Designing Workplaces for Neurodivergent Adults

A universal, human-centric approach

roar

Overview

"This paper explores the evolving conversation surrounding neurodivergent adults in the workplace, specifically questioning the continued relevance of the term "neurodivergent" in an era where diverse brain functions are more widely recognized. Ultimately, we believe that designing workplaces that consider the needs of neurodivergent individuals may benefit all adults, regardless of whether they are considered neurodivergent or neurotypical."

Pallavi Dean

Contributors

Blending science and creativity, empowered women from the fields of mental wellbeing and interior design gathered for a round table discussion about workplace design for neurodivergent adults.

They explored sensory-friendly spaces, adaptable layouts, and calming elements to enhance focus and well-being. By merging psychology and design, their aim was to develop a blueprint for inclusive environments that support diverse needs

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Designing Workplaces for Neurodivergent Adults

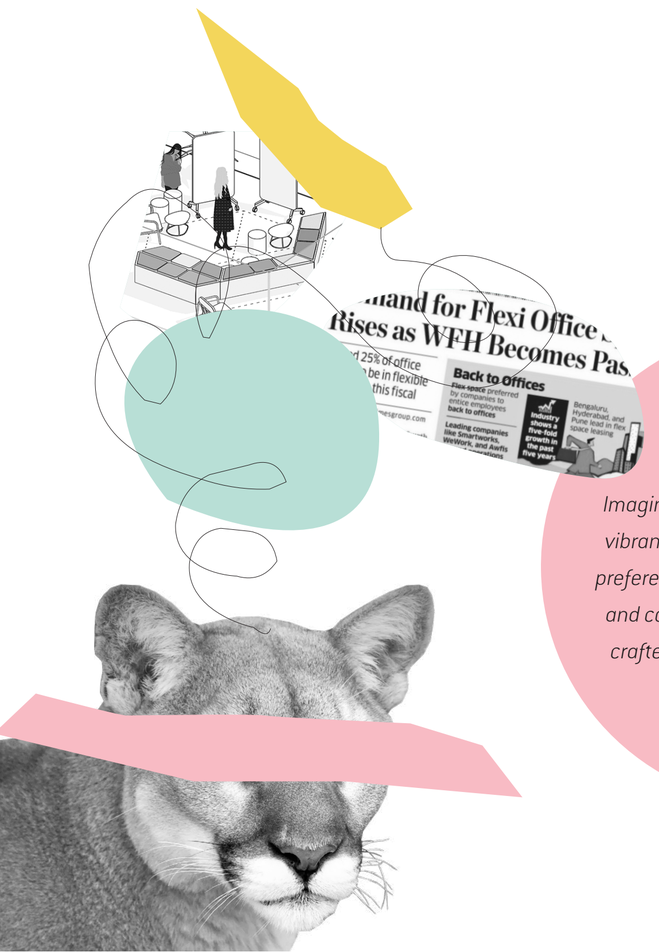
Workplaces have the power to shape how we think, collaborate, and thrive. Yet, many offices are designed with a one-size-fits-all mentality, leaving little room for the diverse needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Neurodiversity—a term that celebrates variations in brain function and cognition, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and more—is now defying human creativity and innovation. Yet, these differences are often overlooked in workplace design, resulting in environments that can feel overwhelming, isolating, or counterproductive.

This paper takes a deep dive into how thoughtful workplace design can empower both neurodivergent and neurotypical adults.

There is a case for a new kind of workspace—one that doesn't just accommodate differences but celebrates them as drivers of innovation and progress.

By combining compelling narratives with impactful visuals, this research aims to inspire a workplace revolution—one where everyone has the tools and spaces they need to thrive.



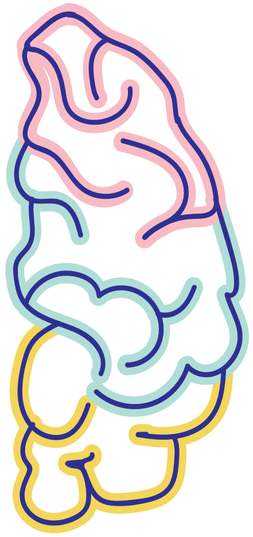
Imagine stepping into a workplace where vibrant, flexible spaces adapt to sensory preferences, quiet zones encourage focus, and collaboration areas are intentionally crafted to foster communication across cognitive styles.

> *Designing for neurodiversity is not just an act of inclusion; it's a strategy for unlocking untapped potential and transforming how we work.*

What is Neurodivergence and What are the Main Challenges for Neurodivergent Adults in the Workplace?

The term “neurodivergence” is often used to describe individuals whose neurological makeup differs from the average. These differences might manifest in various forms, such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, or other cognitive or sensory differences.

However, the concept of neurodivergence, while important in acknowledging the unique experiences of these individuals, is becoming outdated.



The reality is that every human brain functions differently. As such, we all encounter varying challenges and excel in different ways.

Some individuals might thrive in creative tasks but struggle with organization and structure, while others excel in tasks requiring logical thinking but struggle with abstract creativity.

Historically, the term “neurodivergent” has been used to describe people whose sensory and cognitive experiences may not align with mainstream societal expectations.

However, as awareness grows that all human brains function in distinct ways, the question arises: **Is the concept of neurodivergence still useful?**

Is the concept of neurodivergence still useful, or is it simply a label for a larger truth that we are all unique in how we think, feel, and process the world around us?

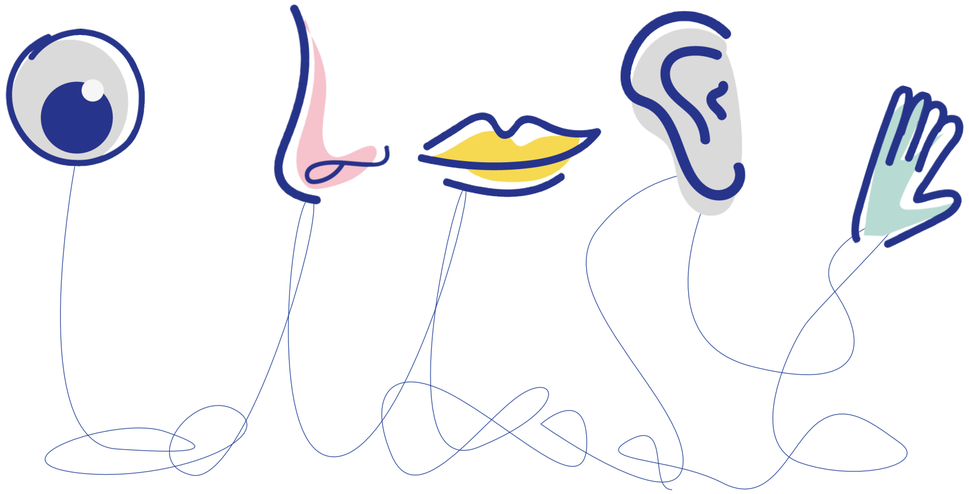
Dr. Haneen Jarrar

One in every three boys born in 2025, and one in every four girls born in 2025 will be neurodivergent, further highlighting the complexity and variability of human cognition and perception.

Main Challenges for Neurodivergent Adults in the Workplace

The main difficulties neurodivergent adults face in the workplace arise from environments designed with a narrow standard of “normal” functionality. Many workplaces, particularly those dominated by traditional office setups, are optimized for individuals who can easily manage sensory input and focus in static, controlled environments.

For neurodivergent individuals—who may experience heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, such as noise, light, or textures—these spaces can feel overwhelming or isolating.



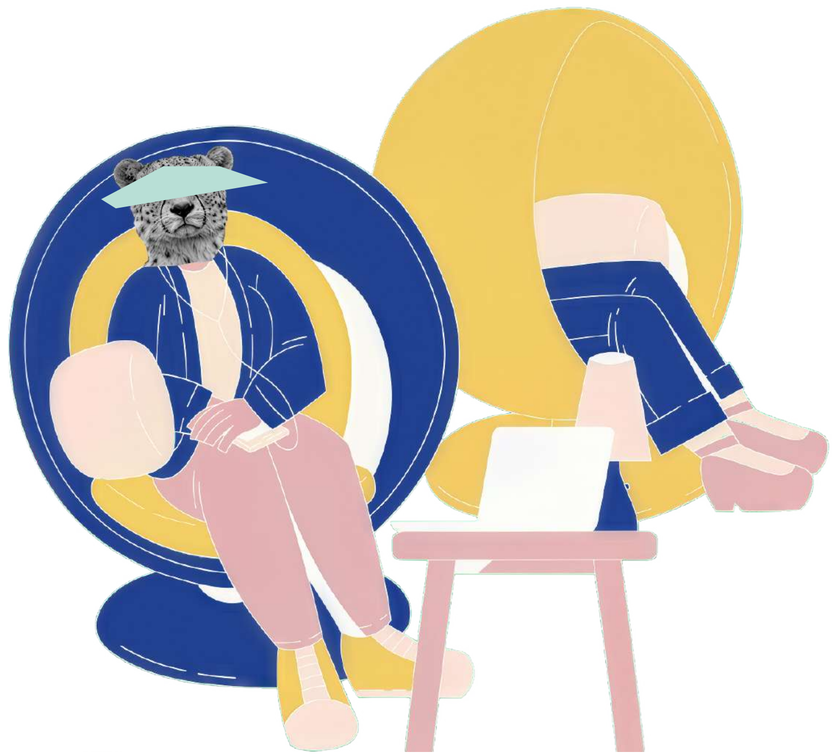
Sensory overload, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation are common challenges for neurodivergent employees. These difficulties can lead to stress, disengagement, and even burnout. The frustration of being unable to work comfortably in a space not designed for one’s neurological needs can hinder performance and productivity, further exacerbating the challenges neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace.

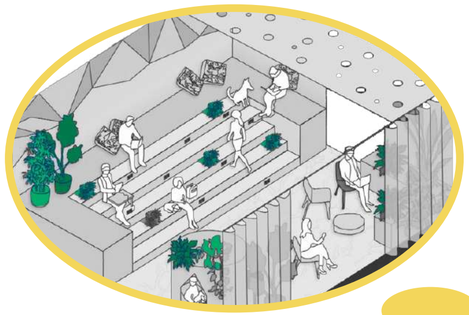
In some cases, individuals might not disclose their neurodivergence (up to two thirds) due to fears of discrimination or misunderstanding. As a result, they may suffer in silence, which only worsens their sense of isolation.

The Benefits of Universal Design: Spaces for All

A key insight that emerged from the roundtable was the idea that designing workspaces with neurodivergent individuals in mind ultimately benefits everyone.

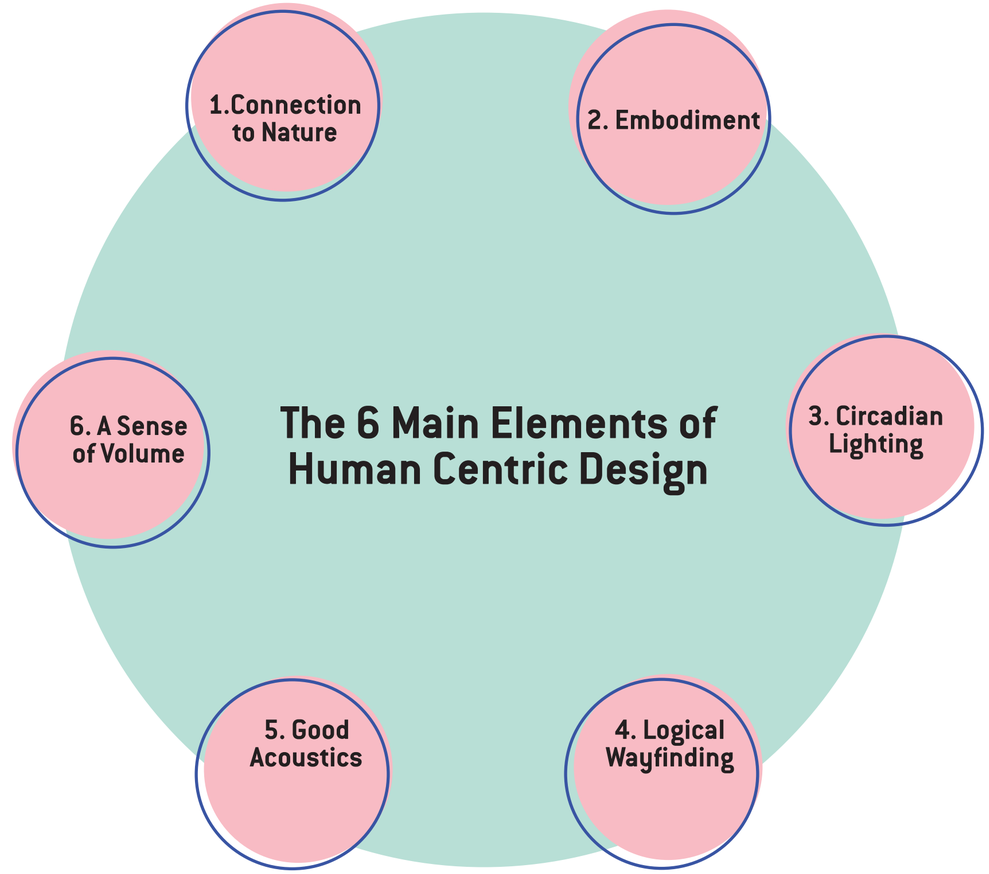
By focusing on the nervous system and sensory regulation, workplaces can create environments that foster calm, focus, and productivity for all individuals, regardless of their neurological makeup.





There is substantial research supporting the idea that certain elements of a workspace—such as lighting, acoustics, biophilia, and space layout—can positively affect an individual's physiological state.

For instance, spaces that allow for natural light, are designed with acoustic comfort in mind, and include natural elements like plants or textured materials, can reduce stress and improve mood.



> *This universal approach does not solely benefit neurodivergent individuals but promotes a healthier, more comfortable environment for everyone.*

1. Connection to Nature

Biophilic design has been around since the 1980s, emerging as a response to the increasing urbanization and technological advancements that disconnected people from nature.

The concept of biophilia—the innate human attraction to nature - has been a part of the design zeitgeist for many years. The fact that incorporating natural elements into office spaces, such as plants, water features, and natural textures, can improve cognitive function and emotional well-being has been well researched.

This sensory connection to nature provides a soothing backdrop, helping workers disconnect from the stressors of the outside world and focus more on their tasks.

Briar Jacques

Moreover, biophilic design helps create an atmosphere where employees feel more grounded and present. That said, many people consider biophilic design to mean the incorporation of lots of plants and greenery in a space, when infact, it can be so much more.

Nature is inherently soothing to the nervous system, triggering the parasympathetic response which calms the body and mind.

This response can be replicated in interior environments through careful attention to light, sound, texture, and color, creating spaces that foster a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere.

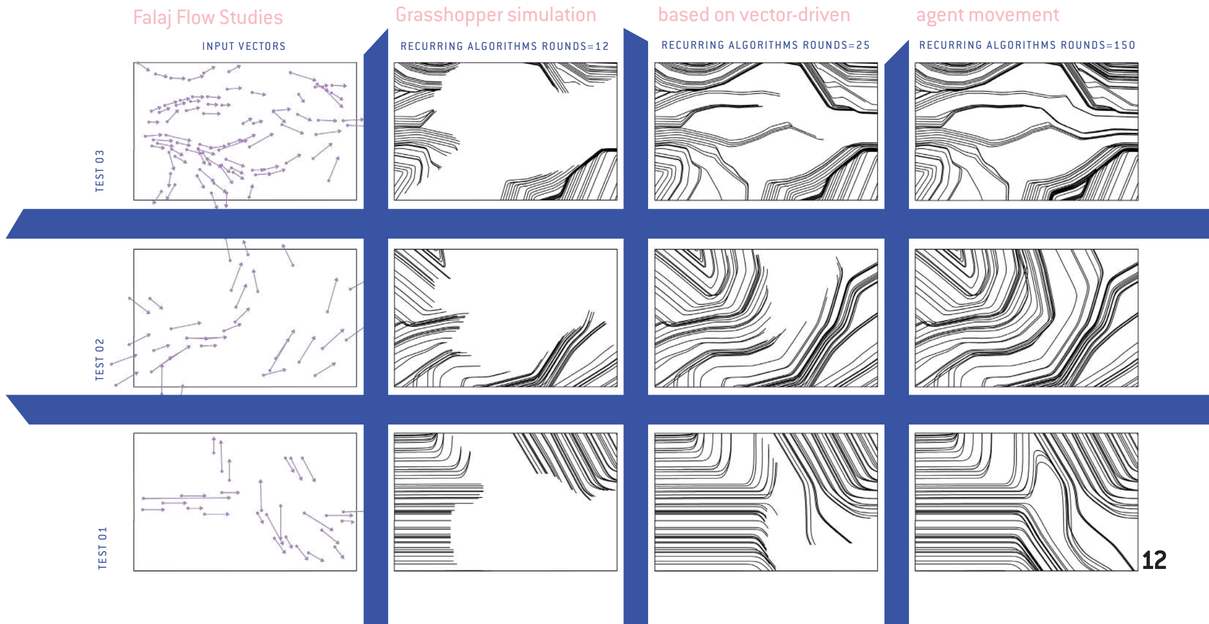
Patterns, Circulation & Flow.

For neurodiverse individuals, these elements - along with mindful flow and spatial arrangement - are crucial in reducing sensory overload and anxiety.

The principles of feng shui and the balance of the five elements in design can enhance this sense of calm, promoting a smooth transition from one area to another.

Inspired by Sharjah's 5,000-year-old falaj irrigation system, the design reflects its life-giving role in the desert. Just as the falaj solved real-world challenges, AUS Enterprises embraces innovation to drive impact. This narrative shapes the interior, influencing circulation and space planning at its core.

In spaces that prioritize these aspects, even those who are not neurodivergent feel more at ease, making these principles beneficial for all.



2. Embodiment

Embodiment plays a vital role in designing workspaces for neurodivergent adults because it fosters a connection to the body that is often underdeveloped in modern, cognitively-focused environments.

From an early age, individuals are encouraged to prioritize mental processes over physical sensations, which can lead to a disconnection between mind and body. This lack of interception, or awareness of internal bodily states, can make it difficult for individuals to remain grounded, focused, or emotionally regulated in high-stress environments.

Incorporate natural scents and sounds

> *Furniture that encourages active posture is a great way to bring awareness back to the body - wellness balls, lean stools and rock forward chairs.*

To address this, workspace design must take into account the sensory experiences that promote embodiment, enabling neurodivergent individuals to reconnect with their bodies and the present moment. By incorporating tactile elements, soothing sounds, and natural materials, the workspace becomes a safe haven for emotional and physical regulation, reducing the cognitive load on individuals and enhancing their overall well-being.

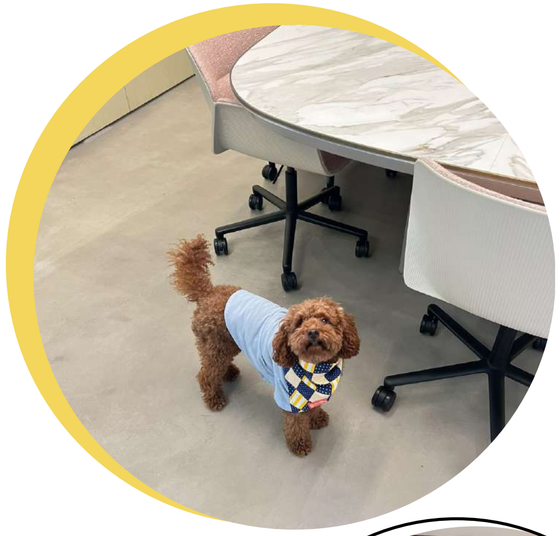
Tactile experiences like high pile carpets, textured wall surfaces and adding weighted blankets to nap rooms, can provide immediate feedback to the body, stimulating interoception and helping individuals reorient themselves in space.

Incorporating natural scents like burning sage, and cyclical sounds, such as the gentle hum of a water feature or rhythmic breathing exercise, can create a tranquil atmosphere that encourages relaxation and focus, allowing neurodivergent individuals to bring their bodies and minds into harmony.

The challenge lies in designing spaces that do not simply cater to the typical norms of cognitive productivity but instead support a more holistic approach to well-being. Much of modern workspace culture is rooted in productivity metrics, where individuals are expected to conform to standards set by KPIs and structured schedules.

These designs often ignore the physiological needs of the human body. To truly support neurodivergent individuals, it is necessary to step back and think beyond traditional productivity models.

Encouraging physical movement—through activities like stretching breaks, walking, or allowing moments of sensory engagement—can bypass the cognitive barriers that often impede focus and relaxation.



For example, creating spaces where individuals can take a break to breathe deeply, engage with an animal, or spend time in nature offers an opportunity for the body to recalibrate, making it easier for individuals to return to work feeling refreshed and re-centered.

By embracing these practices, organizations can help foster a culture of understanding, where the body's needs are seen as equally important as cognitive tasks, allowing neurodivergent individuals to thrive both physically and mentally.

3. Circadian Lighting

Lighting plays a critical role in creating an optimal workspace for neurodivergent individuals, yet it is often overlooked as a potential stressor. Bad lighting can lead to a range of physical and mental health issues, many of which may go unnoticed. For instance, improper or flickering artificial lighting can cause migraines, but individuals may not recognize that their discomfort is related to the lighting.

Constant exposure to low-quality lighting—characterized by high glare, flicker, and poorly controlled color temperature—can lead to agitation, anxiety, and visual fatigue. Moreover, it may significantly hinder individuals' ability to engage and perform effectively within a workspace.

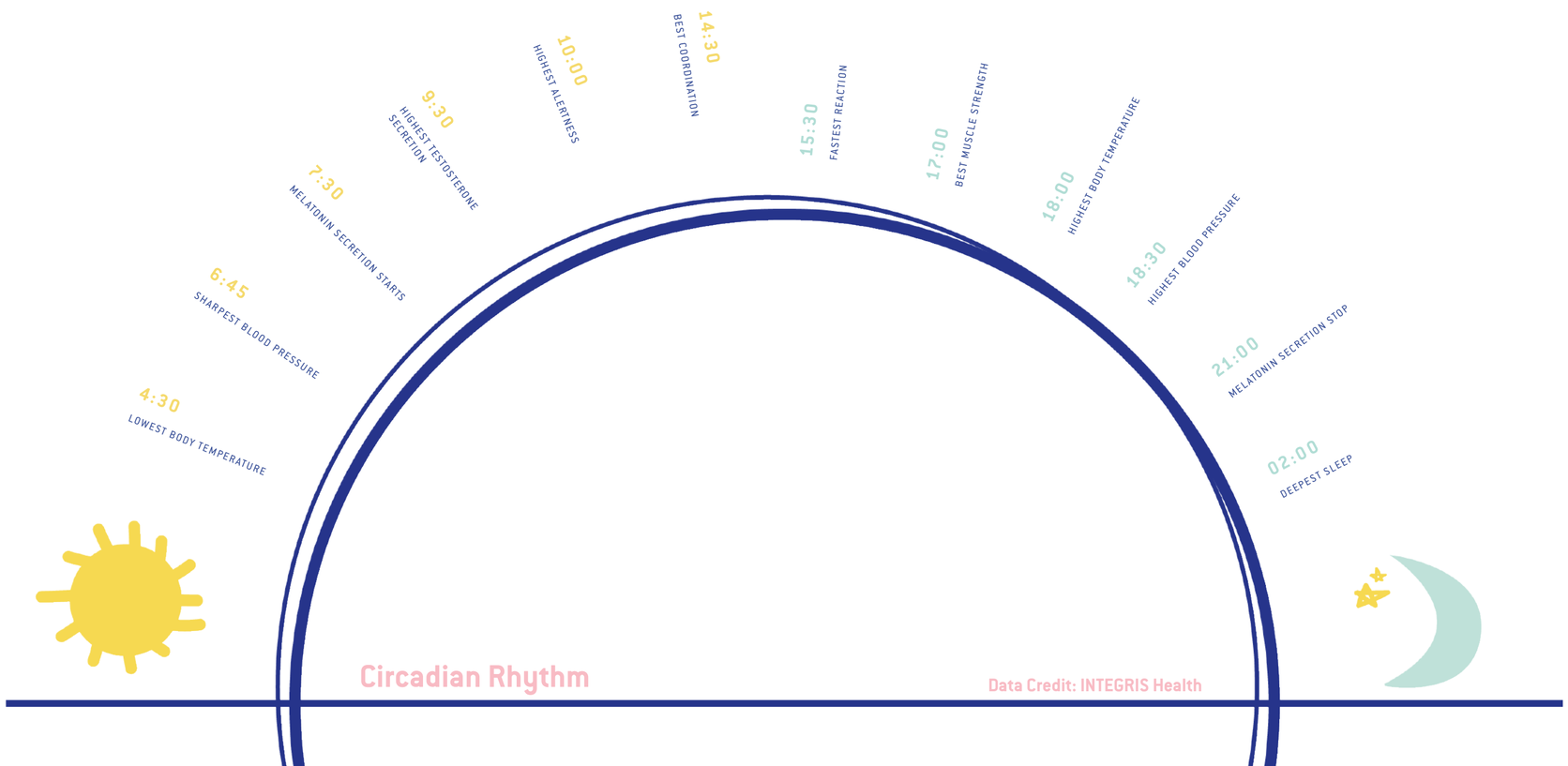
The human body is designed to respond to natural light cycles, which influence our sleep-wake patterns and overall well-being.

> *A key factor is designing better workspaces is reconnecting lighting choices to natural circadian rhythms.*
>
> **- Lama Arouri -**

Exposure to light that mimics the sun's natural progression throughout the day - warmer, softer tones in the morning and evening, with brighter, cooler light around midday - can support mental clarity and emotional stability.

For instance, light around 4000 Kelvin, which is similar to midday sunlight, is ideal for periods of peak productivity.

This approach, however, involves more than just setting a fixed light temperature throughout the day; it requires flexibility, with different lighting temperatures introduced at appropriate times to align with the body's natural rhythms.



4. Logical Wayfinding

Wayfinding is an important aspect of workspaces, especially for neurodiverse adults, as it helps to alleviate anxiety and stress by providing clear, intuitive cues about where one is within a space. The act of knowing where we are is deeply tied to our evolutionary history—much like navigating the savannah, where identifying landmarks like a large tree could signal shelter and safety.

In another concept of celestial navigation called Wayfaring, people used information about the stars, sun, moon, planets, ocean, and tradewinds to know which way to go.

In a workspace, this translates to the use of color, texture, lighting, and even sound to guide individuals without overwhelming them.

We need to create place makers within the design to clearly signal where one is within the space.

Overly rigid signage may be counterproductive, whereas subtle cues that align with our internal sense of direction can create a more comfortable, stress-free environment.

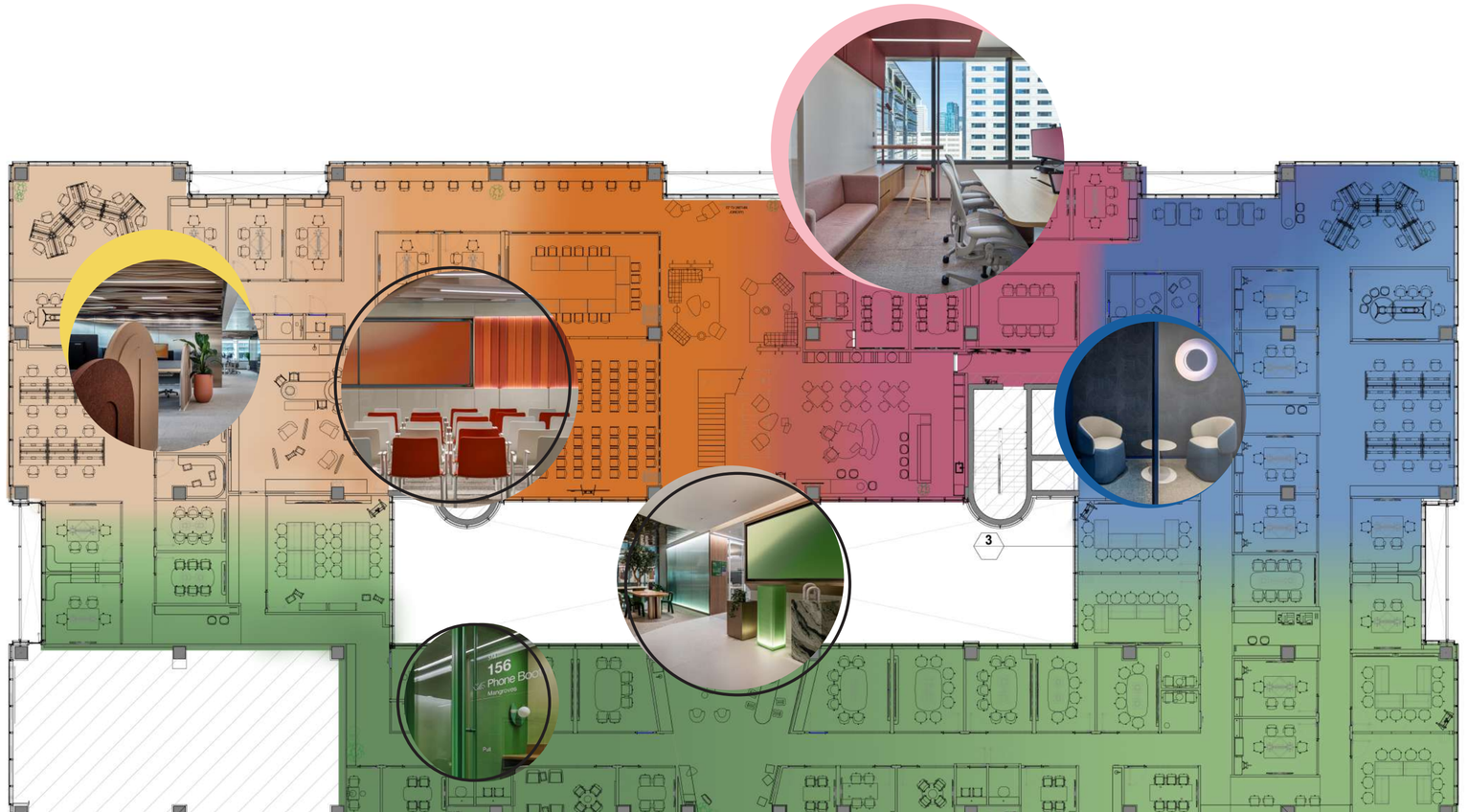
By designing spaces that tap into this natural wayfinding process, we create workplaces that are not only more intuitive but also more supportive for neurodiverse individuals.

The excessive use of technology in a space can overwhelm users with complexity and sensory overload, making it more difficult to navigate and interact with, rather than creating an intuitive and seamless experience.

> *Relying on visual or sensory markers rather than overly didactic signs can mimic brain's natural way of processing spatial information, offering a sense of security and reducing cognitive load.*

Wayfinding through colors

This project utilizes color to define distinct office areas, enhancing wayfinding and spatial orientation. It challenges the conventional notion that corporate offices should be dim and monotonous.



5. Good Acoustics

Acoustics are a critical consideration when designing workspaces for neurodivergent adults, especially in environments where open-plan designs are common. Studies show that two-thirds of people find acoustic distractions to be their primary concern in a workspace.

The rise of open workspaces, populated by diverse individuals with varying needs, can lead to sensory overload, particularly for neurodivergent individuals, who may have heightened sensitivity to noise.

This can create a sense of isolation, as individuals may feel forced to either endure the discomfort or withdraw into an isolated space.

To mitigate this, workspace design could incorporate distinct zones—such as quiet zones, noisy zones, and social zones—similar to train compartments, where individuals can choose environments that align with their needs.

Noise-canceling headphones, for example, may work for some but not others, and providing options without stigma allows employees to take agency over their sensory experiences.

Something we often use in our designs is a concept of "alone together" - creating cooconed spaces within the open plan that are visually connected to the whole.

Providing defensible space, where individuals have control over their environment, helps support their nervous system and reduces the risk of feeling overwhelmed.

Ultimately, creating a workplace that allows for personal autonomy in adjusting one's surroundings can foster a sense of comfort, agency, and inclusion.

6. A Sense of Volume

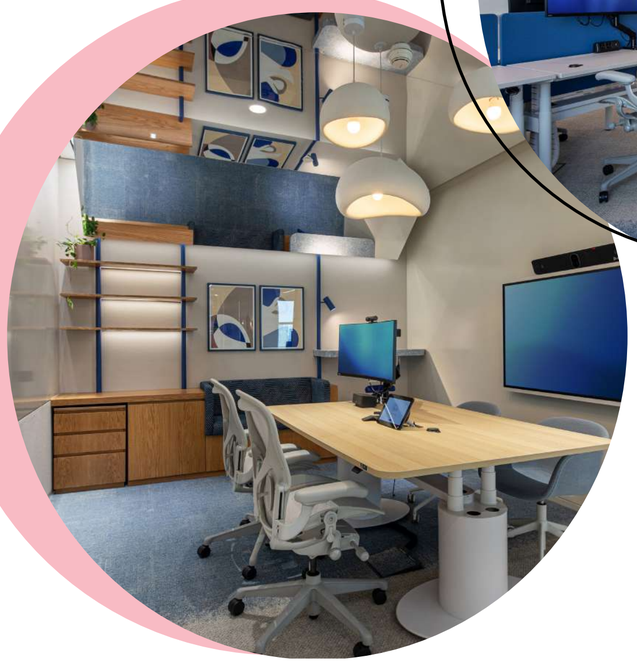
When designing workspaces for neurodivergent adults, the concept of volume plays a crucial role in creating a comfortable and functional environment.

Volume in a space can be manipulated through various visual techniques, which help shape how the space feels. For example, using lighter ceilings paired with darker walls can create the illusion of a more expansive area, adding a sense of openness.

Additionally, incorporating materials like mirrors and strategic lighting can enhance this effect by reflecting light and creating depth. In some cases, curved ceilings with well-placed lighting can provide a sense of warmth and focus, reducing overstimulation.

Just as being in nature, like a forest or open landscape provides a sense of vastness and tranquility, designing spaces that mimic these natural settings, with open volumes and a harmonious sensory experience, can significantly improve focus, learning, and general comfort.

By carefully considering the materiality and design of the space, designers can create environments that cater to the sensory needs of neurodivergent individuals, fostering a sense of calm and focus.



Rely on Science

Designing workspaces that effectively accommodate neurodivergent adults presents a significant challenge, as trying to please everyone can often lead to conflict between individual preferences and the demands of evidence-based design.

Research consistently shows that optimal work environments are those that align with neurodivergent needs, such as minimizing distractions, providing clear structure, and ensuring sensory comfort.

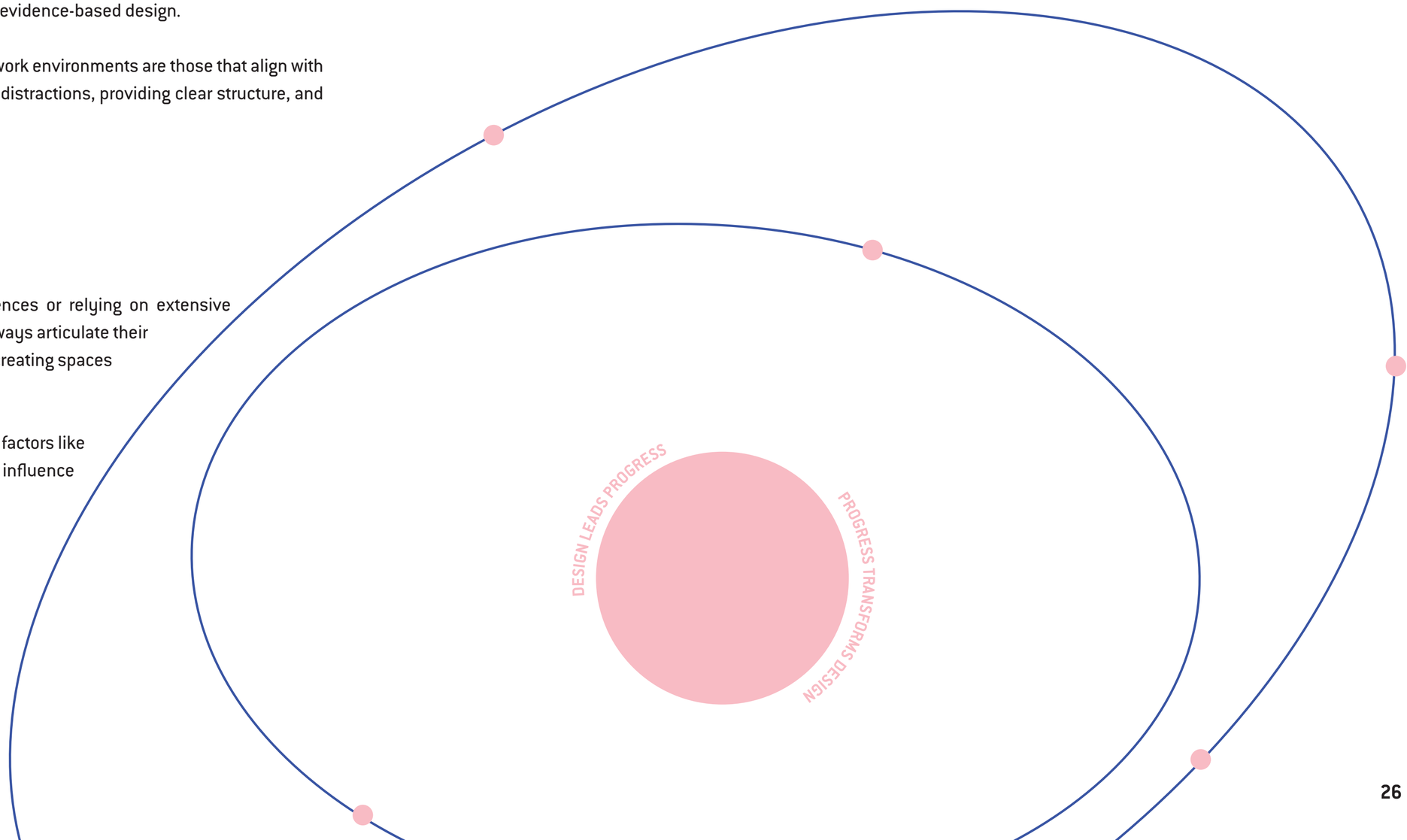
Rather than catering to subjective preferences or relying on extensive feedback from individuals - who may not always articulate their needs clearly—designers should focus on creating spaces informed by scientific principles.

This means considering how environmental factors like lighting, acoustics, and spatial arrangement influence productivity, well-being, and performance.

In an era of Industry 4.0, where technology, culture, and design intersect, we must move beyond generic solutions and embrace architecture, arts, and creativity to shape environments that allow all individuals to flourish.

It is essential to balance the pursuit of human-centered design with the practicalities of economics and functionality.

Spaces should not only be inclusive but also disruptive in a way that fosters innovation and expression, transcending the mere accommodation of needs to create environments that inspire and empower.

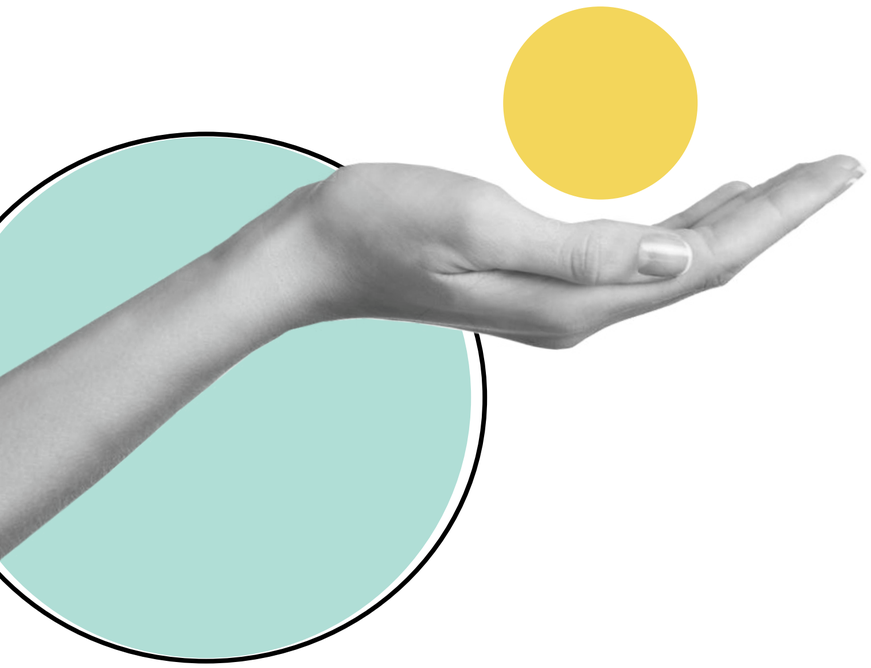


Beyond Design - Creating Psychological Safety and Inclusivity in the Workplace

Beyond physical design, creating a culture of inclusivity and psychological safety is essential.

For neurodivergent employees to thrive, they need to feel that they are valued, understood, and supported by their employers.

Open communication and the removal of stigma are crucial to encouraging neurodivergent individuals to disclose their needs.



Workplaces should foster a culture where employees are not only encouraged to advocate for themselves but where their voices are heard and respected. This shift requires a rethinking of traditional corporate structures that prioritize profit and productivity over human well-being.

Policies must be informed by well-being science, not as a checkbox, but as a genuine commitment to supporting employees in a holistic way, acknowledging the importance of psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and diversity.

When corporations embrace this change and create environments that prioritize human connection and mental well-being, they not only create safer spaces for neurodivergent individuals but also foster a workplace culture that benefits all employees.

Conclusion

The future of workplace design is one that recognizes the inherent diversity of human brains and accommodates that diversity through thoughtful, inclusive design.

By focusing on the needs of neurodivergent individuals, companies will create environments that are beneficial to all employees.

Sensory-friendly spaces, natural elements, and flexible layouts help support emotional regulation, reduce stress, and foster productivity thus creating workplaces that respect and cater to the full range of human experiences.

roar

ABOUT

Roar is an interior design and architecture studio with offices in Dubai and Riyadh. Roar's international portfolio of of commercial projects includes offices for law firm, White & Case, Oliver Wyman, and sovereign investment company, Mubadala.

Roar is also active in in the residential, hospitality and education sectors, and believes firmly that incorporating elements of these diverse fields into each project makes for better environments.

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