

## Making Space for Autism

Project Lead: Sandrine Roche (Service Unit of Diversity Management)

### Which strategic goals will be addressed?

This interdisciplinary initiative, centered on autism, architecture, and inclusive design, actively advances TU Wien's strategic goals by promoting inclusion, fostering creativity, and integrating research into teaching. It meaningfully contributes to and reinforces multiple strategic goals and cross-cutting themes at TU Wien and especially Strategic Goals 1, 3, 5 and 8.

- **Strategic Goal 1:** Further develop an attractive and high-performance environment for all members of the university: This project creates a supportive and inclusive environment by integrating the perspectives of autistic individuals into teaching and learning. By involving the TU Wien self-help group for autistic students, it directly acknowledges and values neurodiverse contributions, making space for an environment that both supports and challenges all participants while being inclusive and appreciative of different lived experiences.
- **Strategic Goal 3:** Re-emphasize the unity of teaching and research: Through collaboration between researchers, teachers, students, and autistic community members, this course represents a close integration of research and teaching, rooted in real-life societal needs. The development of inclusive architectural concepts in response to heightened sensory perception connects academic exploration with social relevance, ensuring that new developments are directly incorporated into teaching.
- **Strategic Goal 5:** Systematically strengthen creativity and innovation culture at TU Wien: This initiative exemplifies TU Wien as a place where creative and critical thinking, interdisciplinary cooperation, and unconventional solutions thrive. By bringing together architecture, neurodiversity, and an initiative emerging from civil society, it fosters a strong culture of curiosity, openness, and interdisciplinary reflection. It supports scientific freedom and creative exploration, while recognizing creativity as a key component of scientific excellence.
- **Strategic Goal 8:** Strengthen the TU Wien community and sense of belonging: By designing innovative formats, opening inclusive spaces such as the Autistic Experience Space, and promoting collaborative interaction between diverse student groups, this project strengthens the TU Wien community and fosters a shared sense of belonging. It encourages spontaneous encounters and conversations across disciplines and neurotypes, enriching the university's social and academic culture.

### Who is involved (Team-Lead und Team-Member/s)?

This project is **led by Sandrine Roche** from the Service Unit for Diversity Management (E639-04), who is responsible for Neurodiversity at TU Wien and coordinates the initiative with a strong focus on accessibility and inclusion.

In January 2024, she established the self-help groups for autistic students and for students with ADHD at TU Wien and continues to lead the former. Through this role, she has privileged access to the community and its needs, ensuring that their perspectives are meaningfully integrated into the project.

Assistant Professor **Maja Kevdzija and Birgit Moser** from the Research Unit of Building Theory by Design (E253-01) at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning contribute their academic expertise in (health)care architecture and person-centered design.

**Architecture students** will participate in the research seminar (Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research), conducting fieldwork in collaboration with autistic peers.

**Members of the Autistic Student Self-Help Group at TU Wien** are closely involved in the project as co-researchers and participants, serving as so-called user experts. By contributing to their lived experience, they help ensure that the project remains grounded in real needs and everyday realities.

Nine members of the group have already been informed about the project and are very enthusiastic and eager to contribute. They are genuinely excited about the idea of integrating autism into the architecture curriculum.

The team brings together members from all three key university groups, researchers and teachers, students, and administrative staff, fulfilling the interdisciplinary requirement of this call. In addition, other employees of the Faculty of Architecture and Planning will participate in the workshop and the subsequent reflection, supporting a culture of openness and critical dialogue around neurodiversity in the built environment.

Together, this interdisciplinary team combines research, lived experience, and institutional commitment to make TU Wien more inclusive for autistic students and staff.

## **What is going to be funded (sketch of idea)?**

Our initiative aims to bring neurodiversity, with a particular focus on autism, into architectural education and campus engagement. The built environment plays a crucial role in the well-being of autistic people, as sensory overstimulation, unclear layouts, and lack of quiet spaces can create significant barriers. Thoughtful, inclusive design can reduce stress, support autonomy, and foster a sense of safety and belonging.

This proposal connects the immersive workshop for students and teachers/researchers with an academic research seminar at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning, positioning inclusion not only as a social goal but as an essential topic within architectural education and practice.

By directly immersing students and staff into the sensory challenges autistic individuals face, the project aims to initiate a cultural and academic shift toward a more inclusive university environment. "Making Space for Autism" is structured around three core components, culminating in a one-day workshop at the end of the semester.

**1. Implementation in teaching at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning:** A special topic will be introduced in the elective course Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research \* at the Institute of Architecture and Design led by Assistant Prof. Maja Kevdzija.

In this seminar, students will conduct in-depth research and engage directly with autistic students through (walking) interviews, observations/shadowing, photovoice and other participatory methods. The course will include critical evaluation of TU Wien's buildings and spaces from the perspective of sensory accessibility and autism-friendliness.

The goal is to understand how spatial design can better serve neurodiverse populations and to identify practical improvements that support inclusive learning and working environments.

\* The Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research enables students to learn to critically evaluate literature, conduct empirical studies, and present findings in the form of a seminar paper, all centered on person-focused design principles that consider users' clinical, practical, and emotional needs. Through methods like interviews, observations, and surveys, students explore how built environments impact well-being and identify design strategies to enhance

accessibility and comfort.

The seminar combines theoretical learning with hands-on research, culminating in research projects that inform more inclusive and user-centered healthcare architecture.

**2. Collaboration with the Autistic Student Self-Help Group:** Making Space for Autism involves autistic students from TU Wien's self-help group, who will engage in direct dialogue with architecture students.

The aim is to foster meaningful exchange between autistic individuals and future architects.

These interactions provide valuable insights into everyday challenges, sensory needs, and spatial preferences, encouraging more empathetic, inclusive, and user-centered design approaches. For autistic individuals, whose sensory perceptions and cognitive styles may differ from the neurotypical norm, conventional architectural environments often pose significant challenges. However, these challenges are rarely considered in mainstream design processes. By involving autistic students as experts of their own experience, we create a platform for mutual learning.

Architecture students gain first-hand perspectives that cannot be taught through textbooks alone, while autistic students have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the creation of more inclusive spaces.

This collaboration not only enriches architectural education but also advances the broader goal of social equity through design. Ultimately, Making Space for Autism promotes a shift in perspective: from designing for to designing with users, particularly those whose needs are often overlooked. It reflects a growing recognition that diversity, including neurodiversity, must be a driving force in shaping the built environment.

**3. The "Autistic Experience Space" (Erfahrungsraum):** Through a multisensory workshop developed by im spektrum (<https://imspektrum.at/>), participants can experience a simulation of autism-related sensory perception. Equipped with stimulation devices, goggles, and headphones, they are exposed to simultaneous audiovisual inputs, tactile sensations, fluctuating lighting, and olfactory stimuli. At the end of the session, each participant is asked to complete a simple task under these conditions, simulating the cognitive and emotional strain that many autistic individuals experience in overstimulating environments.

Sessions are small (approx. 8 people per hour) and last around 15 minutes per participant, including preparation and debriefing. The workshop is mobile and can be hosted in a suitable space at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning. The experience is intended for both students and TU Wien's research and teaching staff.

We will offer this workshop to all interested individuals at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning. To gain a better understanding of participants' experiences and to explore possibilities for integrating autistic perspectives into the curriculum, participants will be asked to complete a short anonymous survey following the workshop.

**4. Workshop: A Celebration of Neurodiversity in Design:** The semester will conclude with a lively one-day workshop and public event, a true highlight of the Making Space for Autism project. This final event will feature a public presentation of students' work, alongside the "Autistic Experience Space" (Erfahrungsraum), which will be open to all members of the Faculty of Architecture at TU Wien, including students as well as research and teaching staff. The event is designed as a platform for exchange between students, faculty, and the broader university community, with the goal of raising awareness and inspiring new directions in both research and teaching related to neurodiversity and inclusive design.

A special highlight: the most outstanding student projects will be recognized and awarded with a feature on the Faculty of Architecture's website, as well as the TU Wien Diversity website. Project objectives:

Increase awareness of autism and neurodiversity among TU Wien students and staff,

- Encourage inclusive, sensory-aware thinking in architectural design and spatial planning,
- Support the establishment of research on autism and the built environment at TU Wien,
- Foster direct exchange between autistic and non-autistic university members,
- Contribute to making TU Wien more accessible for all.

Project output:

- (1) Seminar course integrating neurodiversity into architecture education,
- (2) A final public workshop and exhibition of student projects,
- (3) Feedback and findings from the autistic experience space,
- (4) Results of the survey by the workshop participants that can be used to implement changes in the teaching curriculum,
- (5) Results of the Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research that can be used to implement direct spatial changes in the built environment of the university's buildings.

### ***Long-Term Vision - integrating neurodiversity in the curriculum:***

This proposal marks the start of a growing collaboration between the self-help group of autistic students and architecture students and staff at TU Wien.

The long-term goal is to integrate neurodiversity into architectural education and campus planning, building an environment where all students, regardless of sensory needs, can thrive. The Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research ensures that student-led insights translate into lasting, evidence-based improvements on campus. Furthermore, we expect this project to start a dialogue and inspire other colleagues at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning to start integrating neurodiversity as a topic into their teaching through courses and mentoring diploma projects.

### **Why is it important for a fuTUrefit TU Wien?**

*Contribution to mission and vision; Planned implementation of the strategic objectives and support for cross-cutting issues*

**Cross cutting theme of diversity:** This project actively supports the cross-cutting theme of diversity by embracing neurodiversity and promoting inclusive design principles.

By integrating the perspectives and experiences of autistic individuals into the architecture curriculum, it fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of varied sensory and cognitive experiences.

This inclusive approach enriches the learning environment for all students and ensures that our educational practices and built environments become more accessible and welcoming to a broader spectrum of human experiences.

By promoting collaborative interaction between diverse student groups, the project strengthens the TU Wien community and fosters a shared sense of belonging. It encourages spontaneous encounters and conversations across disciplines and neurotypes, thereby enriching the university's social and academic culture. Sustainability and coherence are ensured by embedding these initiatives into existing curricula and research frameworks, promoting ongoing dialogue between students, faculty, and the autistic community. Because this project strongly supports the theme of diversity, it also advances the overall strategy by fostering an "open, creative, inclusive, and collaborative university culture," enhancing TU Wien's appeal to international talent, and contributing to a fair and inclusive academic environment.

## - **Our Mission: Technology for People**

Not only does the project align with TU Wien's Strategic Goals and cross-cutting themes, it also reflects our core mission: TU Wien stands for Technology for People, a commitment that can only be fulfilled by developing solutions that truly consider the diversity of human life realities.

Human life is shaped by a wide range of social, cultural, physical, and cognitive factors that all influence how individuals perceive and interact with the built and technological environment.

To create meaningful and inclusive innovations, it is essential that we move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and actively consider these diverse life realities. At TU Wien, this means designing, listening to lived experiences, and integrating multiple perspectives into research, teaching, and application.

People on the autism spectrum perceive their environment in unique ways – they often have pronounced sensory sensitivities and specific needs when it comes to spatial design. Yet, this perspective is still too often overlooked in research, teaching, and practice. Architecture studies, in particular, could benefit greatly from direct exchange with autistic individuals: they would gain a deeper understanding of how spaces, light, acoustics, structure and need to be designed to be accessible and comfortable for as many people as possible.

This project supports TU Wien's mission of "Technology for People" by embedding real-world diversity into education, creating tangible learning experiences, and enabling long-term structural change in how we think about inclusive design in higher education. This project could set new standards for low-barrier spatial design, user-centered architectural planning, and socially relevant research.

## - **Our project: Unlimited**

This project fully embodies TU Wien's Unlimited vision by fostering limitless possibilities through innovative interdisciplinary collaboration between architecture, neurodiversity, and inclusive design. It encourages an open mindset by challenging traditional approaches to architectural education and design, promoting new ways of understanding human sensory experiences.

By integrating expertise across disciplines, it embraces interdisciplinarity to address complex societal challenges related to accessibility and inclusion. The project enhances global networking by aligning with international movements in neurodiversity and inclusive design, contributing to a worldwide discourse. It nurtures freedom to innovate by creating novel educational formats integrating immersive, multisensory tools like the Autistic Experience Space, which provide experiential learning opportunities and challenge conventional teaching methods. It is future-oriented, preparing students and faculty to design environments that accommodate diverse human realities, actively shaping a more inclusive society.

## **When is it finalized and how much does it cost?**

The project is planned to begin with the Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research during the winter semester 2025/26, allowing architecture students to investigate and evaluate autism-friendliness in the buildings of TU Wien. The project will then culminate with a public all-day event at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning at the end of winter semester, including an immersive workshop, input presentations and discussions, presentations of student work from the Wahlseminar and a student award ceremony.

The project, including research, analysis, and the final public event, will be completed by the end of January 2026.

We are requesting a total amount of €2,000 to cover the costs associated with the implementation of the research activities and the public event with an immersive workshop.

## CALL FOR PROJECTS 2025 SMALL



Approximately €1,600 will be allocated to the preparation and delivery of the workshop by im spektrum (<https://imspektrum.at/>). This includes staffing (with at least one facilitator on the autism spectrum), setup and dismantling of the technical and sensory equipment, and overall facilitation of the experience.

The workshop will run for one full day or two half-days and accommodate small groups throughout the day.

A further €300 is reserved for compensating autistic students who will participate in the research activities connected to the Wahlseminar Healthcare Architecture Research. These participants will contribute valuable insights through (walking) interviews, observation/shadowing, and photovoice sessions. Each participant will receive an incentive of €30 per session, acknowledging their time, insights, and lived experience. This recognizes their contributions and supports ethical engagement in inclusive research. We anticipate involving 6-10 participants in this phase.

An additional €100 is budgeted for material costs, including printing of workshop announcement materials, plain-language handouts, and supplies to ensure a supportive and inclusive environment for all participants.