

# An ode to quiet

Zilenzio





# Moments of quiet for the ears and the eyes help us work, study and live better together.

When we hear a sound, our ears are sending electrical signals to our brain. Our eyes do the same thing whenever we come into contact with visual stimuli. Think of a busy environment in which you are constantly aware of – and tuned into – other people's conversations. This kind of ambient noise causes us stress and reduces our ability to relax and focus. Our sense of control over our personal space has been compromised. The more we fill our homes and offices with physical clutter, the more visual noise we have to deal with – in addition to acoustic challenges.

Now imagine a different kind of environment.

A sanctuary of calm  
A canvas for ideas

Free of distraction  
Full of inspiration

An ode to quiet

Goodbye noise  
Farewell clutter

Clear your mind  
Let your eyes gently rest

At Zilenzio, we believe the best environment is one in which you're empowered to curate your space according to your individual needs and preferences. We design sound and visual noise-absorbing furniture to create and enhance your personal space at work, school and home. Our products help you choose your desired levels of separation and stimulation — while remaining connected to the world around you.

We bring relief from distracting noises and visual clutter by combining accurate data on productivity and wellbeing with a deep knowledge of sound and design. Our responsive and sustainable approach to creating optimal working and living environments enables us to deliver thoughtful, high-quality solutions to soothe the ears, eyes and mind.



## On visual noise and how to overcome it

A conversation with Christina Bodin Danielsson. Based in Stockholm, Christina is a practising architect, and a teacher and researcher in human-environment interaction. She is an expert in how physical environments influence human behaviour, psychology and wellbeing. Her specific focus is on how the office environment affects employees and organisations.

Interviewer – Are there any similarities between ambient noise and visual noise?

Christina Bodin Danielsson – They both mean distraction. Noise is a stimuli that reaches us through our hearing sense and it affects us even when we do not consciously ‘notice’ it – for example, when it’s a low and continuous background noise. Visual distraction reaches us from our eyes as a visual stimuli – or as a visual stressor when it’s negative. Research has shown that when we are exposed to noise, this also affects our visual experience. This interrelation between our senses is interesting as it tells us it is possible to affect the experience of a physical space by simultaneously working with both the sense of hearing and the sense of sight. The visual sense is the most dominant sense. It tends to take over our environmental experiences; it does not pass ‘under the radar’, so to speak. It is the sensory system that uses nearly half of the brain’s cerebral cortex in order to process visual signals.

I – Can you give the most common examples of ambient noise and visual noise?

CBD – The most common types of ambient noise depend on the setting. In urban areas it’s traffic noise; inside an office it’s conversation between colleagues, or telephone calls that you don’t want to listen to and that therefore distract you. Visual disturbance (when not a medical condition) can be described as a visual overload in an exterior or interior environment. Visual distraction in an office might be caused by the proliferation of digital screens and an overall environment that intrudes on your personal space and makes it difficult to concentrate.

Designed to be suspended from a ceiling, the sound-absorbing Dezibel Divider makes it possible to create distinctive visual and acoustic areas within an open space, while maintaining a sense of openness and flow. Here the Dezibel Ceiling absorber provides additional acoustic control above the dining table, while in the background, the high-backed Tune Sofa designed by Norm Architects creates a blissfully cocooning seating area.

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I – At what point does sound or 'stuff' become noise? Is all noise bad or do we need some to stimulate us?

CBD – Sound has both positive and negative effects on us. When sound has a negative effect or is unwanted, we talk about noise. Sound is a neutral term but noise is always negative. The sound or visual stimulation becomes noise when it is unwanted or disturbing and you cannot shut it out. Whether you find a particular sound negative or not is an individual reaction, though it is thought that certain sounds are generally perceived as negative by all people – think of a car alarm. A positive sound is perceived as pleasantly stimulating or relaxing or rehabilitating. For example, the sound of the sea, or bird song.

I – What benefits can a quiet environment provide? How does it make us feel?

CBD – A quiet environment provides us with the benefit of being able to hear our inner voice, to focus, and think clearly. If you need to concentrate – for example, in order to finish a piece of demanding work – a quiet environment helps us feel focused and creates a sense of flow. We may also experience feelings of wellbeing and pleasure, related to a sense of personal control. We all strive to be in personal control – whether in our relationships, in our financial affairs, or in our living or working situations. Being able to shut out unwanted stimuli like noise is a way of achieving personal control over your physical environment either in the office or at home. Not being able to shut out noise causes stress and the overloading of our mental system that may lead to physiological symptoms.

In various cognitive studies, noise has been found to have a negative impact on our productivity, accuracy in our work, and our ability to memorise information. However, we also know that the sound of people chatting or laughing contributes to a sense of cohesion at a workplace. Creativity is stimulated by sound depending on the task at hand. For instance, creative writing is not stimulated by having colleagues talking next to your work desk, but it can be stimulated by the buzz of people talking in a café. This is because listening to non-relevant talk – the conversations of strangers – does not disturb us as much as listening to talk that might concern us. Ultimately, what stimulates or doesn't stimulate our creativity is highly individual, depending on one's personality as well as the task at hand.

I – How can we live more quietly? What are your top tips for reducing noise and visual clutter?

CBD – To reduce distraction in our work environments, we need to consciously use materials that can absorb noise — as well as including stimulating sound in certain aspects of our workplaces. Regarding visual clutter, it is more complicated. We don't want to work or live in a starkly minimalist environment that does not offer us any visual stimulation. Research has found that a lot of office employees find their white offices boring and impersonal, interpreting the blandness as a compromise by management to avoid conflicts over the design of the physical space. It is my belief that one of the reasons a lot of people don't want to come back to their offices post-Covid is that they don't find these environments as stimulating as their homes — where they might be able to personalise their work station, access a pleasant view, and open the window for fresh air. We must allow people to take personal control over their physical work environment and encourage them to engage and interact with it. What is stimulating to one person might be clutter to another, so rules are needed to maintain a balance. Instead of imposing a generic, impersonal workspace — it's having the freedom to choose that's important.

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With Kyoto, nothing is superfluous. Clearly define a space for intimate gatherings with these discreet and flexible floor screens.





The Focus Pod is easy to position and brings together the handy trio of screen, seat and table.



Find your focus with the gently sloping Zermatt screen. This tactile solution will help you restore peace and quiet to your desktop.



The Tune Sofa and Armchair is a sound-absorbing collection designed by Norm Architects. The sofa shown here is available with a high or low back, and with an open side on either the right or left. The Tune Laptop Table completes the cosy set-up.



Here, the Dezibel Wall panels have been playfully combined with plank-shaped Timber panels. Each product is available in a range of sizes so they can be mixed and matched to create the precise visual and acoustic effect you desire.



Architectural in design and harmonious in function, the Kyoto floor screen offers its user a precious moment of clarity and calm. Inspired by the quiet contemplation of the tearooms of Japan, Kyoto is the simplest route to serenity.

“A good sound environment  
is like health.

You don’t think about it  
until it fails.”

— Pontus Thorsson

## In dialogue

Christina Bodin Danielsson, an expert in human-environment interaction, and Pontus Thorsson, whose PHD studies focused on the effects of traffic noise and are now translated to the world of work, together consider the complex and fascinating relationship between sight, sound, people, space, and design.

Interviewer — Why is sound important and what impact does it have on the workplace?

Pontus Thorsson — I always say that if I do my work well, then nobody notices it. A good sound environment is like health. You don't think about it until it fails. There's no one environment that is best for all. We need to be able to choose what is right for us. We need to be able to focus on our own tasks — even in the presence of others. The best solution would be a true activity-based environment where you can choose your situation based on the work you want to do right now.

I — What about silence?

PT — Silence is the absence of sound. We don't want or need total silence. Think about an empty church where you are afraid to make any sound at all. Or an office that is so quiet you can hear people typing on their keyboards. If anyone speaks in that kind of environment, you hear everything they say. Complete silence is unnatural. No place in nature is completely silent. You don't want to hear your own heartbeat. It's quite scary.

I – So, we need some sound to ground us and make us feel safe.

PT – Yes, but there's a vast difference between hearing speech – and understanding speech. The Speech Transmission Index is helping us to understand how speech-based noise affects people's concentration at work. Through the studies, we have an opportunity to design more suitable landscapes for work and study – and to practically implement positive changes. The Index measures how easy it is to understand speech within a specific environment. While being able to understand what another person is saying is often a good thing – in an auditorium for example – when we're trying to get on with our work, comprehension of every word being uttered around us can actually be a distracting experience. When we perceive speech occurring, we are designed in such a way that there is a trigger in the conscious mind, telling us to listen to what is said. This becomes a real problem when there are many people in the same room, trying to work on different things. But the less speech we are able to understand, the less activated our brain, and the more we can focus.

I – Is it the same for all kinds of work?

PT – There is a scale. It has been academically proven that if the work task is more creative, then certain triggers can activate the brain in a good way. It depends on what you need to do. A café environment is often good for creative work.

I – Christina, can you describe how visual stimulation comes into this question of noise within an environment?

Christina Bodin Danielsson – My field is interdisciplinary so I think about different environmental factors. We have at least five different senses, and sight is the most dominant. It is the sensory system that uses most of the brain's cerebral cortex, with nearly half of the cerebral cortex used to process visual signals. I think it's sad that the visual aspect (how things appear) has taken over so much in our lives. I feel like our other senses are often neglected. We live in a visual culture. And in architecture, a space is now rated primarily on its value as an image. You could call it 'photo architecture'. But humans want harmony and order. We seek control and pleasantness. It's the same with noise. Noise affects us differently if we feel we are in control of it. Randomised noise is the most disturbing because then you sit there waiting for it to come back. As humans we are always striving for personal control and our environments need to accept and obey this fact – and not work against it. An environment that doesn't go along with human nature is always going to demand a lot of energy from us – because we are constantly trying to understand it.

The Tune Armchair contains stone wool to absorb sound and creates a secluded spot for reading and relaxing.





I – What is the most important ingredient for a healthy working environment?

PT – I agree that control is a driving factor in feeling calm and secure. It's my own experience. Being in a building should feel effortless; it shouldn't require energy. If I'm stressed and distracted, I lack a sense of calm and clarity and I might make bad decisions. If I am more relaxed, I am able to decide which thing is more important than another. But we have to remember: we can't look at a work life in isolation. Productivity and wellbeing at work is inextricably linked to our home lives. How do we spend our free time? How much sleep are we getting? It's all connected.

CBD – An environment where we experience friction is not good. Moving through it should be a smooth process. In many office buildings, stressors are everywhere. For starters, people sit too close together. It causes a sense of crowding. After Covid, this made it hard for people returning from home.

PT – In an ideal environment, everyone would have their own room to retreat to. We see people putting on headphones just to create this sense of personal space – a musical space. It's their way of taking back control. Our work lives are dynamic and ever-changing. We don't usually do the same tasks, day in, day out. And not all workplaces have to be the same. We shouldn't be afraid to stretch the limits of what we are able to influence and change.

CBD – We need diverse spaces rather than homogeneous spaces. Every organisation is individual. Context matters. People need to be able to create their own space. A personal space can be an acoustic space, or it can be a visual space. It is multidimensional. It is mental as well as physical. It should offer us the possibility for escape – gazing out of the window at the trees, for example, or letting your mind wander.

“Being in a building should feel effortless; it shouldn't require energy.”

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Zermatt is a desktop screen designed by Studio Stockholm that provides a useful degree of separation in a shared workspace. Due to its thoughtful, dynamic form, individuals can access a pocket of concentration and calm, without feeling boxed in. Where a number of Zermatt screens are assembled, a softly undulating landscape appears.

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Copy Editing: Sarah Trounce  
Photography: Jocke Ono  
Styling: Mimmi Staaf  
Art Direction: Note  
Production: TMG

Stockholm Showroom  
Torstenssonsgatan 11  
114 56 Stockholm  
Sweden

Örebro Showroom  
Boställsvägen 6  
702 27 Örebro  
Sweden

[info@zilenzio.com](mailto:info@zilenzio.com)  
[www.zilenzio.com](http://www.zilenzio.com)

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Witteveen Projectinrichting  
Ouderkerk a/d Amstel  
Tel: 020 - 496 5030  
[info@witteveen.nl](mailto:info@witteveen.nl)  
[www.scheidingswand.net](http://www.scheidingswand.net)  
[www.project-inrichting.nl](http://www.project-inrichting.nl)



