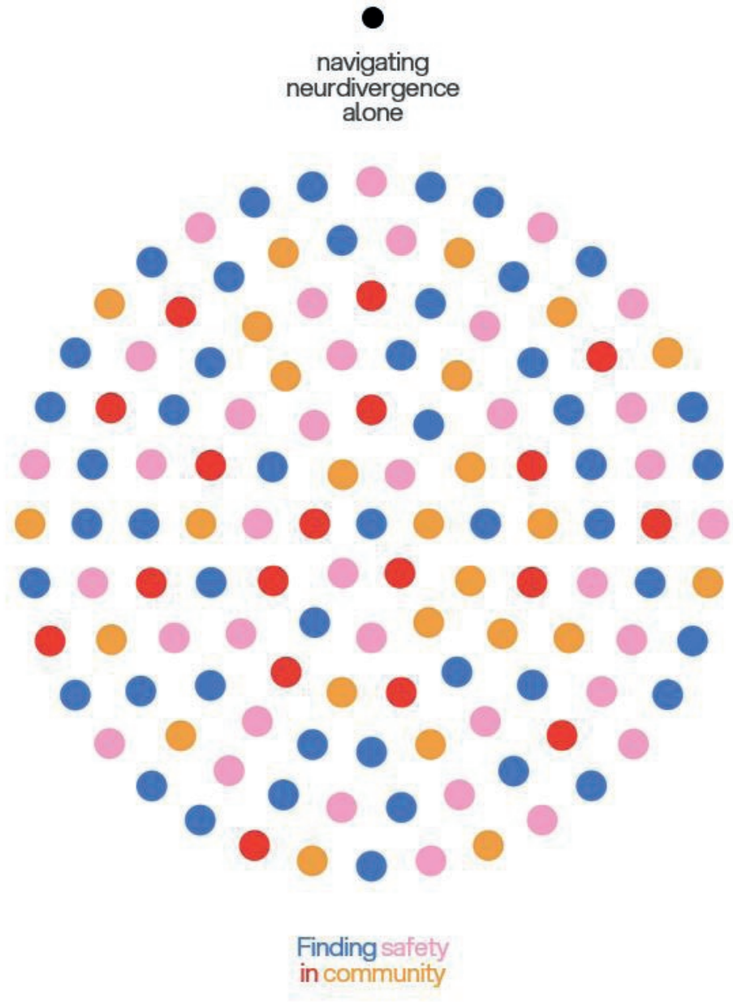
At this point, a fundamental reflection emerges:

“If designing means understanding how people experience space, how aware are we really of the **differences in the ways individuals perceive, process and respond to environmental stimuli?”**

For a long time, inclusivity has been primarily associated with the physical dimension. Today, however, it is increasingly clear that a significant part of spatial experience is tied to the **cognitive and sensory sphere.**

We chose to explore this topic more deeply in order to better understand it and to define design strategies that make experiences equitable also from a cognitive and sensory perspective—addressing those “invisible” aspects that are nonetheless crucial to the quality of everyone’s experience.

There is a term that encapsulates these invisible dimensions, describing the diversity in how people process information and perceive environmental stimuli: **neurodivergence.**



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But what does neurodivergence mean?

The term originated in the 1990s within movements aimed at recognizing and valuing the diversity of human neurological functioning. These movements promoted a shift in perspective—moving beyond the idea of "difference" as a disorder, particularly in relation to the autism spectrum.

Over time, the term has become more widely used and has taken on a broader meaning. Today, **neurodivergence** refers to a **range of ways in which the brain can function differently** from what is considered "typical" (the most common or statistically average pattern).These differences in neurological functioning have significant implications for social and relational dynamics, the perception of environmental stimuli, and the ways in which individuals learn and process information.

Neurodivergence, therefore, is **not a pathology, but a different way of experiencing and interpreting the world** and others. It describes a neuropsychological functioning characteristic of a portion of the population that diverges from the average. This definition implies a **shift in perspective: from the idea of "anomaly" to one of inclusion**—recognizing and **valuing** differences, and supporting everyday wellbeing for those with this type of functioning.

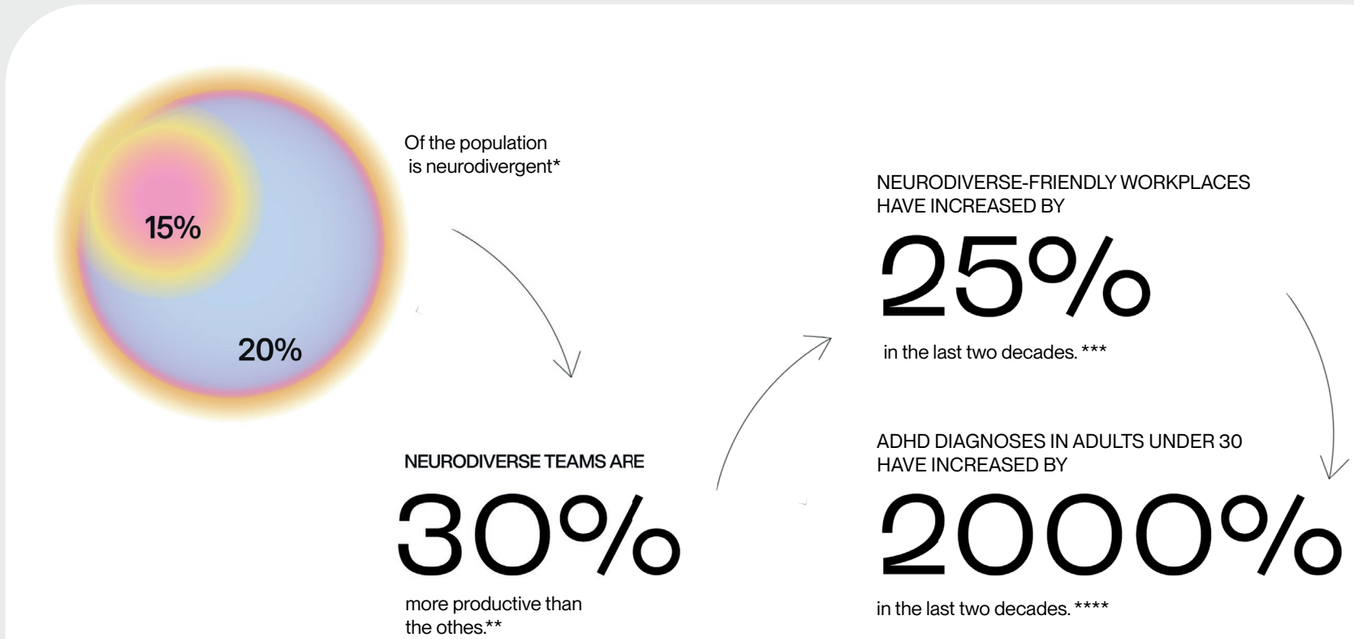
As awareness has grown that we do not all function in the same way—and that, much like biodiversity, human beings are defined by an intrinsic neurodiversity—attention has increasingly turned to identifying both the disruptive and supportive elements in the environments experienced by neurodivergent individuals.

Interest in this topic has grown exponentially over the past two decades, as its importance in ensuring societal wellbeing has become clear, along with its potential to be an advantage rather than a limitation.

Let's look at some numbers

Around **15% of the population is neurodivergent** (including dyslexia, ADHD, autism, giftedness and Tourette syndrome)—a significant share that can act as a powerful driver for societal growth and development.

Neurodiversity also fosters productivity and innovation in teams composed of both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals, encouraging exchange and cross-pollination: neurodiverse teams are **30% more productive than others.**



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* British Medical Bulletin
** Harvard Business Review
*** Neurodiversity in Business & Birkbeck University of London
**** BJPsych Open

How can we support these teams?

By designing **workspaces that accommodate the diversity** of each individual, creating the right conditions for everyone's wellbeing.

This is not about designing for specific categories, but about recognizing that each person has different ways of focusing, orienting themselves, managing stimuli, and seeking control and predictability.

In this sense, neurodivergence is not an exception, but a **condition that makes visible perceptual dynamics that concern us all.** Integrating these aspects into design enhances the overall quality of space—making it more legible, adaptable, and welcoming for every user.

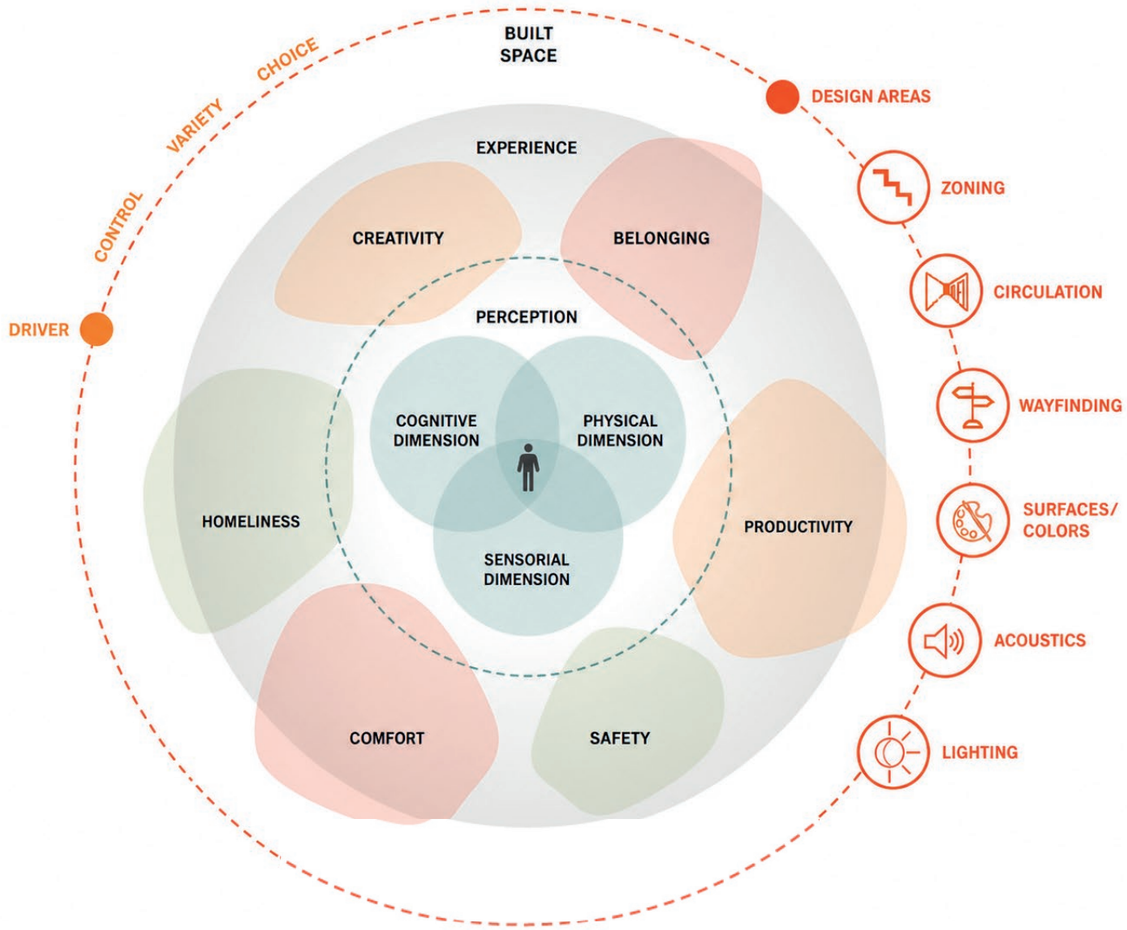
↗ Sensory Design

“Have you ever walked into a space and immediately felt at ease?
Or, on the contrary, uncomfortable—without being able to pinpoint exactly why?”

The **sensory quality** of environments plays a crucial role in the wellbeing of those who experience them. However, what may feel stimulating for some can be a source of discomfort for others.

This is particularly true for neurodivergent individuals, especially those who are hypersensitive. For them, even common stimuli—such as overly bright lighting, constant background noise or visually chaotic surfaces—can generate stress, cognitive fatigue, or a sense of withdrawal.

Conversely, hyposensitive individuals may require more stimulating environments in order to fully perceive and engage with the spatial experience. A truly inclusive environment must therefore take this sensory diversity into account, offering **differentiated and customizable** possibilities.



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Recognizing the diversity of sensory thresholds and cognitive styles means acknowledging that space is never neutral, but a **dynamic system** shaped by tensions. What is required is not simplified solutions, but a design language capable of **offering alternatives, autonomy and interpretability.**

From this perspective, several operational principles become central: the need to ensure environmental variety, the possibility of informed choice, and the ability to control one's own space. **Providing differentiated, legible and adjustable environments is a way of recognizing the plurality of experiences** that coexist within any space.

Alongside these principles, a set of key perceptual qualities emerges, helping to define the sensory and emotional character of an environment:

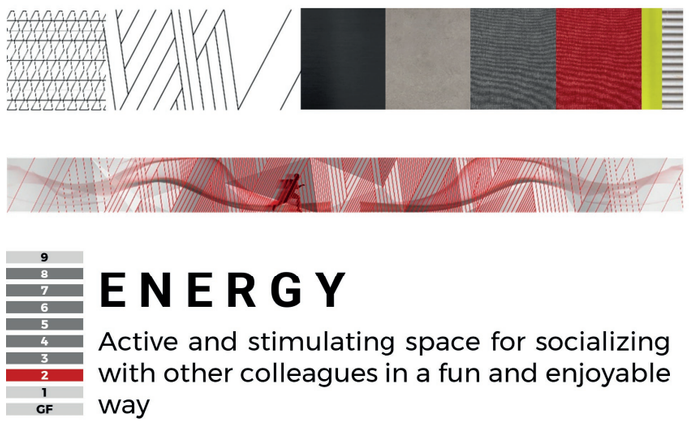
- **coherence,** which makes space legible and predictable;
- **fascination,** which gently stimulates attention without being intrusive;
- **homeyness,** which fosters comfort, recognizability, and a sense of belonging.

These qualities are far from secondary or merely aesthetic—they directly affect people's ability to orient themselves, feel safe, concentrate, and experience space without strain or anxiety. Integrating them into design makes it possible to create environments where individuals can feel at ease without having to mask, adapt or constantly compensate.

Too often, by contrast, spaces are rigid and uniform—designed around the implicit model of the “average” user. This homogeneity becomes a form of silent exclusion: not immediately visible, yet constant. Overcoming it means introducing **sensory differentiation and flexibility of use** as foundational principles.

An effective strategy in this direction is **conscious zoning:** organizing space into areas with varied levels of stimulation, clearly identifiable and guided by physical, visual or tactile cues. In this sense, design becomes an adaptive interface between body and environment—capable of mediating tensions and restoring agency to the individual.

To translate the principles of the **IDEA©** framework into operational design criteria, it is essential to identify what truly guides spatial design: a set of spatial qualities that define how environments are perceived, understood, and inhabited—crucial aspects when addressing sensory vulnerability, cognitive stress, or emotional disorientation. Some of these qualities—such as coherence, fascination, welcome, and intelligibility—emerge inductively from observing design needs within inclusive practices.



ENERGY

Active and stimulating space for socializing with other colleagues in a fun and enjoyable way

NATURE

Tools and recommendations to relate to the world in a positive way: biophilic solutions, advice for virtuous sustainable behavior, etc.

Aon, Milan - Il Prisma.

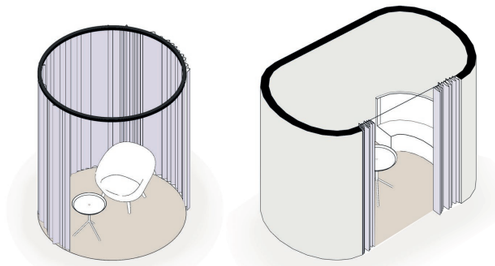
Designing inclusive workplaces means envisioning them as small internal neighborhoods, structured into areas **with distinct identities** yet connected by **fluid and legible pathways. Spatial variety is essential to accommodate the different ways people perceive and interact with their environment.**

For example, individuals with sensory hypersensitivity may benefit from more sheltered, calm, low-stimulation environments—such as quiet rooms, workstations in protected corners, or areas with soft lighting and sound-absorbing materials. Conversely, those with hyposensitivity may prefer more active, stimulating, and dynamic areas, perhaps closer to circulation paths or enriched with stronger visual and tactile stimuli.

In this sense, functional zoning should follow a gradient of intensity: from **deep focus** (individual workstations, quiet environments), to **formal collaboration** (meeting rooms, project spaces), and up to **informal social interaction** (work lounges, break areas, movement zones).

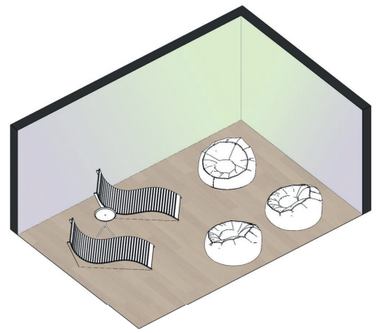
Transitional zones—such as equipped corridors, multifunctional entrances, or nodes with seating and supports for brief interactions—play a crucial role in connecting these environments, offering moments of decompression and orientation. **Designing for different sensory thresholds** means creating a **continuous spatial ecosystem,** where each person can choose where to be, how much to interact, and in which environment to best express themselves.

EMPATHY RELAX POD
Biophilic corner that promotes relaxation and the possibility of recharging body and mind.



COCOON
Closed space to facilitate isolation, concentration or one-to-one moments. It offers a mix of acoustic elements to provide a comfortable experience.

SILENCE AREA
Individual work and focus unit in a closed, dedicated silence environement.



MINDFULNESS ROOM
Closed or semi-closed space to facilitate multisensorial experiences.
It offers a mix of comfortable seating

From *IDEA | A Performance-Based Framework for Inclusive Space*, a publication by Il Prisma.

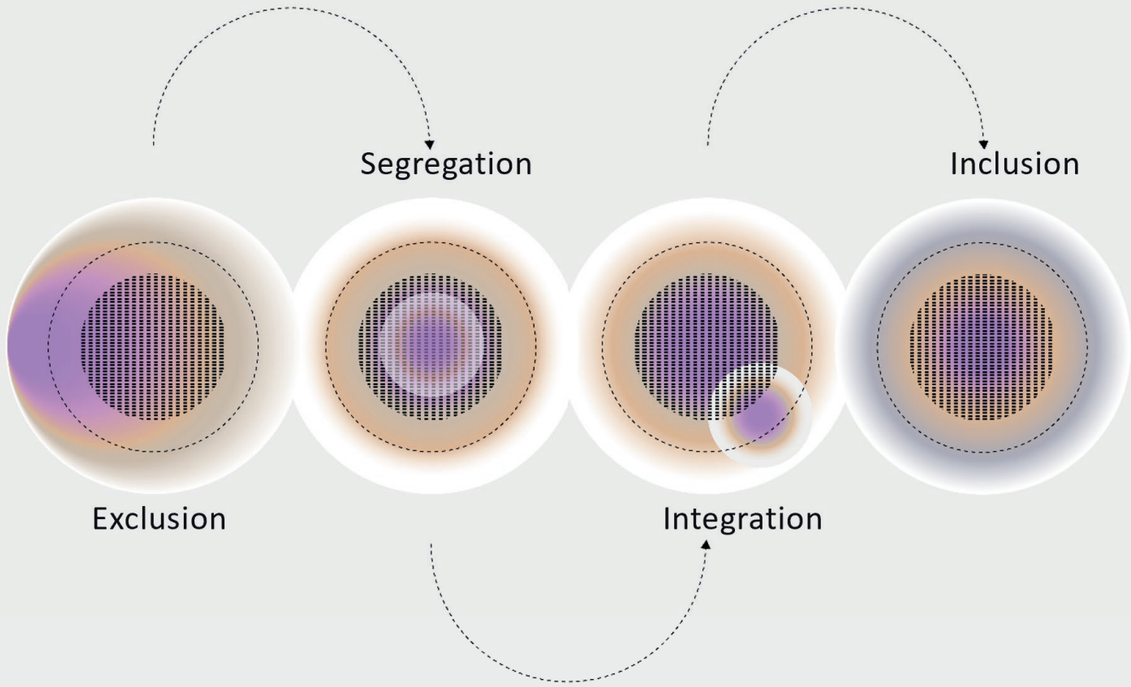
Conclusion

The key lies in the harmonious integration of these zones, **ensuring that differentiation does not turn into segmentation. A *neuroinclusive* office** is not a collection of rooms designed “for some,” but a **landscape of possibilities**—where every space is legible, accessible, and welcoming, and where people can move between focus and social interaction, silence and stimulation, according to their own needs and rhythms.

The design challenge is not about choosing between calm or stimulating environments, but about enabling their **dynamic coexistence.** Spaces with different levels of intensity should be able to intersect, interact, and alternate—without ever segregating or imposing.At different moments throughout the day—or across different phases of life—each individual may need varying levels of stimulation. For this reason, it is essential to provide:

- a range of sensory options that are coherent and clearly recognizable;
- clear transitional paths between areas with different levels of stimulation;
- opportunities for users to self-regulate their environment.

In this sense, multisensory strategies fully reflect the principles of variety, choice, and control, representing one of the most tangible ways to translate the **IDEA©** framework into environments that support wellbeing for all.



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↗ Sources

- British Medical Bulletin
- Harvard Business Review
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- BJPsych Open
- Designing Neuroinclusive Workplace, advancing Sensory Processing and Cognitive Well-being in the Built Environmental, HOK, 2025

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