



Human interest

Varna Berriman challenges the assisted living status quo in favour of more colourful and compelling alternatives.

Many people often take their physical abilities for granted, not realising how many barriers exist in everyday life for those who move, see, hear and process thoughts differently. It's also a common assumption that differently-abled individuals make up but a small fraction of the population. However, statistics show that one in four people in New Zealand and at least one in six people in Australia have a long-term impairment.

"Impairments are not selective to race, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, region, health or partnership and they do not share a common religion, political belief or social class," says graduate architect Varna Berriman. "Despite this, architecture continues to marginalise people with impairments through a medicalised model of segregation and control that highlights the user's medical diagnosis before their humanity."

Her thesis looks at how marginalisation towards people with impairments presents itself in the built world through the current standardised building regulations of accessibility. In turn, Varna developed design strategies which diverge from the medicalised and overprotective architecture that does little to comfort or inspire. She hopes that her explorations will empower others to redefine the oppressive fixed identification of 'disability' and instead give users the freedom to define their multifaceted identities on their own terms.

Varna recently completed her master's degree at Victoria University of Wellington and the subject of her thesis was inspired by her connection to the medical industry. "I am the first person in my family to step into the field of architecture," she says. "However, most of my family works within the healthcare industry in some capacity. It has been really incredible to forge my own way



while also having a connection to my family through the work I do. While studying, I also worked as a support worker – primarily for people with disabilities, but also in retirement homes and in other healthcare facilities. This is where the underlying motivation for my thesis emerged. I plan to continue to specialise in healthcare design, as this is where my passion is."

As a solution to the dullness and sterility that the design of many assisted living spaces suffer from, Varna investigated the interplay between colour and space and how the two might alter user perceptions of their built environment in a way that celebrates their individuality. Her palettes are a sharp departure from typical healthcare architecture and instead investigate how colour interacts with the subconscious while also acknowledging that its perception is subjective and personal.



left: Winner of a Resene Total Colour Rising Star Award, Varna's thesis shows how different colours and textures can alter the perspective of a space by visually heightening, lengthening or widening the room. She says it's an essential consideration for changing spaces to meet the user's diverse needs and preferences, such as people with autism who want to feel enclosed or creating intimacy of space for those who rely on mobility chairs. On the left, Resene Colorwood Pitch Black was used to stain the timber walls and ceiling and Resene Colorwood Rock Salt was used on the timber flooring. On the right, Resene Bright Spark and carpeted flooring offer a completely different look and experience of the space.



Varna admits that, initially, she instinctually wanted to create a cohesive and controlled flow of colour before recognising that this would give little attention to how colour could be used to impact each user's expression of identity. Instead, her critical examination of these impulses exposed that colour selection could be a physical manifestation of the medical model, ascribing a fixed medicalised identity to those living with impairments.

For her investigations, Varna chose to explore what could be achieved through Resene's colour offerings. "Resene is a really incredible New Zealand family-owned business," she says. "They have such an extensive range of colours, which makes it so exciting to explore and imagine endless colour arrangements. The incorporation of te reo Māori in the naming of certain colours has also been a heartfelt reminder of home in New Zealand when using the colour ranges while I've been working overseas in Australia.

"Choosing the specific colours for my project was an amazing and fun process," explains Varna. "Many of the conceptual designs in my thesis were based on the colour preferences of my real-life clients. For example, one colour palette was rooted in a client's preferred shade of pink, inspired by a favourite jumper they wore almost every day. I was able to take a photograph of the jumper and load it into one of the free online colour selection tools on Resene's website (www.resene.com/colourmatchonline) and easily find the closest Resene paint colour to match it."

Through the course of the project, Varna reached a number of realisations. "Often, design choices in the area of public healthcare are primarily supported by both medical

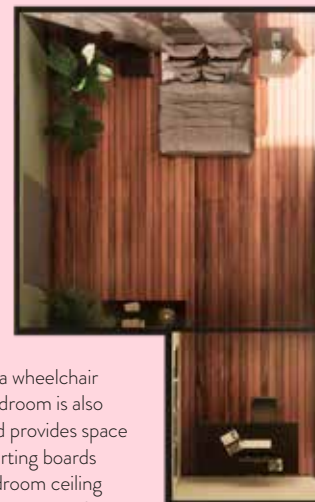
and economic evidence. This study resists the urge for the architect, as the designer, to be in control of the colours in a space or be seduced by the colours that are 'on trend'. Instead, it allows the users to participate and envisage where and how they will experience the built environment through colour, tapping into their imagination, creativity and autonomy. The research of my thesis asserts that the more control we offer people over the colour of their surroundings, the more we can design architecture that speaks to the unique person rather than an imposed identity. Colour really is a powerful and often overlooked tool to humanise clinical environments."

Today, Varna works at Architecture & Access as a specialist consultant for built environments to create safe and accessible community facilities, workplaces and homes for people with disabilities. She continues to look for surfaces that can be painted or stained with Resene products to better enhance her clients' spaces. "The ability that Resene Colorwood and Resene Woodsman have to transform and enhance the colour and texture of timber inspired me to embrace the rustic charm and warmth of wood in my latest design projects. A façade, for instance, may have timber stained with Resene Woodsman Heartwood to bring out the wood's unique grain, which could be further enhanced through accenting with the charcoal black of Resene Bokara Grey. Resene Seaweed, a bitter olive brown, is another one of my personal favourites. Combined with tan and brown furnishings, this would make for a warm and calming living area."

We can't wait to see the ripples Varna is able to make through her important and inspiring work in an area that's ripe for change. **BW**



above and right: The private spaces in Varna's project reflect the personalities, wants and needs of its inhabitants. This suite was designed for a 40-year-old woman who works from home as a marketer. In her personal space, the client wanted a calming and serene environment which replicates elements of nature she grew up around, which led Varna to a green-based colour palette and stained timber flooring. Since the client is a wheelchair user with multiple sclerosis, the bedroom is also designed for ease of navigation and provides space for hoisting. Bedroom walls and skirting boards in Resene Seaweed, doors and bedroom ceiling stained in Resene Colorwood Pitch Black, office walls and skirting boards in Resene Lemon Grass, office ceiling in Resene White Pointer and timber floor stained in Resene Colorwood Meranti.



opposite top: While some architectural customisations can be costly, Varna investigated colour as a time and cost-effective solution for personalisation – one which allows architecture to transition with the elusive and fluid identities of the users and facilitates choice and independence for expressing oneself through the physical environment. She looked at ways colour can alter the perception of space and the way the built environment may be regarded as a statement of identity. In these renders, Varna shows the same space personalised for two different individuals and just how much the paint colour and wood stain choices affect the user experience of the space. Walls in Resene All Black (top) and Resene Smitten (bottom) and timber flooring and cabinetry stained in Resene Colorwood Rock Salt (top).

Resene Colorwood Rock Salt Resene Woodsman Heartwood



right: When selecting colours for the public spaces within her project, Varna says the scale of intensity was strongly considered for the experiential experience of people with autism. Neutral and calming colours like Resene Merino, Resene White Pointer, Resene Pitch Black wood stain and Resene Rock Salt wood stain were chosen for the common areas to reduce visual stimulation for people who experience hypersensitivity. "Research has shown that almost 85% of people with ASD see colours with greater intensity than people without autism, due to different neural and/or chemical makeups. Therefore, it was important that the intensity of the colours in the shared spaces was limited."



- Resene Pink Lace
- Resene White Pointer
- Resene Lemon Grass
- Resene Seaweed
- Resene Bokara Grey
- Resene Colorwood Meranti
- Resene Colorwood Pitch Black