

How Can Trauma-Informed Interior Design Principles Be Effectively Implemented in Domestic Abuse Shelters to Foster Emotional Healing and Resilience?



Figure 1. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Megan Wilson - 24124287

Interior Architecture and Design MA, Birmingham City University

Appreciative Design Enquiry ARC7443

29th April 2025

Declaration Statement

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my independent work and has not been submitted elsewhere for any other academic qualification. All sources used have been duly acknowledged and cited. The word count of this dissertation, excluding the Title pages, Topic Inspiration, Acknowledgements, Abstract, Contents Page, Quotations, References, Bibliography, List of Images, Captions/Titles to Illustrations and Glossary is xxx.

Topic Inspiration

Surviving domestic abuse is an experience that reshapes every aspect of a person's life. It is not just about leaving a dangerous situation but about reclaiming a sense of safety, autonomy, and emotional stability in the aftermath. I struggled to feel safe in my own space for a long time. My bedroom, which should have been a place of comfort, became a source of anxiety, a reminder of things I wanted to forget. It was not until I changed many elements of my environment - adjusting the lighting, rearranging furniture, removing triggers and adding comforting textures and colours - that I felt a sense of control again. These small but significant changes helped me transform my space into one that felt secure, healing, and truly mine.

This experience made me deeply aware of how interior spaces impact on emotional wellbeing. While I was fortunate to have safe places to go, many survivors rely on domestic abuse shelters as their first step toward rebuilding their lives. However, these spaces are often designed for function rather than healing, prioritising security but neglecting the emotional needs of the people within them. A space that feels cold, impersonal, or restrictive can make recovery even more difficult, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and disconnection.

Through this dissertation, I want to explore how trauma-informed interior design can help create shelters that truly support survivors by keeping them physically safe and supporting emotional resilience and recovery. By integrating calming design elements, choice, privacy, and sensory-sensitive features, these spaces can become places of empowerment rather than just temporary refuge. Survivors deserve more than just shelter—they deserve environments that support their journey to healing.

This research is driven by the understanding that space plays a crucial role in recovery. Whether in a home, a shelter, or any place of refuge, the way a space is designed can either trigger distress or promote healing. My goal is to highlight how thoughtful, trauma-informed design can make a meaningful difference for those rebuilding their lives after abuse. I want to dedicate this research to every survivor who has ever felt unseen in a space that was supposed to protect them—to those who deserve a space that reflects their worth, journey, and resilience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who have supported me while writing this dissertation. This journey has been as personal as it has been academic, and I am genuinely thankful for the people who stood beside me.

Firstly, I sincerely thank my supervisor, Ana Araujo, whose insight, encouragement, and feedback have been invaluable. Her belief in this project and her ability to challenge me intellectually and creatively helped shape this research into something I am deeply proud of. Her guidance pushed me to think not only more critically but more compassionately as a designer and as a person.

To my boyfriend, Ethan, thank you for being my sounding board, cheerleader, and safe space. Your patience, love, and understanding have carried me through this process's most stressful and overwhelming moments. You have supported me without hesitation, never asking for anything in return, and your belief in me—both as a designer and as a person—has helped me stay grounded and motivated. You've been my biggest supporter throughout this project, my entire degree, and my personal life.

To my mum, Angela—thank you for your support, constant belief in me, and gentle reminders to look after myself, which have meant more than I can put into words. Your strength, empathy, and quiet resilience have been a grounding presence in my life, and I carry those values with me in everything I do.

To my incredible friends, thank you for constantly checking in, reminding me to breathe, and lifting me up when I've needed it most. Your love, encouragement, and humour have kept me going, and I'm so grateful to be surrounded by people who genuinely care.

To myself, thank you for your resilience, curiosity, and unwavering determination. A few years ago, I was at one of the lowest points in my life. I never imagined that I would emerge from that place, let alone find the strength to write a dissertation rooted in a topic that once felt too painful to speak about. This work is more than an academic milestone—it reflects personal growth, healing, and a deep commitment to advocating for spaces that offer dignity, safety, and hope. I am proud of the woman I've become.

And finally, to all the women who have experienced domestic abuse—this dissertation is for you. No one on this earth deserves to endure such pain. Your courage, stories, and strength inspire every word I have written. Thank you for being brave enough to protect yourselves, to speak out, and to survive. Your voices matter, and your experiences continue to shape a more compassionate future in design and beyond.

Note: Whilst it is acknowledged that people of all genders can be survivors of domestic abuse and many of the frameworks and principles discussed in this dissertation apply to all people, the case studies selected and my focus here is on women.

1. Abstract

Domestic abuse shelters are vital refuges for individuals fleeing abuse. While conventional shelters prioritise physical safety and functionality, they often overlook or miss opportunities for the deeper psychological and emotional healing needs of survivors. Trauma-informed interior design recognises the profound impact of space on mental wellbeing and recovery. Emotional safety, autonomy, and sensory regulation can be enhanced within shelter design to support survivors in rebuilding their resilience, dignity and lives.

This dissertation investigates how trauma-informed interior design principles can be effectively implemented within domestic abuse shelters to foster emotional healing and resilience. The research aims to identify key design strategies that align with psychological theories of trauma recovery and evaluate their real-world application through case study analysis. It seeks to bridge the gap between design theory and practice, offering actionable guidance for future shelter environments.

A qualitative research methodology was adopted, combining an interdisciplinary literature review with detailed case studies of three trauma-informed shelter environments: Amos Goldreich Architecture's purpose-built women's shelter, MASS Design Group's "Haven" project in Montana, and the grassroots initiative Homes and Havens. These case studies were analysed against a set of trauma-informed design criteria rooted in psychological frameworks (including Judith Herman's trauma recovery model) and design theory. In addition, a primary research interview was conducted with Dr Kate Williams at the University of Wolverhampton, who has expertise in the survivor experience of domestic abuse and recovery.

The findings indicate that spatial qualities, including privacy, personal control, natural light, calming colour palettes, biophilic integration, and acoustic sensitivity, significantly reduce hypervigilance, support emotional regulation, and foster a sense of safety and empowerment. However, systemic barriers—including limited budgets, lack of trauma-informed training within the design profession, and institutional resistance—often hinder the widespread implementation of these approaches.

To help overcome these barriers, the study suggests a few key steps: pushing for more funding and better policies to support shelter design, bringing trauma-informed principles into design education and training, encouraging more collaboration between designers, psychologists, and survivor organisations, and using flexible, modular design solutions that can work around tight budgets and small spaces. Raising awareness and involving survivors directly in the design process could also help make trauma-informed design a bigger priority and shift mindsets towards more empathetic, supportive spaces.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically to the fields of interior architecture and trauma-informed care. It offers a flexible, evidence-based framework for designing shelters that are sensitive to trauma and can be adapted to different situations. The recommendations call for a shift in shelter design—from basic, functional spaces to environments that actively support recovery and independence.

In conclusion, this research reinforces the view that space is never neutral in the context of trauma. By approaching design with empathy, psychological insight, and a survivor-centred mindset, interior designers can play a crucial role in shaping environments that protect and heal. Trauma-informed design is not a luxury but a necessity—an essential tool in creating shelters that offer more than refuge: they offer the possibility of renewal.

Keywords: Trauma-informed design, domestic abuse shelters, interior architecture, emotional healing, resilience, psychological safety, survivor-centred design.

Contents Page

Title Page	1
Declaration Statement	2
Topic Inspiration	2
Acknowledgements	3
1. Abstract	4
Contents Page	5
2. Introduction	9
3. Literature Review	12
3.1. Introduction	12
3.2. Trauma Theory and Recovery (Herman, 1997)	12
3.3. Designing for Healing (Berke and Yale School of Architecture, 2020)	12
3.4. Trauma-Informed Advocacy (Sullivan & Cain, 2004)	13
3.5. Development of Trauma-Informed Design Criteria	14
3.6. Conclusion	14
4. Case Studies and Findings	16
4.1. Introduction	16
4.2. Case Study 1: Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture	16
4.2.1. Overview of the Shelter's Design Approach	16
4.2.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features	16
4.2.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing	17
4.3. Case Study 2: Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group	21
4.3.1. Overview of the Shelter's Design Approach	21
4.3.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features	21
4.3.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing	21
4.3.4. Interview with Robyn Whitwham an Associate Architect at MASS Design Group	23
4.4. Case Study 3: Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces	28
4.4.1. Overview of the Organisation's Design Approach	28
4.4.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features	28
4.4.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing	28
4.4.4. How Homes and Havens Works	29
4.5. Key Themes and Comparative Findings	33
4.6. Conclusion	33
5. Discussion and Analysis	35
5.1. Introduction	35
5.2. How Trauma-Informed Design Aligns with Shelter Needs	35
5.3. Evaluating Current Shelters Against Trauma-Informed Criteria	35
5.4. The Impact of Specific Design Elements	36
5.5. Challenges and Barriers in Implementation	36
5.6. Case Study Improvements	37

5.6.1. Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture	37
5.6.2. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group	37
5.6.3. Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces	38
5.7. Future Opportunities and Recommendations	38
5.8. Notable Observations	39
5.9. Conclusion	39
6. Conclusion	41
6.1. Introduction	41
6.2. Summary of Key Findings	41
6.3. Research Contributions	42
6.4. Recommendations for Shelter Design	42
6.5. Limitations and Areas for Further Research	43
6.6. Final Thoughts	44
7. References	46
7.1. List of Figures	46
7.2. References	48
7.2.1. Books	48
7.2.2. Dissertations, Articles, and Journals	49
7.2.3. Websites	49
7.2.4. Case Studies and Projects	50
7.2.5. Additional Bibliography	51
7.3. Glossary of Terms	52
7.4. Appendix	55
7.4.1. Interview with Dr Kate Williams	55
7.4.2. Wonder Foundation. (2023) Trauma-informed Design Toolkit	56



Figure 2. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

2. Introduction

“There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures, and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable” (Ban Ki-Moon, 2008, as cited in WHO, 2013, p.2).

Domestic abuse is a pervasive global issue, affecting millions of individuals and families across all regions and cultures each year. Worldwide, survivors of domestic violence face not only immediate risks of physical harm but also long-term psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Trevillion et al., 2012). The consequences extend beyond individual wellbeing, contributing to broader societal impacts such as economic hardship and intergenerational trauma. Access to safe and supportive housing is a critical step toward recovery. However, many domestic abuse shelters around the world remain underfunded, overcrowded, or poorly designed to meet the emotional and psychological needs of their residents.

While security and basic needs are typically prioritised, the role of interior design in fostering emotional healing and resilience is often overlooked. Many shelter environments are rigid, institutional, and impersonal. This can inadvertently perpetuate stress, disempowerment, and trauma (Both et al., 2019). In contrast, trauma-informed design provides a promising framework for creating environments that actively support recovery. By integrating safety, choice, empowerment, connection, and sensory regulation principles, trauma-informed spaces help reduce re-traumatisation and promote a sense of autonomy and dignity (Sullivan & Cain, 2004).

However, there remains a gap in the global research literature concerning how trauma-informed design principles can be practically and effectively implemented in domestic abuse shelters, especially within the constraints of limited resources, policy frameworks, and diverse cultural contexts.

This dissertation explores how trauma-informed interior design principles can be integrated into domestic abuse shelters worldwide to foster emotional healing and resilience. Through a combination of case study analysis, expert interviews, and psychological research, the study aims to:

Identify key trauma-informed design principles and their psychological benefits for survivors.

Evaluate current shelter design practices across different global contexts, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.

Examine the impact of design elements—such as lighting, spatial organisation, colour psychology, acoustics, and biophilic integration—on trauma recovery.

Investigate the challenges and limitations of implementing trauma-informed design within diverse economic and policy environments.

Offer evidence-based, adaptable recommendations for improving shelter design in supportive and scalable ways.

Bridging academic theory, design practice, and survivor-informed insights, this research aims to provide actionable, context-sensitive strategies for creating domestic abuse shelters that nurture recovery, dignity, and long-term resilience globally.



Figure 3. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

3. Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

This literature review explores how trauma-informed design principles can be implemented in domestic abuse shelters to foster emotional healing and resilience. By anchoring the discussion in interdisciplinary sources across psychology, architecture, and domestic violence advocacy, this chapter builds a critical foundation for assessing shelter design. The texts selected for review are Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Deborah Berke and Yale School of Architecture's *Designing for Healing Environments* (2020), and Sullivan & Cain's *Opening the Door: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Domestic Violence Advocacy* (2004). Together, these works provide a robust framework connecting survivors' lived experiences and psychological healing needs with spatial strategies.

3.2. Trauma Theory and Recovery: Judith Herman (1997)

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* is a cornerstone of trauma theory and offers a psychological foundation for trauma-informed spatial design. Herman outlines three stages of trauma recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Of these, the first—establishing safety—is the first priority for the design of abuse shelters. Herman writes that “the first task of recovery is to establish the survivor's safety,” which includes physical, emotional, and psychological aspects.

In the context of domestic abuse shelters, this theory supports the need for spaces that are secure, private, and predictable. Environments should reduce sensory overstimulation and avoid institutionalised or triggering aesthetics. Design that supports a sense of control—scope for personalisation such as the ability to adjust lighting or control over private areas—directly contributes to this first stage of recovery.

Herman's emphasis on agency and empowerment also ties directly into the layout and usability of space. Survivors need to feel not only protected but also autonomous.

3.3. Designing for Healing: Deborah Berke and Yale School of Architecture (2020)

In *Designing for Healing Environments*, Deborah Berke and her collaborators explore how trauma-informed principles can be translated into architectural decisions. Though the book focuses largely on healthcare and institutional spaces, many insights are transferable to domestic abuse shelters.

Key design strategies discussed include:

Sensory Regulation: Soft lighting, acoustic dampening, natural textures, and soothing colours can help calm the nervous system, especially for those with heightened sensory sensitivity due to trauma.

Wayfinding and Spatial Clarity: Clear, intuitive layouts reduce confusion and anxiety.

Personalisation and Flexibility: Spaces that can be adapted by their users—for example, through movable furniture, access to private areas, or control over their immediate environment—help foster a sense of empowerment.

Biophilic Design: Connection to nature—whether through views, indoor plants, or natural materials—supports stress reduction and emotional well-being.

Berke's framework aligns with Herman's recovery model by identifying environmental elements that contribute to feelings of safety and autonomy. It also provides design language and criteria that are measurable and implementable, allowing these psychological needs to be expressed through material and spatial decisions.

3.4. Trauma-Informed Advocacy: Sullivan & Cain (2004)

Sullivan & Cain's report, *Opening the Door*, is among the few texts that specifically address trauma-informed care in the context of domestic violence services. It expands Herman's clinical framework into the realm of service delivery, providing insight into how environments can either support or undermine advocacy work with survivors.

Key contributions from this text include:

Understanding Re-Traumatisation: Institutional settings that feel punitive, restrictive, or cold can unintentionally mirror the control and surveillance survivors experience in abusive relationships.

Empowerment through Environment: The physical space should reflect the values of trauma-informed care—choice, collaboration, safety, and trustworthiness. This includes avoiding authoritarian design (e.g. locked doors and surveillance cameras in public spaces) and providing options for privacy as well as communal interaction.

Staff-Survivor Dynamics: Layouts that support transparency, visibility, and calmness can improve relationships between staff and residents, encouraging trust and communication.

Sullivan and Cain's work connects the theoretical and architectural frameworks with the lived experience of survivors navigating shelter systems. Their advocacy-oriented perspective ensures that design is not only functional and aesthetic but also emotionally attuned and socially responsive.

3.5. Development of Trauma-Informed Design Criteria

Drawing from the three core texts, a set of trauma-informed design criteria can be developed to guide case study evaluation. These criteria are derived from psychological theory, architectural strategy, and advocacy best practices.

Criteria	Description	Source(s)
Safety	Secure, private, non-triggering environments; minimises surveillance	Herman (1997); Sullivan & Cain (2004)
Empowerment & Choice	Ability to personalise or control one's space; access to different zones	Herman (1997); Berke (2020)
Sensory Regulation	Use of soft lighting, natural materials, acoustic control to reduce overstimulation	Berke (2020)
Connection to Nature	Incorporation of outdoor views, plants, or biophilic elements	Berke (2020)
Social Connection & Privacy Balance	Opportunities for safe interaction alongside private retreat	Sullivan & Cain (2004); Berke (2020)

These criteria will be used to assess selected case studies in the next chapter. Each shelter will be evaluated based on how well it meets the needs of safety, autonomy, sensory well-being, connection to nature, and socio-spatial flexibility.

3.6. Conclusion

The combination of Herman's trauma recovery theory, Berke's architectural strategies, and Sullivan & Cain's trauma-informed offer a compelling interdisciplinary foundation for trauma-informed shelter design. Each source contributes uniquely: Herman defines the psychological goals, Berke translates them into spatial interventions, and Sullivan & Cain advocate for survivor-centred practices in real-world settings. This synergy of theory, design, and lived experience offers a robust framework for assessing the effectiveness of domestic abuse shelters in supporting emotional healing and resilience.

The criteria outlined here will inform the comparative analysis of real shelter environments and shape design recommendations that are not only evidence-based but deeply empathetic to the needs of survivors.



Figure 4. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

4. Case Studies and Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter applies the trauma-informed design criteria established in the literature review to three case studies: the Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence by Amos Goldreich Architecture, the Haven Domestic Violence Shelter by MASS Design Group, and Homes and Havens' residential retreat spaces. These case studies demonstrate varying applications of trauma-sensitive design across different scales and contexts. Each will be analysed through the lens of five core criteria: Safety, Empowerment and choice, Sensory Regulation, Connection to Nature, and Social Connection and privacy Balance.

4.2. Case Study 1: Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture

Due to the project's sensitive nature and to protect the residents' safety and privacy, no photographs of the interior living spaces have been taken or made publicly available. This decision ensures that survivors can remain anonymous and secure, with confidence that the location and design will not compromise their safety.

However, by closely analysing the available architectural imagery, along with the documented design intentions and the signature styles of the architects involved, it has been possible to make informed interpretations about the likely interior atmosphere and spatial qualities.

4.2.1. Overview of the Shelter's Design Approach

This completed shelter in Israel was designed by London-based practice Amos Goldreich Architecture and Israel-based practice Jacobs-Yaniv Architects in collaboration with the charity "No To Violence". The site aims to provide a private, safe, and dignified temporary residence for women and children fleeing domestic abuse. The architectural strategy focuses on creating a sense of home rather than institutional refuge.

4.2.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features

Safety: The building's design includes a secure perimeter and discreet access, ensuring residents feel safe but not closed in. The arrangement of residential units in a courtyard layout also allows passive surveillance that is not intrusive to privacy.

Empowerment & Choice: Residents can personalise their private rooms and access different zones within the shelter, including shared kitchens and play areas, supporting autonomy and participation.

Sensory Regulation: The use of warm materials such as timber, gentle colour palettes, and generous natural light creates a calming atmosphere.

Connection to Nature: Every unit has access to garden views and shared green spaces, offering biophilic benefits.

Social Connection & Privacy Balance: The design supports community through common spaces while allowing retreat to private rooms. The semi-open courtyard facilitates casual, non-intrusive social interaction.

4.2.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing

Feedback from staff and residents indicates that the homelike environment reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of dignity. The spatial layout supports emotional safety, privacy, and community, aligning closely with Judith Herman's stage of establishing safety and Sullivan & Cain's emphasis on empowerment.



Figure 5. Shelter for Battered Women. Work begins on Israel's first purpose-built haven for abused women and children. Tamsin Bradshaw reports on the project initiated by the charity NoToViolence. Ground floor plan. (Seow, 2015)

"The building comprises a cluster of small houses that are staggered along two sides of the site. The internal corridor separates these spaces from the communal courtyard to give them a sense of privacy and separation.

Alongside private rooms for up to 12 families, other functions provided on site include a nursery, kindergarten, computer room, laundry, kitchens and a refectory.

Accommodation and offices for various staff are also incorporated around the perimeter of the green inner courtyard, which serves as a meeting place for residents. (Griffiths, 2018)"



Figure 6. Aerial view of the Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. The image shows the use of enclosed courtyards, supporting trauma-informed principles of privacy and calm. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018). Edited (Megan Wilson, 2025)

“The site for the shelter measures 1600 square metres, is located within a quiet residential neighbourhood and surrounded by a mix of private residential houses and blocks of flats. The brief specified a location within reach of local community resources, i.e. stores, jobs, health clinics, schools, parks and other green spaces, counselling centres and recreational facilities. (Goldreich, 2018)”



Figure 7. Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. Exterior view showing the entrance and façade designed to ensure privacy and safety. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018)

“Another paramount request was to create a sense of home and security for the inhabitants, without it feeling like a prison. For safety reasons, residents spend most of their day in the shelter, and so the major design challenge was how to accommodate all families in a peaceful manner for extended periods of time. (Goldreich, 2018)”



Figure 8. Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. Corridor encircling the courtyard showing the seamless flow between internal and external spaces. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018)

“The corridor encircling the courtyard is lined with glazing to allow parents to watch their children playing, and to create the sense of a seamless flow between internal and external spaces. (Griffiths, 2018)”



Figure 9. Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. Courtyard exterior view. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018)



Figure 10. Illustrative colour theme based on images of Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)

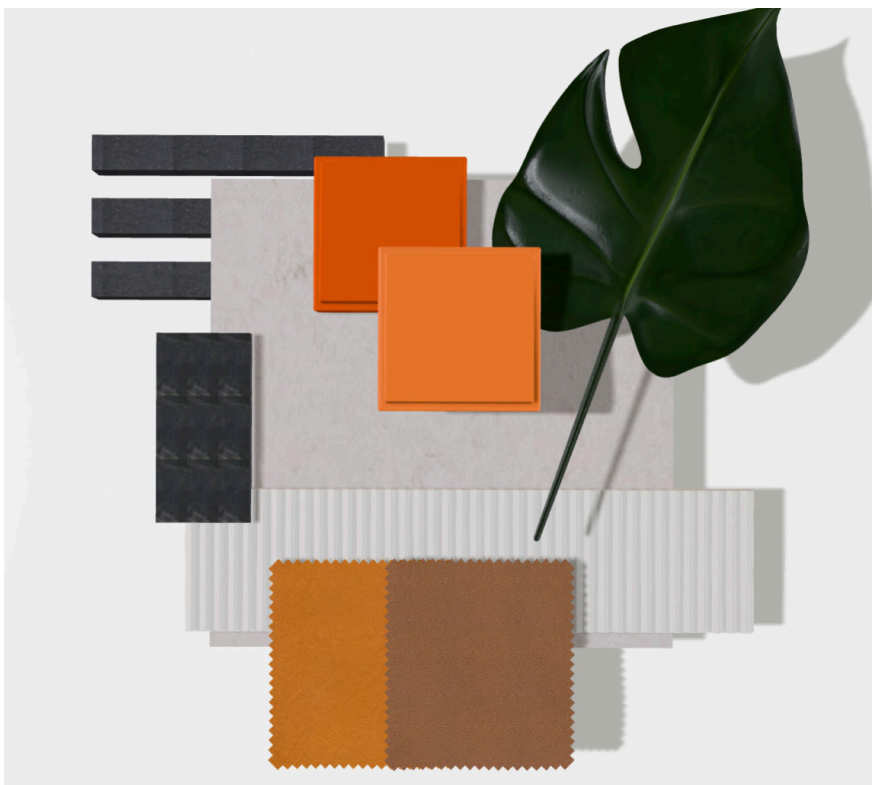


Figure 11. Material palette for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Based on the available images of the Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence by Amos Goldreich Architecture, the communal spaces are designed with a neutral palette of white, grey, and black, creating a calm and understated backdrop. To introduce warmth and energy, the doors are painted in yellow and orange tones, arranged in a gradient from light to dark to assist with intuitive wayfinding. The addition of abundant greenery throughout the interior further softens the space, creating a connection to nature and enhancing the residents' sense of well-being.

The material palette follows a minimalistic approach, with clean, simple finishes that emphasise clarity and functionality. Strong angular lines and structured forms are used throughout, contributing to a sense of stability, organisation, and security. By carefully balancing minimalism with bold accents and natural elements, the design creates an environment that is both uplifting and reassuring — essential qualities for supporting healing, empowerment, and recovery.

Case Studies and Findings

4.3. Case Study 2: Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group

4.3.1. Overview of the Shelter's Design Approach

Haven, located in Bozeman, Montana is a fully operational domestic violence shelter co-designed by MASS Design Group in partnership with survivors, staff, and advocates. It reimagines the traditional shelter by positioning survivors not as passive care recipients but as space co-creators. This participatory and trauma-informed approach represents a paradigm shift in how shelter environments can support healing, dignity, and agency.

4.3.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features

Safety: Haven creates a strong sense of safety by using different layers of spaces to gradually increase privacy and security. Entry points are carefully designed to limit outside visibility and control who has access, helping residents feel more protected and in control.

Empowerment & Choice: Space allocation offers a variety of environments—including quiet reflection rooms, communal kitchens, private suites, and flexible gathering areas—allowing residents to choose how and when they engage with others.

Sensory Regulation: Natural, tactile materials, soft lighting, and acoustic treatments are used throughout the shelter to reduce over-stimulation. Sensory rooms and gentle transitions between spaces promote nervous system regulation.

Connection to Nature: Outdoor courtyards, gardens, and wooded walking trails are central to the site design, integrating biophilic principles that support stress reduction and emotional grounding.

Social Connection & Privacy Balance: Haven balances communal living with private retreats by offering a range of social spaces that vary in scale and intimacy. Residents can manage their interactions based on their personal comfort and recovery needs.

4.3.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing

Early feedback and observations suggest that Haven's trauma-informed design is having a profound impact on residents' emotional well-being. The shelter's emphasis on agency, safety, and healing-oriented space has resulted in a calm, empowering environment aligned with Judith Herman's recovery stages—particularly safety and reconnection. The participatory design process fostered a sense of ownership and trust, aligning with Sullivan & Cain's emphasis on collaborative care. Haven stands as a leading example of how spatial design can facilitate emotional healing and resilience in survivors of domestic abuse.



Figures 12,13 & 14. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter, Bozeman, Montana, USA. Renderings produced using Lumion. (MASS Design Group 2023)

4.3.4. Interview with Robyn Whitwham an Associate Architect at MASS Design Group

“How designing a women’s shelter taught one architect about recovery, reintegration, and empowerment”

1. Find the balance between connection and privacy

“While designing spaces to cultivate a sense of community inside the shelter is essential, you also need to provide the spatial means for privacy. The challenge comes in achieving the right amount of both. A woman should be given the autonomy to choose the level of engagement and interaction that works for her. For Green Haven, the communal space—which includes a kitchen, dining area, lounge, and children’s play area—is where that community can thrive. This is where residents can share meals together, where their children can do their homework, and where there is direct access to the secure outdoor space. Our strategy was to create a space to encourage peer support and break the isolation that can come from abuse.

On the other hand, access to a private space for respite is equally important for women to feel comfortable and secure. In Green Haven’s former facility, the rooms with multiple beds—mostly bunk beds—created a stressful environment for women who shared a room with strangers while in an often vulnerable and distressed state. We ensured the new shelter included only single and double bedrooms with a connecting door between select rooms, creating a “suite” for instances where a woman has multiple children. We placed a considerable focus on the wall partitions surrounding rooms, to ensure sound-proofing between spaces—especially where private conversations are most likely to happen. In addition, we separated the bedrooms from the semi-public and public zones of the building for those seeking privacy.”

2. Provide individual flexibility so residents can create a new home

“A domestic abuse survivor might have a triggering relationship with their home, so it’s important to leave room for personalization to encourage residents to make the shelter their new home. This can help the transition into a new place feel more comfortable. In the design, it’s important to ensure residents can customize their environment to reclaim the sense of belonging that was eroded by abuse. Giving control over lighting levels—both natural and artificial—as well as temperature contributes to the feeling of “home.”

For Green Haven, the only fixed elements inside the bedrooms are the built-in closets. We wanted all furniture to be movable so that residents can rearrange it as they choose. There is a comfort that comes from having a place to call your own.”

3. Foster physical and emotional security

“When we think of security, we often imagine physical barriers such as bulletproof glass and surveillance cameras. While these are all essential to the overall safety of the building’s occupants, creating an atmosphere that feels physically and—equally as important—emotionally safe involves more than key fobs. It’s vital to know the triggers that could make a resident feel at risk. If a woman doesn’t feel protected by the shelter, there’s a higher risk she’ll leave and potentially return to unsafe conditions.

At Green Haven, we created a sense of safety through warmth and the straightforward organization of space. The entrance canopy, clad in wood and brightly lit, is welcoming and says, “you’re here now, and we will protect you.” The predictable floor plan has clear sightlines to reduce the need for surveillance cameras. The mechanical and electrical rooms can be accessed directly from the exterior so that maintenance workers don’t need to enter the shelter. Passersby can’t see any windows from the sidewalk in front of the building, and there is a high masonry wall separating the backyard exterior area from the street. Bedrooms have lockable closets to secure personal belongings. These more passive security strategies were intentional to ensure the building doesn’t feel institutional and the residents feel protected.”

Lessons learned from a compelling project

“When we use design to reignite a sense of belonging for abuse survivors, we can encourage them to feel empowered to find strength in moments of weakness and choose a path forward to recovery. I now understand that a shelter needs to be so much more than a room behind a locked door. The space should help restore the individual’s sense of identity and their dignity. Hopefully, the design contributes to an environment of normalcy.”

Reflection on Interview with Robyn Whitwham: Literature Review Alignment

The interview with Robyn Whitwham, Associate Architect at MASS Design Group, aligns strongly with the trauma-informed design principles identified in the literature review, particularly as demonstrated in the Green Haven shelter project. Whitwham’s emphasis on balancing privacy and community mirrors the key strategy of zoning and layered thresholds, which help manage access and enhance residents’ sense of control and safety. The shelter’s design empowers residents through choice and flexibility, offering spaces such as communal areas, private suites, and adaptable bedrooms—allowing individuals to engage on their own terms. Whitwham also highlights the importance of emotional safety through warm, predictable layouts, which connect directly to trauma-informed goals of reducing anxiety and fostering security while minimising institutional cues. Elements such as natural lighting, movable furniture, and soft textures contribute to sensory regulation, creating a calming environment that supports nervous system recovery. Furthermore, the inclusion of secure outdoor areas echoes biophilic design principles, reinforcing emotional grounding and wellbeing. Whitwham’s reflections not only reinforce academic theory but demonstrate its successful application, showing how thoughtful spatial design can support trauma recovery, restore dignity, and nurture resilience.



Figure 15. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Tucked under the communal stairs and bathed in sunlight, the children's library designed by Farland Interiors offers a cozy and inviting reading nook for children of all ages. (Magianas, 2023)



Figure 16. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. This communal living space curated by Farland Interiors allows clients relaxing, sun-drenched respite, while offering parents open sightlines into the children's reading area. (Magianas, 2023)



Figure 17. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Counselling and consultation room created by Envi Design. (Maganias, 2023)

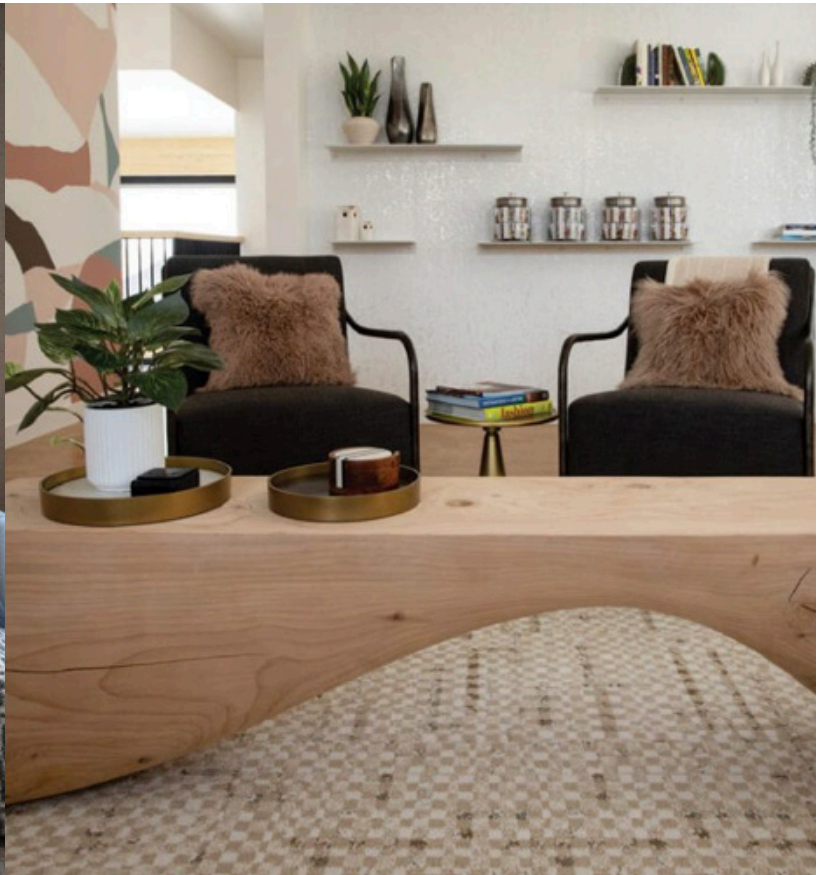


Figure 18. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Comfortable and communal living space, furnished by Adler & Tweed. (Maganias, 2023)



Figure 19. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. The shelter's intake room, located just off of the concierge entry area. (Maganias, 2023)



Figure 20. Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Family friendly living area curated by Icon Interiors. (Maganias, 2023)

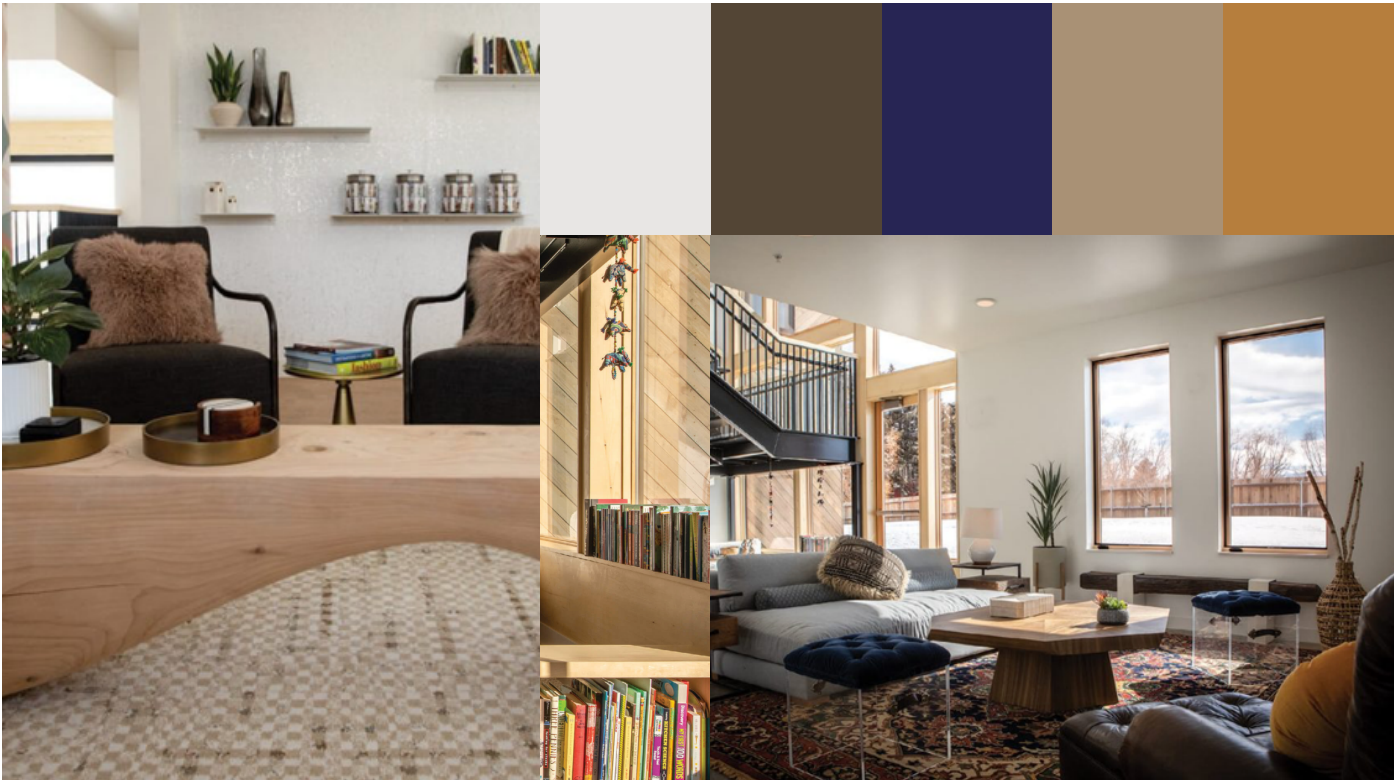


Figure 21. Illustrative colour theme based on images of Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. (Maganias, 2023). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)



Figure 22. Material palette for Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)

The Haven Domestic Violence Shelter, designed by MASS Design Group, adopts a distinctly homely and welcoming aesthetic. The entire building is thoughtfully designed to feel warm, safe, and inviting, creating a strong sense of comfort for its residents. Throughout the space, soft and tactile materials are heavily featured — such as natural wood, warm textiles, and plush furnishings — which contribute to a soothing, domestic atmosphere. Comforting finishes, like textured fabrics and warm-toned surfaces, are paired with plants, cushions, blankets, books, candles, and other personal touches. These elements not only make the space feel lived-in and nurturing but also help to reduce the institutional feel often associated with shelters.

Case Studies and Findings

4.4. Case Study 3: Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces

4.4.1. Overview of the Organisation's Design Approach

Homes and Havens is a UK-based non-profit that transforms transitional housing and therapeutic spaces for women recovering from domestic violence and trauma. Their approach is rooted in co-design, emotional safety, and aesthetic dignity. "Homes and Havens has helped 136+ women and children affected by trauma find peace through beautiful furniture and home goods using therapeutic "trauma-informed" design."

Instead of relying on the latest trends to inform their design process, the Homes and Havens team looks to research that analyses how environmental factors like colour and clutter affect emotional well-being. The studies are often conducted with hospitals and rehabilitation centres; the team then uses the data to create personalised interior designs free of stress triggers and promote healing.

"Our vision is for every woman overcoming trauma to have a home that supports her recovery."

4.4.2. Key Trauma-Informed Design Features

Safety: Safety is achieved through secure settings and the elimination of institutional design language. Spaces are intentionally designed to feel like a personal sanctuary.

Empowerment & Choice: Clients actively participate in choosing furnishings and layouts, reclaiming authorship over their environments.

Sensory Regulation: Designs avoid harsh lighting and synthetic materials, opting instead for soft textiles, layered lighting, and muted tones.

Connection to Nature: Indoor plants, natural textures, and artworks featuring natural motifs are used to maintain a sense of nature indoors.

Social Connection & Privacy Balance: While Homes and Havens focus on individual domestic spaces, their model provides insight into how privacy and sanctuary coexist with the community through layered design strategies.

4.4.3. Impact on Residents' Wellbeing

Qualitative feedback suggests high emotional comfort and restored agency among residents. The co-creative model resonates with Sullivan and Cain's emphasis on empowerment and Herman's argument that recovery involves restoring control and dignity.

4.4.4. How Homes and Havens Works

“Homes and Havens has helped 136+ women and children affected by trauma find peace through beautiful furniture and home goods using therapeutic “trauma-informed” design. But the work that takes place behind the scenes bears more complexity than one might think.

Instead of relying on the latest trends to inform the design process, the Homes & Havens’ team looks to research that analyzes how environmental factors like color and clutter affect emotional well-being. Though the studies are often conducted with hospitals and rehabilitation centers in mind, our team uses the data to create personalized interior designs that are free of stress-triggers and able to promote healing by inducing tranquility.

Homes & Havens partners with local women’s recovery agencies in order to bring that same kind of healing space to recent graduates of their programs. The goal is to complete the transformation while the women are transitioning back into everyday life, when the danger of relapse is often at its highest.

After graduating a rehabilitation program, women may find a job and get a key to an apartment, only to be triggered when they walk into the empty space with no resources — emotionally or financially — to create a home for themselves or their families.

For example, for victims of sex trafficking a barren apartment can often be reminiscent of a pimp’s living quarters, which are typically unfurnished, with clothes kept in garbage bags, to allow for easy relocation from one dwelling to another. For those recovering from drug or alcohol abuse, the desolate living conditions may intensify temptation, as coming home to yet another reminder of their struggle to reintegrate into society slowly lessens the appeal of staying sober.

Instead of giving these incredible women a harsh reminder of what their lives once were, the healing spaces that Homes and Havens creates gives them a place to envision what their lives could be. With fully furnished bedrooms set up, some might be able to envision what life might be like if they regained custody of their children. With living areas that exude a feeling of warmth and safety, others may be able to visualize themselves building a life free from domestic abuse.

We’re just trying to protect their recovery by rewriting the story of what ‘home’ means. We believe home is not a place to be abused. Home is a place to recover and heal and dream and keep growing.



Figures 23,24,25 & 26. Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces, before and after images: “From addiction to incarceration and being separated from her daughters, Britteny has worked hard and has been filled with faith at @renewwomens and now has a home of her own, a job, her daughters, and a new relationship with God. What an honor to serve her and provide a calming, comfortable home to begin this new season of life. Thank you all for your prayers and support to make homes like these happen!” (Homes and Havens Instagram, 2022)



Figures 27,28,29 & 30. Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces: “Today we wrapped up a beautiful little haven for a resilient mama and daughter who have overcome so much to finally be in this chapter. Our team commented on how her home already felt peaceful and full of light, so we were happy to add a little more beauty to their safe haven. We are so grateful for a precious family in our community that agrees to sponsor a haven each Christmas as a way to celebrate the giving season. What a blessing you are! Thank you to @partnershipfca for helping serve victims of domestic violence and support them with such care. Also thank you to @bellhopmoving for continuing to help us move all our furniture to these new havens!” (Homes and Havens Instagram, 2020)



Figure 31. Illustrative colour theme based on images of Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces. (Homes and Havens Instagram, 2020-2024). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)



Figure 32. Material palette for Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Homes and Havens operate slightly differently from the previous two case studies, adapting their style and materials for each project based on the individual client's tastes and needs. This personalised approach works particularly well, giving clients greater input into the design of their space and helping them feel safer, more comfortable, and more in control of their choices. This sense of agency has an empowering impact on the individual's healing process and marks an important first step toward reclaiming their independence and voice. Although each project is tailored to the individual, Homes and Havens conduct extensive research into trauma-informed design to ensure the best outcomes for their clients.

As a result, while every design is unique, there are consistent elements across all projects, such as the use of calm, neutral colours, warm and soft materials, and homely touches, all intended to create a soothing and welcoming environment.

4.5. Key Themes & Comparative Findings

Criteria	Amos Goldreich Shelter	MASS Design's Haven Shelter	Homes and Havens
Safety	Discreet, secure layout	Spaces shift from public to private, creating safety and control	Safe, non-institutional feel
Empowerment & Choice	Personalisation, varied spaces	User-driven program	Co-design model
Sensory Regulation	Natural light, soft materials	Sensory rooms, warm finishes	Soft textures, layered light
Connection to Nature	Garden views, courtyard	Courtyards, walking trails	Natural motifs, indoor plants
Social Connection & Privacy Balance	Communal + private spaces	Zoning for interaction modes	Personal sanctuaries

Identifying the Most Effective Strategies Across all three case studies, empowerment and sensory regulation emerged as central to positive resident outcomes. The ability to personalise space and control sensory input significantly supports emotional stability. Connection to nature—through design and materials—also proved to be consistently beneficial across contexts.

The participatory design process at Homes and Havens and Haven represents a significant evolution in trauma-informed practice, directly aligning with Sullivan & Cain's emphasis on collaboration and Herman's principle of agency. Meanwhile, Amos Goldreich's project illustrates how subtle, architecturally embedded cues can powerfully support safety and dignity.

4.6. Conclusion

These case studies affirm that trauma-informed design is not about a singular aesthetic but a responsive, relational approach to space. When design is grounded in principles of psychological safety, autonomy, and sensory atonement, it can become a powerful tool in healing. Drawing from these precedents, future design proposals can refine and expand trauma-informed strategies to foster not only shelter—but genuine sanctuary—for survivors of domestic abuse.



Figure 33. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1. Introduction

This section reflects on the integration of trauma-informed design principles within domestic abuse shelters, using the literature review and case studies as a foundation. It explores how these principles align with survivor needs, evaluates current examples, and identifies which elements are most impactful in fostering emotional healing. It also highlights implementation challenges and outlines future opportunities for advancing trauma-informed environments.

5.2. How Trauma-Informed Design Aligns with Shelter Needs

The case studies analysed demonstrate varying degrees of alignment with the trauma-informed criteria derived from the works of Herman (1997), Berke (2020), and Sullivan & Cain (2004). Across all cases, trauma-informed design principles have been shown to support psychological healing by addressing core needs such as safety, empowerment, and sensory regulation.

Notably, Herman's call for "establishing safety" as the first stage of trauma recovery is a unifying theme in each case. Safe, non-threatening environments emerge as a foundational aspect of all shelters studied. Similarly, Berke's emphasis on biophilia and sensory modulation is well-supported through the use of calming colour palettes, natural materials, and attention to light and acoustics. Sullivan & Cain's advocacy for non-institutional design manifests in spatial layouts that support autonomy, trust, and collaborative living.

5.3. Evaluating Current Shelters Against Trauma-Informed Criteria

Each shelter reflects different priorities based on regional context, organisational vision,

Criteria	Amos Goldreich Shelter	MASS Design's Haven Shelter	Homes and Havens
Safety	Strong; gated access and zoning create secure zones	Emphasised through layout planning and landscaping	Emphasised through familiar, homelike environments
Empowerment & Choice	Moderate; spatial layout supports autonomy	Strong; co-design fosters choice and flexibility	Strong; personalised interiors reflect survivor input
Sensory Regulation	High; natural light, soft textures, and acoustic control	High; natural light, soft textures, and tactile materials	High; emphasis on calming colour schemes and tactile materials
Connection to Nature	Moderate; access to garden spaces	High; biophilic integration central to concept	High; use of indoor plants and nature-based themes
Social Connection & Privacy Balance	Strong; zoning separates communal and private areas	Strong; flexible shared/private spaces	Moderate; focus on comfort may limit social interaction structures

Across the board, privacy, lighting, acoustics, and biophilia stand out as consistently impactful. Where shelters incorporated flexible spatial design or personalised aesthetics, survivors were more likely to report comfort, calm, and a sense of control.

5.4. The Impact of Specific Design Elements

Several design elements proved especially effective:

Lighting: All case studies prioritised natural and soft lighting. This significantly aided in nervous system regulation and emotional wellbeing.

Acoustics: Acoustic control was present in two of the three examples, reducing overstimulation and creating a sense of calm—a key requirement for survivors with PTSD or heightened sensory sensitivity.

Biophilic Design: Whether through views of gardens, indoor planting, or natural textures, a connection to nature helped ground individuals and reduce stress.

Privacy & Control: Private rooms, personalisation, and adjustable lighting emerged as essential to fostering autonomy and empowerment—central themes in Herman's trauma recovery model.

5.5. Challenges & Barriers in Implementation

Despite growing awareness, there are multiple systemic and practical barriers to adopting trauma-informed design:

Budget Constraints: High costs can prevent the integration of flexible layouts, biophilic features, or premium materials. Smaller or underfunded shelters often struggle to implement anything beyond the bare minimum.

Institutional Resistance: Regulatory standards prioritising efficiency, security, or institutional uniformity may clash with the goals of trauma-informed care.

Design Knowledge Gaps: Many shelters are developed without input from trauma specialists or trained designers, leading to environments that inadvertently replicate institutional or triggering aesthetics.

Maintenance & Longevity: Personalisation and flexibility can pose long-term upkeep challenges, leading to hesitation in their adoption.

These barriers suggest that trauma-informed design cannot be achieved through aesthetic gestures alone; it requires systemic shifts in policy, education, and funding models.

5.6. Case Study Improvements

5.6.1. Case Study 1: Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture

While the shelter offers privacy and clear zoning, some communal spaces could feel a little stark or institutional. Warmer, softer materials and more personalisation options (like flexible furniture arrangements or resident artwork displays) could help the environment feel even more welcoming and less clinical.



Figures 34,35. Suggestive case study improvements for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).



5.6.2. Case Study 2: Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group

Haven's design is very strong in terms of emotional safety, but the size and complexity of the space might feel overwhelming for some residents initially. Adding more transitional, small-scale "pause spaces" (like cosy nooks or alcoves) between public and private areas could better support nervous system regulation and give more opportunities for quiet retreat.



Figures 36,37. Suggestive case study improvements for Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).



5.6.3. Case Study 3: Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces

Homes and Havens focuses heavily on emotional healing through design, but as a grass-roots initiative, consistency across spaces can vary. Creating a simple design toolkit or set of core trauma-informed design guidelines could help ensure that even with different budgets or volunteers, every space still meets essential healing-centred principles.

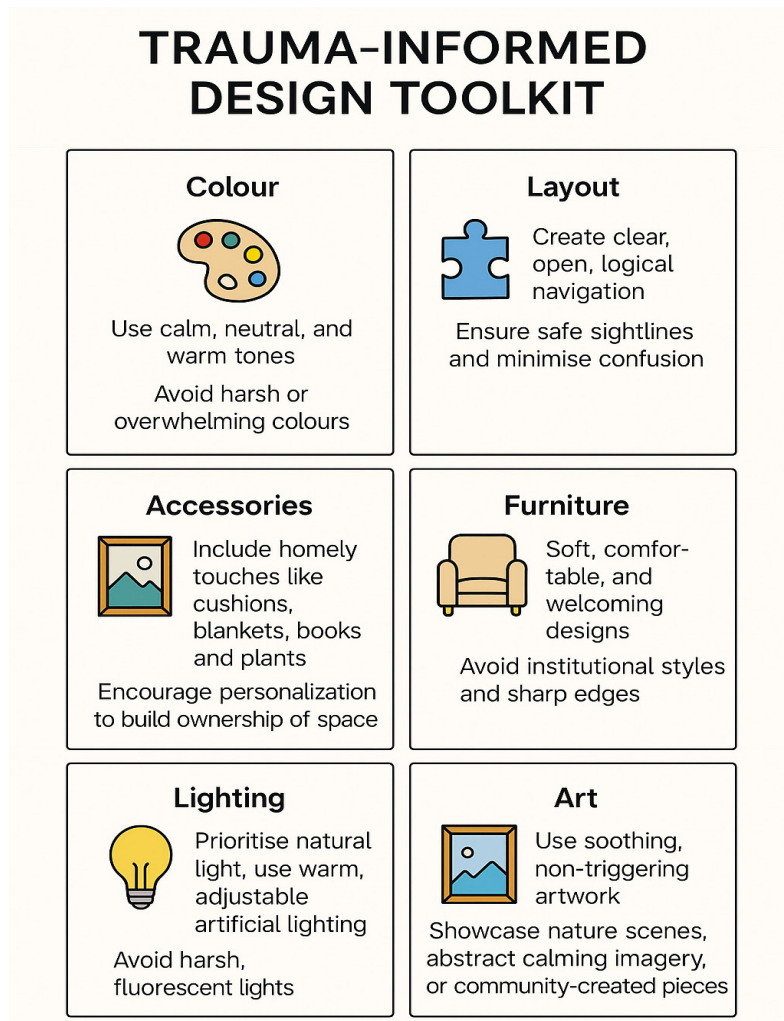


Figure 38. Suggestive case study improvements for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. (Megan Wilson, 2025)

See appendix for example trauma-informed design toolkit, created by Wonder Fund.

5.7. Future Opportunities & Recommendations

To move from intention to implementation, several strategies should be considered:

Policy Integration: Trauma-informed design should be embedded into shelter design guidelines at national and local levels. This requires collaboration between policymakers, funders, and design professionals.

Dedicated Funding - Funding bodies should allocate specific budgets for trauma-informed interventions, including post-occupancy evaluation and ongoing design support.

Training & Awareness: Designers, architects, and shelter staff need training in trauma theory, sensory processing, and survivor advocacy to translate these principles effectively.

Participatory Design Processes: Co-design not only validates survivor expertise but also produces more effective and contextually appropriate design outcomes. Involving residents in decisions—however small—fosters trust and empowerment.

Flexible, Scalable Models: Develop trauma-informed toolkits or modular solutions that shelters of all sizes can adapt. These should balance cost, feasibility, and survivor-centred principles.

Post-Occupancy Evaluation: Implement feedback loops through interviews or surveys to refine trauma-informed practices based on real experiences. Continuous assessment supports design accountability and responsiveness.

5.8. Notable Observations

An unexpected finding from the Homes and Havens case is the powerful impact of relatively small-scale interventions. Unlike the purpose-built architectural projects, Homes and Havens operates within existing residences and uses furniture, colour, and layout adjustments to foster healing. This reinforces that trauma-informed design doesn't always require large budgets or new builds—it can be accomplished incrementally, with care and consultation.

Similarly, the emphasis on non-institutional aesthetics across all three examples points to a broader trend: survivors often need environments that feel familiar, homelike, and non-judgmental. Cold, clinical, or over-secure environments may replicate the sense of being controlled and disempowered that characterised abusive relationships.

5.9. Conclusion

The findings affirm that trauma-informed design is not only beneficial but essential for domestic abuse shelters. When applied thoughtfully, it promotes emotional regulation, autonomy, and recovery. However, its success depends on more than just good intentions—it requires structural support, funding, training, and survivor collaboration. As the field evolves, the role of designers will increasingly involve listening, empathising, and translating lived experience into spatial form.

By centring safety, empowerment, and emotional wellbeing in shelter environments, trauma-informed design can help transform these spaces from sites of refuge into places of renewal and resilience.



Figure 39. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This dissertation has explored how trauma-informed interior design can be effectively implemented in domestic abuse shelters to foster emotional healing and resilience. Grounded in a multi-disciplinary literature review and reinforced by real-world case studies, the research has demonstrated that design is far more than a backdrop for recovery—it is an active, participatory element in the healing process. By centring survivor needs and aligning spatial strategies with psychological frameworks, trauma-informed design offers a powerful model for shelter environments that are safe, empowering, and emotionally restorative.

6.2. Summary of Key Findings

The research found that trauma-informed design directly supports the psychological recovery model outlined by Judith Herman, particularly in establishing safety, enabling autonomy, and facilitating reconnection. The environments studied—Amos Goldreich's purpose-built shelter, MASS Design Group's Haven project, and the more grassroots Homes and Havens initiative—each illustrated how design elements like soft lighting, acoustic control, biophilic elements, and spatial flexibility could tangibly improve survivor wellbeing.

Key findings include:

Safety is a foundational requirement, not only in physical terms but also emotional and psychological. Design elements that create predictable, secure environments—such as zoning, access control, and private areas—enable survivors to begin recovery.

Empowerment and autonomy are essential, supported by design features that offer choice and control, such as personalisable spaces, flexible layouts, and the ability to retreat or connect as needed.

Sensory regulation through the use of natural materials, soft acoustics, calming colour palettes, and diffused lighting helps soothe the nervous system and reduce hypervigilance.

Connection to nature, as emphasised through biophilic design, significantly enhances emotional wellbeing and helps re-establish a sense of grounding.

Balance between privacy and social connection supports communal living without replicating institutional dynamics, allowing survivors to rebuild trust and community at their own pace.

These findings confirm that trauma-informed design is not only compatible with domestic abuse shelter environments but essential to their effectiveness.

6.3. Research Contributions

This dissertation makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of interior architecture and design.

Theoretically, it expands trauma-informed care from the clinical and advocacy spheres into the spatial and material dimensions of interior design. By integrating psychological theory (Herman), architectural frameworks (Berke), and survivor-led advocacy (Sullivan & Cain), this research provides a holistic model for understanding how space influences trauma recovery.

Practically, the dissertation offers a clear, criteria-based framework for evaluating and implementing trauma-informed design in shelters. The case study analysis illustrates how these criteria can be used to critically assess existing spaces and guide new interventions, whether at the level of architecture, interior design, or domestic styling.

It also highlights the often-overlooked role of interior design in social care settings, calling attention to the designer's responsibility not only to form and function, but to emotional and psychological impact.

6.4. Recommendations for Shelter Design

In light of the findings, the following best practices are recommended for the design of domestic abuse shelters:

Prioritise Safety Beyond Security: Include physical safety measures but also emotional and psychological safety through predictable layouts, calming environments, and spaces that avoid institutional aesthetics.

Design for Autonomy: Offer residents control over their environment, including lighting, furniture arrangement, and access to private zones. Empowerment is essential to recovery.

Incorporate Sensory Awareness: Use soft, natural materials and limit harsh sensory stimuli. Consider acoustics, lighting quality, and tactile experience in every design decision.

Foster Connection to Nature: Where possible, include outdoor views, plants, natural materials, and opportunities for fresh air and daylight.

Balance Privacy and Social Interaction: Provide both communal and private spaces, allowing residents to choose when and how they engage with others.

Involve Survivors in the Design Process: Participatory design ensures that spaces reflect lived experience and build trust from the outset.

Train Design Professionals in Trauma Theory: Understanding the psychological effects of trauma should be a core competency for those designing care and shelter spaces.

Use Modular, Scalable Solutions: Develop adaptable design strategies that can suit different budgets, building types, and cultural contexts.

These principles offer a foundation for trauma-informed shelter environments that prioritise emotional safety as much as physical shelter.

6.5. Limitations & Areas for Further Research

While this research makes a significant contribution, it is not without limitations:

Limited Case Studies: The analysis was restricted to three case studies, with varying levels of available data. A broader range of shelters, especially across different cultural and geographic contexts, would offer a more comprehensive picture.

Subjective Measures of Success: Much of the evaluation depends on qualitative indicators—such as perceived comfort or empowerment—that can be difficult to measure consistently across different populations.

Lack of Direct Survivor Testimony: Although literature and secondary interviews informed the analysis, direct engagement with survivors was outside the scope of this study. Future work should centre survivor voices through interviews, workshops, or participatory research.

Focus on Interior Design: The emphasis here is on interior architecture, meaning that broader urban, policy, or infrastructural issues (such as shelter accessibility or housing supply) are not addressed in depth.

Future research could build on this foundation by:

Conducting post-occupancy evaluations of trauma-informed shelters to assess their long-term impact.

Exploring how trauma-informed design intersects with other forms of marginalisation (e.g. race, disability, immigration status).

Developing trauma-informed toolkits or guidelines tailored for specific design professions (e.g. interior designers, architects, decorators).

Investigating how trauma-informed principles can be adapted for different shelter types, including temporary housing, communal refuges, and transitional accommodation.

6.6. Final Thoughts

This dissertation set out to answer the question: How can trauma-informed interior design be implemented in domestic abuse shelters to foster emotional healing and resilience?

The research and case studies show that trauma-informed design can be implemented by carefully considering survivors' emotional and psychological needs at every stage of the design process. Practical strategies include zoning spaces to offer choice and control, using natural and tactile materials to reduce sensory overwhelm, creating clear and safe circulation routes, offering flexible and personalisable environments, and integrating nature to support emotional regulation. These approaches move beyond basic safety and create environments that actively support recovery.

For survivors of domestic abuse, space is never neutral. Every doorway, colour, texture, and sound can either trigger anxiety or provide comfort. Trauma-informed design encourages us to see shelters not just as places of safety, but as active tools for healing. It challenges designers to move beyond aesthetics and instead create spaces that restore autonomy, dignity, and emotional wellbeing.

When implemented thoughtfully, trauma-informed design can transform not only how shelters look, but how they feel—and ultimately, how they help survivors heal and rebuild their lives.



Figure 40. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

7.1. List of Figures

Figure 1 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 2 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 3 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 4 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 5 - Indesignlive (2015). Shelter for Battered Women. Available at: <https://www.indesignlive.com/singapore/project-news/shelter-for-battered-women> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 6 - Divisare (2018). Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Available at: <https://divisare.com/projects/385368-amos-goldreich-architecture-jim-stephenson-amit-geron-shelter-for-victims-of-domestic-violence> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 7 - Divisare (2018). Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Available at: <https://divisare.com/projects/385368-amos-goldreich-architecture-jim-stephenson-amit-geron-shelter-for-victims-of-domestic-violence> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 8 - Divisare (2018). Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Available at: <https://divisare.com/projects/385368-amos-goldreich-architecture-jim-stephenson-amit-geron-shelter-for-victims-of-domestic-violence> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 9 - Divisare (2018). Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Available at: <https://divisare.com/projects/385368-amos-goldreich-architecture-jim-stephenson-amit-geron-shelter-for-victims-of-domestic-violence> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 10 - Illustrative colour theme based on images of Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. (Stephenson and Geron, 2018). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 11 - Material palette for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, Tel Aviv, designed by Amos Goldreich Architecture. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)

Figure 12 - MASS Design Group (2023). Haven Domestic Violence Shelter. Available at: <https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/haven-domestic-violence-shelter> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 13- MASS Design Group (2023). Haven Domestic Violence Shelter. Available at: <https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/haven-domestic-violence-shelter> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 14- MASS Design Group (2023). Haven Domestic Violence Shelter. Available at: <https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/haven-domestic-violence-shelter> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 15 - Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 16- Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 17- Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 18 - Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 19- Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

Figure 20 - Big Sky Journal (2023). Making a Difference. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> [Accessed March 2025].

- Figure 21 - Illustrative colour theme based on images of Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. (Maganiyas, 2023). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 22 - Material palette for Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 23 - Homes and Havens (2022). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 24- Homes and Havens (2022). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 25 - Homes and Havens (2022). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 26- Homes and Havens (2022). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 27- Homes and Havens (2020). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 28 - Homes and Havens (2020). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 29- Homes and Havens (2020). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 30 - Homes and Havens (2020). Instagram Page. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/homesandhavens/> [Accessed March 2025].
- Figure 31 - Illustrative colour theme based on images of Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces. (Homes and Havens Instagram, 2020-2024). Edited by (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 32 - Material palette for Homes and Havens – Residential Retreat Spaces. Created using Matto Board. (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 33 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 34 - Suggestive case study improvements for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).
- Figure 35 - Suggestive case study improvements for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).
- Figure 36 - Suggestive case study improvements for Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).
- Figure 37 - Suggestive case study improvements for Haven Domestic Violence Shelter – MASS Design Group. Sketch by (Megan Wilson, 2025). Rendering completed by AI rendering software (Rendiar.ai, 2025).
- Figure 38 - Suggestive case study improvements for Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence – Amos Goldreich Architecture. (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 39 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 40 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)
- Figure 41 - Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)

7.2. References

7.2.1. Books

Bloom, S.L. (2013) *Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.

Brandt, R. (2019) *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being*. London: Penguin Books.

Chayadi, M.C., Meliana, S. and Ruki, U.A. (2023) *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Art, Craft, Culture and Design (ICON-ARCCADE 2023)*. Dordrecht: Atlantis Press.

Curtis, R. and Gesler, W. (2010) *Healing Places: Emotional Architecture in Practice*. London: Routledge.

Elliott, D.E., Bjelajac, P. and Fallot, R.D. (2017) *Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Gordon, S. and Wachs, K. (2018) *Designing for Hope: Healing Architecture and the Human Spirit*. New York: Monacelli Press.

Herman, J.L. (2015) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. 2nd edn. New York: Basic Books.

Jackson, L.E. (2003) *The Psychology of Sustainable Environments: Building Well-being into Place*. New York: Springer.

Lawson, B. (2001) *The Language of Space*. Oxford: Architectural Press.

Malchiodi, C.A. (2012) *Art Therapy and Health Care*. New York: Guilford Press.

Pallasmaa, J. (2014) *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. 3rd edn. Chichester: Wiley.

Rifqi, S. (2021) *The potential influence of interior furnishings on sense of dignity for residents of domestic violence shelters*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Trevillion, K., Oram, S., Feder, G. and Howard, L.M. (2012) 'Experiences of domestic violence and mental disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *PLoS ONE*, 7(12), p. e51740.

van der Kolk, B.A. (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking.

Zelinka, A. and Brennan, D. (2001) *SafeScape: Creating Safer, More Livable Communities Through Planning and Design*. Washington, DC: APA Planners Press.

7.2.2. Dissertations, Articles, and Journals

Both, A., Winter, S. and Williams, R. (2019) 'Breaking the cycle of abuse: Design strategies for domestic violence shelters', *Journal of Social Design*, 14(2), pp. 75–92.

Sullivan, C.M. and Cain, D. (2004) 'The role of housing programs in supporting survivors of domestic violence', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19(6), pp. 703–717.

Guhl, A. (2022) '5 Principles of Trauma-Informed Design', Neumann Monson Architects. Available at: <https://neumannmonson.com/blog/principles-trauma-informed-design> (Accessed: 17 March 2025).

Garcia, A.M. (2020) 'Empathy in Architecture: Using Trauma-Informed Design to Promote Healing', E4H Architecture. Available at: <https://e4harchitecture.com/empathy-in-architecture-using-trauma-informed-design-to-promote-healing/> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Singer, D. (2020) 'Using Trauma-Informed Design, Buildings Become Tools for Recovery', Collective Colorado. Available at: <https://collective.coloradotrust.org/stories/using-trauma-informed-design-buildings-become-tools-for-recovery/> (Accessed: 20 March 2025).

Barnard, S. (2021) 'Can the design of your home aid recovery from past trauma? Research says yes', Sarah Barnard Design. Available at: <https://www.sarahbarnard.com/story/2021/3/13/can-the-design-of-your-home-aid-recovery-from-past-trauma-research-says-yes-1> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

7.2.3. Websites

Bazarah, A.M.S. (2021) Information exchange (IE) among multi-stakeholders for improving decision making. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5642/cguetd/198> (Accessed: 16 March 2025).

HFA | Healthcare. (n.d.) Available at: <https://blog.hfa-ae.com/solutions/healthcare> (Accessed: 15 March 2025).

Tricklings. (n.d.) The role of staff in convalescent homes: Ensuring quality care. Available at: <https://tricklings.com/staff-in-convalescent-homes/> (Accessed: 19 March 2025).

Gregory Abarron. (n.d.) Understanding common types of accident injuries. Available at: <https://joanlawrence.com/the-untold-consequences/> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

CellStream, Inc. (2024) What is the ISO/IEC 27008 guideline about? Available at: <https://www.cellstream.com/2024/03/14/what-is-the-iso-iec-27008-guideline-about/> (Accessed: 21 March 2025).

High Country Drapery Designs. (n.d.) Homes and Havens. Available at: <https://www.high-country.design/homes-and-havens/> (Accessed: 16 March 2025).

Women's Aid (2023) Domestic abuse support services and refuge provision in the UK: Annual report 2023. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk> (Accessed: 17 March 2025).

Wonder Foundation. (2023) Trauma-informed practice: What it is and why it matters. Available at: <https://wonderfoundation.org.uk/trauma-informed-practice-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> (Accessed: 2 April 2025).

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2023. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH) (n.d.) What is trauma-informed design? Available at: <https://traumainformedhousing.poah.org/what-is-trauma-informed-design> (Accessed: 19 March 2025).

Trauma-Informed Design Society (TIDS) (n.d.) Available at: <https://www.tidsociety.com/> (Accessed: 21 March 2025).

Healing Action Network (n.d.) Empowering commercial sexual exploitation victims: Legal reforms and support. Available at: <https://healingaction.org/empowering-commercial-sexual-exploitation-victims-legal-reforms-support/> (Accessed: 24 March 2025).

Tosi, I.B. (2014) A Lei Maria da Penha e o regime interamericano de proteção dos direitos humanos. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/196878565.pdf> (Accessed: 27 March 2025).

7.2.4. Case Studies and Projects

Dezeen (2015) 'Work starts on purpose-built shelter for victims of domestic abuse in Israel'. Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/13/israel-first-purpose-built-shelter-victims-domestic-abuse-amos-goldreich-jacobs-yaniv/> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

PDX Monthly (2021) 'Trauma-Informed Design Turns an Old Church into a Family Shelter'. Available at: <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/home-and-real-estate/2021/12/family-village-shelter-trauma-informed-design> (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Reclaim Magazine (n.d.) 'Transforming a women's refuge'. Available at: <https://www.reclaimmagazine.uk/charity-ethical/charity-design-of-a-womens-refuge/> (Accessed: 25 March 2025).

MASS Design Group (n.d.) Haven Domestic Violence Shelter. Available at: <https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/haven-domestic-violence-shelter> (Accessed: 27 March 2025).

Stantec (n.d.) 'Better than before: 3 ways design can ease the transition to safety for survivors of abuse'. Available at: <https://www.stantec.com/en/ideas/topic/buildings/better-than-before-3-ways-design-can-ease-the-transition-to-safety-for-survivors-of-abuse> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

Townsend Collective (n.d.) Haven Barnard Center. Available at: <https://client.townsendcollective.com/havenbarnardcenter/> (Accessed: 29 March 2025).

Haven Montana (n.d.) 'Haven cuts ribbon on new shelter'. Available at: <https://havenmt.org/blog/haven-cuts-ribbon-on-new-shelter> (Accessed: 30 March 2025).

Big Sky Journal (n.d.) 'Making a difference'. Available at: <https://bigskyjournal.com/making-a-difference/> (Accessed: 31 March 2025).

Homes and Havens (n.d.) Process. Available at: <https://homesandhavens.org/process> (Accessed: 31 March 2025).

7.2.5. Additional Bibliography

American Institute of Architects (AIA) (2017) Design for mental health facilities: Best practices guide. Washington, DC: American Institute of Architects.

Hopper, E.K., Bassuk, E.L. and Olivet, J. (2010) 'Shelter from the storm: Trauma-informed care in homelessness services', *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*, 3(2), pp. 80–100.

Ponic, P., Varcoe, C. and Smutylo, T. (2016) Trauma- and violence-informed approaches to supporting victims of violence: Policy and practice considerations. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Steel, C., Blundell, P. and Joseph, S. (2018) 'Post-traumatic growth and positive psychology in housing design for survivors of domestic abuse', *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 18(2), pp. 270–286.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Available at: https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Weisz, A.N. and Black, B.M. (2009) Programs to address teen dating violence: Perspectives on what works. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zeeman, L., Sherriff, N., Browne, K., McGlynn, N. and Mirandola, M. (2019) 'A review of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) health and healthcare inequalities', *European Journal of Public Health*, 29(5), pp. 974–980.

Wilson, C. (2020) 'Designing safe spaces: Using architecture to heal trauma', *Architectural Digest*. Available at: <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/designing-safe-spaces-using-architecture-to-heal-trauma> (Accessed: 30 March 2025).

7.3. Glossary of Terms

A

Acoustics

How sound behaves in a space. Minimising noise stress and triggers is vital in trauma-informed design.

Autonomy

The ability to make independent choices and have control over one's environment, crucial for trauma recovery.

Attachment to Place

The emotional bond people form with spaces, helping survivors feel safe, familiar, and supported.

C

Circular Economy

A sustainable approach that reduces waste and reuses materials, creating eco-friendly, adaptable shelters.

Cognitive Load

The mental effort needed to process information. Lowering it helps environments feel calmer and safer.

Colour Psychology

The study of how colour influences emotions and behaviour, used to create calming environments.

Control in Design

Designing for user control over lighting, temperature, and privacy to promote empowerment.

D

Domestic Abuse

Controlling, coercive, threatening, violent, or abusive behaviour by a partner or family member.

Dignity in Design

Designing environments that make individuals feel respected, valued, and in control.

Deinstitutionalisation of Spaces

Moving away from cold, clinical spaces towards more personal, comforting, home-like environments.

E

Environmental Psychology

The study of how surroundings impact emotions and behaviours, guiding supportive design choices.

Empowerment in Design

Creating spaces that offer choice and control, helping survivors regain autonomy.

Entry Sequencing

Designing gradual transitions between public and private spaces to increase feelings of security.

H

Human-Centred Design

Prioritising users' needs, emotions, and experiences to create supportive, healing spaces.

L

Lighting Design

Using natural and artificial light thoughtfully to influence mood, safety, and well-being.

M

Materiality

Choosing materials with textures, colours, and durability that impact comfort and safety.

Mental Health and Well-being

Supporting emotional and psychological states through calming, secure environments.

P

Personalisation

Allowing individuals to personalise their spaces to foster identity, ownership, and emotional safety.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

A trauma-triggered condition causing anxiety and flashbacks; spaces must be designed to reduce triggers.

Privacy in Design

Giving individuals control over their space, reducing vulnerability, especially in communal living.

R

Resilience

The ability to recover from adversity, supported by stable and empowering environments.

Restorative Environments

Spaces designed to promote relaxation, recovery, and emotional well-being after trauma.

S

Sensory Regulation

Designing spaces that manage noise, light, and textures to prevent sensory overload or distress.

Shelter Design

Creating safe, emotionally supportive spaces for individuals escaping domestic abuse.

Spatial Planning

Arranging rooms, furniture, and circulation for privacy, functionality, and emotional support.

Survivor-Centred Design

Design that prioritises the experiences and needs of survivors to foster healing.

T

Threshold Spaces

Transitional zones between environments, easing emotional and sensory shifts.

Trauma-Informed Design (TID)

Design based on understanding trauma's effects, ensuring safety, empowerment, and healing.

Triggers

Environmental or sensory stimuli that can cause distress or flashbacks; must be minimised.

7.4. Appendix

7.4.1. Interview with Dr Kate Williams, SFHEA
 Programme Leader, BA (Hons) Criminology & Criminal Justice
 Programme Leader, BA (Hons) Criminology & Criminal Justice & Law
 Senior Lecturer, Criminology & Criminal Justice
 Co-Chair, British Society of Criminology Midlands Hub
 School of Social, Historical & Political Studies
 Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities
 University of Wolverhampton
 Mary Seacole Building
 Nursery Street
 Wolverhampton
 WV1 1AD
 UK

Held on the 14th of April.

Are there patterns you've observed in how survivors respond to institutional or impersonal settings, and how might these affect their recovery?

"In my limited experience, women in these situations are most concerned about the safety of themselves and their children. They may be frightened that their (ex) partner will find out where they are. So therefore, security is perhaps the most important element here. They are also likely to be worried about their children's emotions and often the lack of things – they may have had to have left in the clothes they are standing up in and without anything else such as toys, toiletries, other clothing – and they may not have the money to replace these. Therefore, the combination of these factors may mean that the setting suited best to them is very individualised/personalised. For example, one woman may feel more safe if there are secure locks, CCTV and anonymity, whereas another who may have different experiences may want to have freedom and a soft, caring environment."

Do you see differences in needs or triggers for survivors of domestic abuse compared to survivors of sex work exploitation, and how might these differences influence how a space should be designed?

"As mentioned above, I think it is likely that environmental features are flexible in order to accommodate the differing experiences and needs of women. Certainly the need for some sort of control is likely to be important in that sense."

In your opinion, are there ways in which shelter design or atmosphere can unintentionally mirror aspects of control or confinement that survivors are trying to escape?

"I have no experience here other than to say that obviously funding is an ongoing issue. The lack of money will inevitably impact upon services available."

In your opinion, what does empowerment look like in a shelter setting—not just in services offered, but in day-to-day lived experience?

“I don’t know I’m afraid – I think best to speak to a shelter/refuge manager – although as a point of interest, my colleague is currently researching this with deaf women, and has found a real lack of inclusion for them. She said “even when first accessing (ie met with a door with an intercom etc), or refusal due to ‘health and safety’ reasons even though there are things available such as flashing lights for fire alarms etc”.”

If you could redesign one space in a shelter from the perspective of a criminologist working with survivors—what would it be, and what changes would you make?

“Brilliant questions Meg, I think as you suggest above, empowering survivors by involving them and asking needs is so important. I think so much comes down to funding for emotional/trauma needs and basic practicalities, fundamentally physical safety.”

7.4.2. Wonder Foundation. (2023) Trauma-informed practice: What it is and why it matters. Available at: <https://wonderfoundation.org.uk/trauma-informed-practice-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> (Accessed: 2 April 2025).



Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces

Calming spaces make a measurable difference in our experience. Think about what it feels like to be sitting by a lake, listening to the birds chirping and the water lapping against the shore versus standing in the middle of a loud construction site. Our environment and the space around us directly impacts the way we feel inside, our ability to focus, stay calm, learn and feel safe.

That is why the Wonderfund has committed to making spaces trauma informed for children and families engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. Based on our learnings, we have created the Trauma Informed Design Toolkit to provide helpful guidelines for others who seek to create calming, anxiety-reducing environments for the people they serve.

The Wonderfund is a Massachusetts non-profit that serves children engaged with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF). Our population is 50,000 children who have open cases with DCF, 10,000 of whom are in foster care. We provide financial and material support in emergency situations, funds for children to experience extracurricular and enrichment activities, presents during the holidays and a focus on making spaces trauma informed for kids who have experienced abuse and neglect.

The Wonderfund's Trauma Informed Design Toolkit is the direct result of conversations with DCF social workers who work on the front lines every day with traumatized children. We were informed that when foster children have supervised visits with their biological parents - which are often stressful moments for both parents and children - the visits were taking place in sterile office space with bland walls, fluorescent lighting and uncomfortable furniture. We recognized an opportunity to create child-friendly environments that could reduce stress, provide natural opportunities for parents and children to bond and engage and rewrite the script for how families felt coming into a DCF office. How? By making simple, trauma informed design choices as we renovated office spaces and transformed them into family visiting rooms.

The beauty of this approach is that it is easy to do! By following trauma informed principles, providers can achieve better outcomes for the families they work so hard to serve every day.

In this toolkit, we provide guidelines, suggestions and examples with a focus on creating trauma informed child and family friendly spaces. It should be noted that the principles of trauma informed design can be applied to any environment and that each space and the people who use it will be different. It is critical to examine each space, its purpose and its user group through a trauma informed lens to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Wishing you happy designing!

The Wonderfund Team



"Trauma is the experience of an event that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects." - National Institute of Mental Health

"Individual trauma is the experience of an event or series of events that is perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that can have long lasting adverse effects on physical, social, emotional or spiritual well being." - SAMSHA, Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014

What is Trauma?

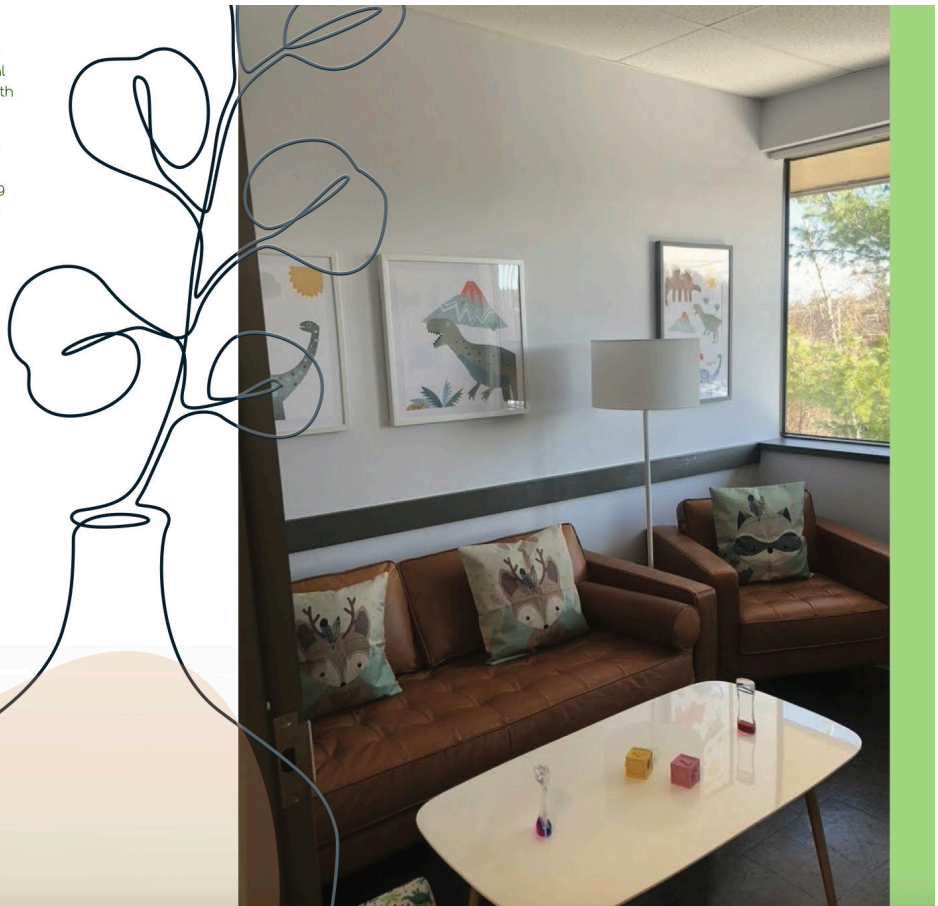
Common causes of childhood trauma include physical, sexual and emotional abuse; death of a loved one; incarceration of a parent; violence in the home or close community; living with adults who have mental health or addiction issues; experiencing racism; and stress caused by poverty.

Studies show that experiencing trauma without intervention and support from safe adults makes it far more likely that a child will grow up and suffer from things like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, addiction and poverty.

Trauma Informed Care

A Trauma Informed approach to care shifts the question from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" According to the Center for Health Care Strategies, Trauma Informed Care aims to:

- Recognize the impact of trauma and understand potential paths to recovery
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in a person
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies and practices
- Seek to actively resist re-traumatization (i.e. avoid creating an environment that reminds people of their traumatic experiences and causes additional stress)



Trauma Informed Design

Trauma informed design seeks to create environments and spaces that are calming, comfortable, soothing to all five senses and not re-traumatizing or reminiscent of past traumatic environments. By using a trauma informed approach to design, we can greatly improve the outcomes of the interactions that occur in a space. Trauma informed design can be applied to any setting, including hospitals, schools, social service offices, mental health facilities, residential treatment programs, police stations and state agencies.

TRAUMA INFORMED ENVIRONMENTS:

- Understand that the physical environment affects an individual's sense of identity, worth and dignity
- Recognize that the environment plays an important role in the attitudes, moods and behaviors of the people experiencing the space
- Feel welcoming, safe and stress reducing, with the goal of removing potential triggers and allow people the ability to think and function with greater clarity and agency
- Ultimately contribute to more successful outcomes for those being treated in or using the space

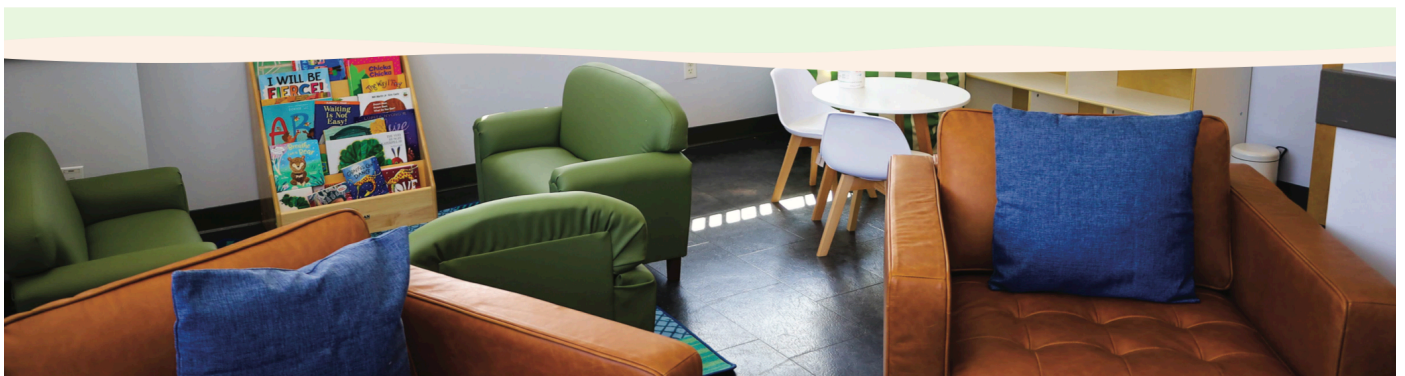
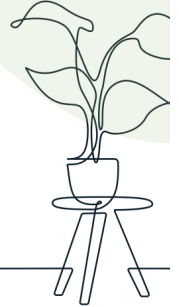
Why Is Trauma Informed Design Important?

Trauma informed design creates environments that are proven to positively impact outcomes for people using the space. By creating calming environments and removing potential triggers, we can help ensure that people have a better chance of having successful interactions, which can lead to better outcomes overall.

Key Considerations in Trauma Informed Design

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT:

- Understands the population that will be using this space - Who are they? Why are they in this space? Are they children? Adults? Are there cultural considerations? Physical or intellectual disabilities?
- Produces a sense of calm and positivity by removing stressors and adverse stimuli
- Generates the feelings of safety and comfort
- Provides positive, multi-sensory experience through textures, sounds, color and light
- Allows for individual agency - choices, self-reliance, functionality with flexibility, privacy if needed and gives some control to the users of the space



Guidelines for Creating Trauma Informed Interior Spaces

- Be intentional by understanding who is using the space and why
- Color - soothing colors to create calm
- Layout - create clear sight lines for a sense of order and openness
- Furniture - utilize pieces that are comfortable and durable
- Accessories - toys, books and pillows can decrease anxiety and provide opportunities for bonding
- Art - artwork on the walls can distract, soothe and entertain
- Light - natural light is calming and connects us to the natural world, while indirect and lower level illumination improves a sense of comfort



COLOR

Colors have an immediate and powerful impact on the users of the space.

- Create a feeling of calm and openness
- Choose lighter colors that are perceived as calming; Neutral and natural colors such as pale blues, grays and greens are good options
- Avoid deeply hued red, orange and yellow, as they may arouse negative feelings and make confined spaces feel crowded and stressful



LAYOUT

This can have a profound impact on moods and behavior

- An open, simple layout with clear sight lines and few barriers reduces stress and increases a sense of safety, order and predictability
- Eliminate clutter and overcrowding
- Provide opportunities for privacy or personal space
- Provide feelings of safety with some seating against a solid wall with clear sight lines to the rest of the room
- Empower users by allowing for functionality with flexibility. Allow users to move some furniture, adjust lighting, serve themselves and have options for how to interact with the space
- Arrange furniture to promote positive equitable interactions. Chairs arranged corner to corner feels more communal and less confrontational than chairs separated by a desk



FURNITURE

Offer functionality with flexibility

- Quality, durability, and functionality are important and communicate respect and dignity for the users
- Natural materials and colors enhance connection to nature
- Comfort is important and communicates respect and care for the user
- Choose materials that are easy to keep clean and maintain, like wipeable surfaces (e.g. faux leather) and performance fabrics
- Allow for some pieces to be movable which offers agency to users

ACCESSORIES

Small details can have a big impact

- Plants provide a connection to nature, as well as visual interest
- Magazines, toys, informational material, if available, should have a specific place so as to reduce clutter and visual complexity
- Games and toys are great tools to have in a room to foster bonding between family members or between clinicians and clients. The key is to make sure they have all of the pieces, are safe for all user groups and are stored in an organized fashion
- Throw pillows make a space feel cozy. Users can gain a sense of security by holding them or using them to make sitting more comfortable
- Sensory-friendly toys like fidgets, pop-its, and swings are often very helpful for children with sensory processing challenges
- Refreshments/water should be self service, easily accessible and easy to keep tidy and clean
- Attention should be paid to limiting or eliminating accessories that could be thrown or used as weapons



ART

Artwork speaks to the heart and soul. Make it beautiful.

- Art and images on the wall not only add visual interest but create a pleasing distraction that can alleviate stress
- Landscapes and images from nature can have a calming, positive effect on the observer
- Artwork and wall decor featuring soothing colors and soft textures are soothing to the eye and nervous system
- Avoid art with symbolic significance that could arouse negative feelings by understanding your user group

LIGHTING

Simple enhancements to lighting can change the whole experience.

- Increasing natural light in a space improves mood and makes a room feel less crowded
- Soft light from lamps can give a space warmth
- Overhead and fluorescent lighting can be harsh on the sensory system. If overhead lights must be used, dimmers can provide significant improvement
- Providing space with lighting options improves its functionality for different uses and empowers users to create the environment most suitable for their needs
- Avoid small lamps in environments where individuals struggle with lashing out physically

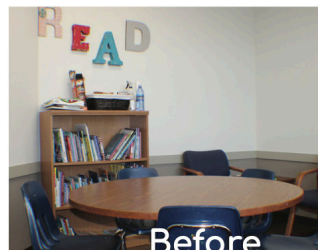


Putting the tools to use

Trauma informed design is achievable for anyone, in any space. It should not feel daunting, difficult or expensive. By making simple choices and swap outs, we can make any space feel more welcoming and safe. We can better honor the individuals using the space, reduce their stress levels and give them the best possible chance of a successful outcome.

OFFICE TRANSFORMATIONS

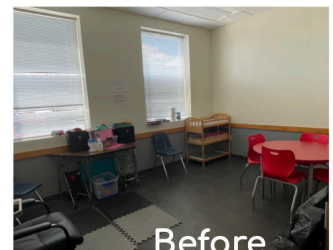
Created by Wonderfund



Before

OFFICE TRANSFORMATIONS

Created by Wonderfund



Before



Updated



Updated

OFFICE TRANSFORMATIONS

Created by Wonderfund



Before



Updated

Thank you to all that helped build this guide.

This toolkit was spearheaded by Massachusetts First Lady Lauren Baker with contributions from the Wonderfund team, including: Erin Murphy Rafferty, Katlin McInnis, Jenny Nardone, Jessie Stein, and Colleen Walsh. Design by Lynette Allaire & Mark DaPonte of Mirage Design.

Special thank you to the many DCF social workers and staff members who provided valuable insight into what these rooms needed to best serve the kids and family engaged with DCF.

Finally, thank you to the Shah Family Foundation who has provided a generous gift to the Wonderfund making these transformations possible for DCF Offices across the Commonwealth.

Trauma Informed Design Toolkit



Massachusetts Wonderfund, Inc. 600 Washington St. • 6th floor • Boston, MA 02111 • wonderfundma.org @wonderfundma @wonderfundma



Figure 41. Illustration (Megan Wilson, 2025)