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Neuroinclusive Workplace Design, Functional Obsolescence and Post-Occupancy Evaluation: Insights from a Corporate Office Environment

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Commercial office buildings typically have structural lifespans extending over several decades, yet their interior fit-outs are replaced far more frequently. These interventions are often driven by functional obsolescence, where workplace environments no longer support evolving work patterns and user needs.. Creating office spaces which meet user needs and increase workplace satisfaction is an important step to reducing the re-fits and the recurring associated embodied carbon and waste. This paper investigates whether an office designed on neuroinclusive principles improves workplace satisfaction amongst both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees and explores the implications for workplace effectiveness, functional adaptability and workplace lifecycle management. Using a mixed-methods Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) of a neuroinclusive commercial office, the study draws on survey responses from fifty employees and semi-structured interviews with occupants and the workplace designer. Findings indicate that neuroinclusive design should be understood not as targeted accommodation for a minority of users, but as an approach that identifies and responds to shared workplace needs for acoustic comfort, privacy, visual calm and spatial flexibility. The study demonstrates how user experience evidence can inform workplace adaptation and briefing decisions, supporting the use of POE as a feed-forward mechanism within workplace lifecycle management. While no direct causal relationship between neuroinclusive design and reduced refurbishment frequency is established, the findings suggest a potential pathway through which addressing functional dissatisfaction may support longer interior lifespans.

Keywords: embodied carbon, lifecycle resilience, neurodiversity, post occupancy evaluation, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

While commercial office buildings are typically designed to remain operational for several decades, their interior fit-outs are frequently replaced at much shorter intervals (Vartiainen and Vanharanta, 2024). Refurbishments are commonly driven by functional obsolescence, whereby workplace environments no longer adequately support organisational activities, occupant requirements or changing patterns of work despite remaining physically serviceable (Remøy and van der Voordt, 2014). Office fit-outs tailored to the operational requirements of a tenant relate to the internal elements of an occupied workplace are termed Category B (Cat B) fit-outs and recur regularly throughout a building's lifecycle. Studies report that between 46% and 70% of office floors may undergo refurbishment within a five-year period (Casas-Arredondo et al., 2017). Such interventions represent a significant source of recurring

material waste and embodied carbon, with estimates of 31–38 kg/m² of waste generated and 93–96 kgCO₂e/m² of embodied carbon per refurbishment cycle and cumulative embodied carbon associated with repeated fit-outs can ultimately exceeding the initial embodied carbon of the original building (Budiyani, 2023). Addressing the underlying causes of functional dissatisfaction therefore presents an underexplored opportunity to reduce premature refurbishment and improve the long term sustainability of workplace interiors.

Despite increasing investment in office design, large-scale and global workplace surveys indicate persistent dissatisfaction with office environments, by neurodivergent and neurotypical workers, particularly in relation to noise, privacy and access to task-appropriate space, (Leesman, 2024; Gensler, 2025). From a sustainability perspective, workplace environments that continue to meet occupant needs over time are less likely to experience functional obsolescence, a recognised driver of refurbishment within commercial office buildings (Remøy and van der Voordt, 2014). Although the relationship between workplace satisfaction and organisational performance is well established, little research has examined whether workplace environments that better accommodate diverse user needs may also contribute to sustainability outcomes through reduced functional obsolescence and extended fit-out lifespans. This represents an important gap in current workplace and sustainability literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines neuroinclusive workplace design, workplace performance in use and the role of Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) in informing workplace adaptation. Although inclusive design and workplace dissatisfaction are well documented, limited empirical research has examined how neuroinclusive user feedback can be used proactively within workplace lifecycle management to reduce premature Category B fit-out replacement.

Inclusive design and workplace environments

Workplace research increasingly recognises cognitive and sensory diversity as an important factor in how environments perform, with neurodivergent employees often experiencing heightened sensitivity to noise, lighting and spatial organisation, (Doyle, 2020). Open-plan workplaces have been shown to generate persistent background noise, visual disruption and social interruption, which can undermine concentration and increase cognitive fatigue (Sander et al., 2021; Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2021). While these conditions are often experienced more acutely by neurodivergent employees, they are not exclusive to them. Large-scale workplace studies consistently identify noise and lack of privacy as dominant sources of dissatisfaction across office populations, indicating broader limitations in prevailing workplace models (Leesman, 2024). Designing environments that respond to a wider range of sensory and cognitive needs has therefore been linked not only to improved inclusion, but also to enhanced comfort, perceived effectiveness and workplace performance more generally (Maslin, 2021; Narenthiran et al., 2022). Recent guidance, including PAS 6463:2022, Design for the Mind – Neurodiversity and the Built Environment, promotes neuroinclusive strategies such as acoustic zoning, adaptable lighting, sensory retreat spaces and flexible workplace layouts (BSI, 2022). However, the breadth of such guidance can result in inclusive features being applied selectively or diluted during delivery. Research and practice-based critiques indicate that inclusive design is still frequently approached as a compliance exercise, resulting in environments that meet regulatory thresholds but do not support equitable use in practice (Tagg, 2022).

Practice based commentary within the office sector further reinforces the importance of addressing these issues at the briefing stage, emphasising that inclusive workplaces are achieved not through checklist compliance but by designing environments that work for people in practice (BCO, 2024). This highlights the need for feedback from occupied environments to understand which principles deliver meaningful benefit in practice.

POE and workplace performance

Lifecycle research highlights that frequent Category B office refurbishments carry disproportionate embodied carbon impacts relative to their functional lifespan, with interiors often replaced well before the end of their material service life (LMN Architects, 2024). These interventions are commonly driven by functional misalignment rather than physical deterioration, reinforcing the importance of identifying performance issues before they escalate into carbon intensive refit cycles. Post-occupancy evaluation (POE) is widely recognised as a means of understanding how buildings perform in use by revealing gaps between design intent and lived experience (Preiser and Vischer, 2005). In workplace settings, however, POE has most often been applied as a project based, architect led exercise aligned with completion or compliance, rather than as an ongoing source of adaptation and improvement. As a result, performance issues are frequently addressed through reactive spatial reconfiguration or refurbishment rather than through earlier design, with RIBA guidance positioning POE as a mechanism for continuous learning rather than retrospective critique (RIBA, 2018; RIBA, 2020).

Research indicates that inclusive design strategies can improve environmental satisfaction where users have greater choice and control (Zallio et al., 2024; Narenthiran et al., 2022). However, there remains limited empirical research examining how POE can be used proactively to inform adaptable workplace design and reduce the need for Cat B fit-out cycles. This highlights the potential for POE to operate as a feed-forward tool within workplace lifecycle management, informing briefing and design standards to support spatial resilience over time. This study contributes to addressing this potential by providing empirical evidence from a real workplace case study, showing how feed-forward post-occupancy insight can inform inclusive design decisions, reduce functional dissatisfaction and limit the need for future material intensive fit-out intervention.

RESEARCH METHOD

A mixed-methods research design was adopted to capture both measurable patterns in workplace experience and qualitative insight into how employees perceive and use the environment. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled examination not only of which environmental features were valued, but also how and why they influenced everyday working practices. Rather than benchmarking the case study against existing design guidance, the research focuses on evaluating how neuroinclusive design principles perform in use, responding directly to the research gap identified in the literature.

Case study environment

The research was conducted within a commercial office located in Birmingham, United Kingdom. The workplace was designed using neuroinclusive principles and includes a range of space types intended to support diverse sensory preferences and task requirements. These include open-plan desk areas, enclosed quiet booths, meeting

rooms, breakout spaces and designated quiet zones. Environmental strategies incorporate acoustic treatments, access to natural daylight and a flexible spatial layout to support task based choice. A case study approach was selected to enable detailed examination of a real, occupied workplace, allowing the research to move beyond theoretical or guidance led discussion towards assessment of how inclusive design strategies are experienced in everyday organisational practice.

Data collection

Two data collection methods were used, an online survey and semi-structured interviews with both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees. Using both approaches allowed the research to identify broad trends in workplace satisfaction while also exploring individual experiences and perceptions in greater depth. This combination supports triangulation between numerical patterns and qualitative insight, strengthening the robustness of the findings.

An online survey was distributed to employees working within the case study environment via internal communication channels and remained open for a two-week period. Approximately fifty employees completed the survey, representing a range of professional roles and including both neurodivergent and neurotypical participants. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymised. Survey questions were informed directly by key themes identified in the literature review, including acoustic comfort, lighting, privacy, spatial flexibility and environmental control. Closed questions used five-point Likert scales to assess satisfaction with these environmental factors and their perceived impact on concentration, wellbeing and the ability to carry out different types of work activity. Open-ended questions enabled respondents to describe supportive or problematic aspects of the workplace in their own words, providing contextual depth to the quantitative results.

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews informed by literature were conducted with four workplace users and the workplace designer responsible for the office environment. Interviewees included both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees, allowing exploration of shared and divergent experiences. Interviewing the designer helped clarify the original design intent, the assumptions made during briefing, and how the workplace was expected to perform in use.

Ethical principles relating to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were applied throughout the study in accordance with institutional ethics requirements.

Data analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in satisfaction across different environmental variables. Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved familiarisation with the data, coding of recurring issues and identification of broader themes. Key themes included acoustic comfort, privacy, lighting, visual complexity and spatial flexibility, which underpin the findings presented in the following section.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the survey and interview data identified several recurring themes relating to workplace experience. Table 1 summarises survey findings across the principal design categories, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence between neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents. Although neurodivergent employees

generally reported higher levels of dissatisfaction, several themes, most notably sound, lighting and workplace choice, generated concerns across both groups. Privacy demonstrated the greatest disparity (+20%), while sound attracted consistently high dissatisfaction ratings regardless of neurotype. These patterns suggest that many issues commonly associated with neurodivergent employees reflect broader workplace performance challenges. The themes identified in Table 1 are explored in greater depth through the interview findings presented below.

Table 1: Comparison of Workplace Experience Ratings by Neurotype

Design Category	Neurodivergent (%)	Neurotypical (%)	Difference	Key Finding
Privacy	57	37	+20	Largest difference between groups. Privacy was a significant concern for neurodivergent employees.
Wayfinding and Spatial Layout	47	32	+15	Neurodivergent employees reported greater difficulty locating and accessing suitable spaces.
Lighting	57	47	+10	Both groups valued natural light, but neurodivergent employees reported greater sensitivity to lighting conditions.
Choice, Control and Flexibility	50	42	+8	Choice was valued across both groups but experienced differently.
Sound	59	49	+10	Noise was a shared concern across both neurotypes and one of the most frequently cited workplace issues.
Smell	55	51	+4	Sensory discomfort extended beyond neurodivergent employees.

Acoustic environment: Sound

Sound emerged as one of the most significant workplace challenges identified in both the survey and interview data. As shown in Table 1, dissatisfaction with sound was reported by both neurodivergent (59%) and neurotypical (49%) respondents, indicating that acoustic discomfort was a shared concern across the workforce. Participants consistently identified background conversations, online meetings, telephone calls and general office activity as barriers to concentration, particularly during tasks requiring sustained focus.

As one neurodivergent participant explained, "Noise is one of the biggest challenges for me... even with zoning, sound carries. I have to actively ignore it... then I've got no bandwidth left for the actual task."

This aligns with previous research identifying noise as a dominant environmental stressor in office environments (Riordan et al., 2023). Although the workplace incorporated acoustic zoning and quieter settings to support focused work, participants reported that noise levels within shared areas remained disruptive and that alternative spaces were not always sufficient or accessible when required. Employees frequently relied on coping strategies, including relocation and noise-cancelling headphones, suggesting a gap between acoustic design intent and operational performance.

Privacy and quiet meeting rooms

Privacy emerged as a key area of divergence between neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents. Participants consistently associated open-plan working environments with frequent interruption, visual distraction and reduced ability to concentrate during cognitively demanding tasks. The availability of quiet rooms and private spaces was therefore highly valued, particularly for focused work and managing periods of sensory overload.

One neurodivergent participant compared the enclosed booths to "putting blinkers on a horse", explaining how reducing visual and auditory distractions was essential for maintaining concentration.

Although quiet rooms were intended to support focused work, participants reported that their effectiveness was constrained by inconsistent availability and unpredictable access. As a result, these spaces were often used reactively, once disruption had already become problematic, rather than proactively as part of task based working. Employees relied on personal coping strategies rather than the workplace consistently supporting different modes of work. These findings highlight a gap between design intent and operational performance, suggesting that the value of privacy depends not only on provision but on reliable and predictable access in everyday use.

Visual calm and lighting

Lighting generated one of the largest differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents, with dissatisfaction reported by 57% and 47% of participants respectively. Natural daylight was widely valued across both groups; however, glare, overly bright artificial lighting and visually busy environments were commonly identified as disruptive. Participants consistently expressed a preference for greater control over lighting conditions, particularly in spaces used for focused work.

Interview findings suggested that the issue was less about absolute lighting levels and more about the ability to regulate environmental conditions according to individual needs. One participant explained, "It's not necessarily that the lighting is bad, it's that I can't do much about it when it isn't right for what I'm doing." Another noted: "When it's too bright, I find myself concentrating on the discomfort rather than the work."

Although the workplace incorporated high daylight levels and consistent ambient lighting, participants reported that uniform lighting and limited opportunities for adjustment could be distracting and cognitively demanding. These findings suggest that greater environmental adaptability may improve workplace experience and better accommodate diverse sensory preferences.

Choice and spatial flexibility

Choice, control and flexibility were positively valued across both neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents, although neurodivergent employees reported slightly higher levels of dissatisfaction (50% compared with 42%). Across both survey and interview data, access to a variety of workspace settings emerged as an important factor influencing workplace effectiveness. Participants valued the ability to select environments that matched different tasks, levels of concentration and sensory requirements.

As one participant explained, "I like that I can move around... based on my tasks."

However, the findings suggest that effective choice depended less on the existence of multiple workspace types and more on their availability, proximity and ease of access. Where quieter or more controlled environments were unavailable, employees often reverted to coping strategies rather than adapting their environment. Although this was reported more frequently by neurodivergent participants, similar preferences for task appropriate settings were expressed across both groups. These findings suggest that workplace choice is most effective when it functions as a reliable and accessible feature of everyday working rather than a theoretical provision.

Table 2 summarises the survey and interview findings, highlighting areas of convergence between neurodivergent and neurotypical participants and identifying implications for POE and workplace lifecycle management.

Table 2: Summary of survey and interview findings

Theme	Survey Evidence	Interview Evidence	Implications for POE and Workplace Lifecycle Management
Acoustic comfort	Low satisfaction with noise and acoustic privacy across both neurotypes	Noise disrupted concentration and required coping strategies	Acoustic performance should be routinely evaluated post-occupancy
Privacy	Lower satisfaction amongst neurodivergent respondents	Quiet spaces valued but availability inconsistent	POE can identify gaps between provision and accessibility
Visual calm and lighting	Preference for daylight and environmental control	Visual complexity and limited control perceived as distracting	User feedback should inform future lighting and zoning decisions
Spatial choice	Positive response to varied workspace settings	Effective choice depended on availability and ease of access	POE should evaluate utilisation as well as provision

DISCUSSION

The findings support existing workplace research identifying acoustics, privacy, environmental control and access to task appropriate settings as key determinants of workplace effectiveness (Leesman, 2024; Narenthiran et al., 2022). However, the study extends this literature by demonstrating substantial convergence between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees. While neurodivergent respondents generally reported higher levels of dissatisfaction, many of the challenges identified, particularly relating to sound, privacy and workplace choice, were experienced across both groups. The principal contribution of the paper is therefore not the identification of these factors as important workplace attributes, which is already well established, but the demonstration that they were shared priorities within a workplace intentionally designed around neuroinclusive principles. This suggests that neuroinclusive design may be better understood as a framework for addressing common workplace performance requirements rather than solely as an accessibility intervention.

Despite the inclusion of features intended to support both collaboration and focused work, participants frequently described relying on coping strategies, including relocation and noise-cancelling headphones, to compensate for environmental shortcomings. These findings indicate that workplace performance depends not only on the provision of supportive design features but also on their accessibility, usability and reliability in everyday practice. In this respect, the study supports the principles

contained within PAS 6463:2022 and recent RIBA guidance while extending them by demonstrating how neuroinclusive design principles perform in use.

From a workplace lifecycle perspective, the findings provide insight into how functional obsolescence may emerge. Existing literature identifies functional obsolescence as a key driver of workplace adaptation and refurbishment (Remøy and van der Voordt, 2014). The evidence presented here suggests that recurring issues relating to acoustics, privacy, environmental control and spatial suitability may signal growing misalignment between workplace provision and user needs. Although the workplace remained physically fit for purpose, participants frequently adapted their behaviour to compensate for environmental shortcomings, indicating that functional dissatisfaction may develop well before physical deterioration occurs.

The findings also highlight the value of POE as a feed-forward mechanism within workplace lifecycle management. By identifying emerging sources of dissatisfaction, POE can provide evidence to inform future briefing requirements, workplace standards and adaptation strategies. While this study does not establish a direct causal relationship between neuroinclusive design and reduced refurbishment frequency, it suggests a plausible pathway through which improved workplace performance may support lifecycle resilience and potentially reduce recurring embodied carbon associated with premature fit-out replacement.

The paper contributes to construction management research in three ways. First, it extends discussion of workplace sustainability beyond operational performance by examining functional obsolescence as a potential driver of recurring embodied carbon. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a real-world POE of a neuroinclusive workplace, addressing a gap in the literature concerning how inclusive workplace environments perform in use. Third, it introduces the concept of POE as a feed-forward mechanism within workplace lifecycle management, demonstrating how user experience evidence can inform future briefing and design decisions.

CONCLUSION

This research examined how neurodivergent and neurotypical employees experience a neuroinclusive corporate workplace environment. Across both survey and interview data, acoustic comfort, privacy, visual calm and spatial flexibility emerged as the most influential factors shaping workplace experience. These findings reinforce the importance of sensory conditions and spatial configuration as critical determinants of effective everyday workplace performance.

A key contribution of the study is the evidence of strong convergence between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees in their environmental preferences. Rather than identifying specialist or exceptional requirements, the research demonstrates that design strategies commonly associated with neuroinclusive practice, including quiet spaces, effective acoustic control, environmental choice and reliable access to task appropriate settings, support comfort, concentration and perceived effectiveness across the workforce as a whole. Neuroinclusive design should therefore be understood not as targeted accommodation for a minority of users, but as an approach that identifies and responds to shared workplace needs. For industry practitioners, this suggests that investment in acoustic comfort, privacy, sensory control and workplace choice should be viewed not only as wellbeing interventions but also as measures that may improve workplace longevity. By addressing common causes of dissatisfaction

during briefing and design, organisations may reduce the likelihood of future reconfiguration and carbon intensive refurbishment interventions.

From a workplace lifecycle perspective, the findings suggest that functional dissatisfaction may emerge well before physical deterioration occurs. Consistent with research on functional obsolescence, recurring issues relating to acoustics, privacy, environmental control and spatial choice may signal growing misalignment between workplace provision and user needs. As Category B refurbishment is often used to address such issues, these findings indicate that user experience data may provide an opportunity for earlier intervention before major reconfiguration or fit-out replacement becomes necessary.

This study highlights the potential role of POE in addressing this challenge. Current workplace adaptation decisions are frequently driven by organisational change, anecdotal feedback or periodic redesign programmes rather than systematic evidence of user experience. A feed-forward approach differs by using POE findings to inform future briefing requirements, workplace standards and design decisions before dissatisfaction results in substantial material intervention. The findings therefore position POE not simply as an evaluative tool, but as a proactive mechanism for supporting workplace lifecycle management and reducing unnecessary embodied carbon expenditure.

While no direct causal relationship between neuroinclusive design and reduced refurbishment frequency is claimed, the findings suggest that workplaces organised around adaptability, sensory comfort and user choice may be better positioned to remain functionally relevant over time. Designing environments that accommodate variation in sensory and cognitive needs therefore has the potential to reduce functional obsolescence, extend the effective lifespan of workplace interiors and limit the embodied carbon and material waste associated with repeated fit-out replacement. In this context, neuroinclusive design should be understood not only as a social and wellbeing intervention, but also as a strategic approach to improving the long term environmental performance and resilience of workplace assets.

Limitations

This research is based on a single workplace case study within one organisational context. While this enabled detailed examination of a neuroinclusive workplace in use, the findings cannot be assumed to be representative of all workplace types, sectors or organisational cultures. Furthermore, although the study identifies potential links between workplace satisfaction, functional obsolescence and lifecycle resilience, it does not directly measure refurbishment frequency, fit-out longevity or embodied carbon outcomes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative of potential relationships rather than evidence of causality.

Future research could build on this work through comparative studies across multiple workplace settings, organisational models and spatial typologies. Longitudinal POE studies would be particularly valuable in examining how neuroinclusive design strategies perform over time and whether environments that better accommodate sensory and cognitive diversity are more resilient to organisational change. Further research exploring the relationship between user experience, workplace adaptation and refurbishment decision making would strengthen understanding of how feed-forward POE can support workplace lifecycle management and potentially reduce reactive Category B fit-out interventions.

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