

# Designing Beyond Walls:

## An Exploration of How Architecture Can Contribute to Semi-Independent Living for Autistic Adults

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### RANGAHAU / RESEARCH

- Many autistic adults with less obvious support needs face barriers to suitable housing – such as high unemployment, inaccessible housing markets, and funding challenges.
- While affordability is a key focus of housing policy, the inclusivity and adaptability of these dwellings is often overlooked or marginalised during the design process.
- Public and community housing in AoNZ currently lacks dwellings and design guidance that meet the accessibility needs of autistic adults.
- This study explored how housing can better support semi-independent living for autistic adults through a combination of literature and case study analysis, participatory research, and speculative design.

### NGĀ HUA MATUA / KEY FINDINGS

- Informed by literature, case studies and participatory research involving photo-elicitation and follow-up interviews, seven guiding principles were identified – and accompanied by detailed guidance points – to support autism-friendly design:
  - (1) Familiarity and Clarity
  - (2) Health and Safety
  - (3) Choice
  - (4) Public-Private Interface
  - (5) Sensory Environment
  - (6) External Environment
  - (7) Privacy
- Predictable layouts and consistent, carefully designed apartment floorplans support legibility and reduce anxiety.
- A mix of dwelling types (1–3 bedrooms) supports different living preferences and life stages.
- Mixed-tenure models and shared spaces – such as community hubs, gardens, rooftop spaces and retreat areas, which tenants can engage with on their own terms – can help reduce isolation and improve wellbeing.
- On-site carers ensure crucial help is available to tenants 24/7

### WHAIKUPU / RECOMMENDATION

- Designers, housing providers, and policymakers should incorporate autism-friendly principles into housing design and guidance, especially for public and community housing.
- The guiding principles developed in this study can be further tested and refined, but they are available now to support the development of housing which better enables semi-independent living for autistic adults.

### TO READ MORE:

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Autism-friendly kitchen design. Illustration by Amber Haussmann.