

# OT in housing: pen portrait

## About me

Name: Anava Baruch

Current role: CEO and Clinical Lead

Organisation: Design for Independence Ltd

Years in housing: 23 years

Previous OT roles: Assistant Team Manager, Housing OT, West Essex.

## My journey into housing

### How I got here

After graduating, I worked as a sensory integration OT in a Convent with medically fragile, abandoned children. Working one-to-one in a sensory room 37 hours a week, I witnessed a profound truth: when environments are designed to meet individuals' sensory needs, they can concentrate longer, make eye contact, learn, and interact with their world. This revelation—that people with disabilities are limited not by themselves but by environments that demand they adapt—led me to pursue my MSc in Ergonomics. Combining knowledge-based OT and ergonomics gave me the unique skills for working in housing, transitioning from sensory rooms to homes. Now, just as with those children, I design bespoke environments that remove barriers and empower clients to function, control their surroundings and fulfil their roles in life.

### What surprised me most about being a housing OT

What continually surprises me is the sheer uniqueness of every client I work with—no two people have the same combination of needs, abilities, or aspirations for their home, which makes designing bespoke new builds endlessly fascinating. I'm struck by how profoundly good design impacts quality of life. From seemingly small adaptations to a house that is purpose-built. If the house is designed to reflect a client's personality and be aesthetically pleasing, they feel proud of their home, which enables them to keep socialising and enjoy their community rather than withdrawing from it. Most of all, I've learned that the home environment isn't just a backdrop to our lives—it's fundamental to our wellbeing, identity, and sense of control, especially when we have the privilege to create these spaces from the ground up.

## What I actually do

### My typical week includes:

- **Designing accessible homes:** I work on projects ranging from small adaptations in rented properties to large-scale bespoke new builds for clients who've suffered life-changing injuries. From initial assessment through to move-in day, I collaborate with architects, surveyors, builders and families to create homes that are both fully accessible and beautiful. My role involves everything

from specifying ceiling track hoists and accessible kitchens to choosing colours that reduce sensory overload—it's highly technical and deeply creative work.

- **Acting as an accommodation expert witness:** I provide expert testimony on behalf of the High Court under Part 35 of the Civil Law. This area is often dominated by architects and surveyors who have limited understanding of how disability impact function, so I ensure clients receive appropriate compensation for their injuries, enabling them to design and adapt homes that truly meet their needs.
- **Mentoring the next generation:** I meet with, supervise, and mentor housing OTs who work for my company or as associates. I have the privilege of passing on the skills I've developed to younger, less experienced occupational therapists entering this specialist field.

**The most rewarding aspect:** the problem-solving process, really understanding the difficulties and barriers and finding a way to remove/ overcome/ reduce them.

**The biggest challenge:** Identifying OTs with the sufficient breadth of knowledge and expertise to work for my company. Many OTs who practice in this area work without the required knowledge and expertise.

## Skills and knowledge I've developed

### Technical knowledge I've gained:

1. **Construction knowledge** – I've learned to understand the building process from foundation to finish, including the infrastructure of houses and how different elements work together. I now know the roles, skills, and responsibilities of every professional on a building project, which allows me to communicate effectively and advocate for my clients' needs at every stage.
2. **Materials, fixings, and fixtures** – I've developed an eye for product longevity and quality control, and I've learned to source materials from mainstream (non-disability-specific) markets. This means my clients get contemporary, stylish homes using the same beautiful materials as anyone else, while still meeting their functional needs.
3. **Interior design, particularly biophilic design** – I've studied how colour, texture, natural materials, and bringing the outside in can profoundly support mental health, sensory processing, and cognitive function. This knowledge transforms my work from purely functional adaptations into spaces that actively contribute to wellbeing and quality of life.

### Skills that have been essential:

1. Spatial awareness and construction knowledge
2. Task analysis, clinical reasoning for problem solving
3. How to design for visual impairment, mental health conditions, and cognitive impairments **not just** physical disability.

## An unexpected competency I've developed:

Communication skills, especially the ability to debate and argue without undermining the other side. I work closely with architects and surveyors who are considered experts in design for people with disabilities. I regularly need to make amendments to their designs and ensure my instructions are followed.

## My top tips for OTs considering housing

### Three things I wish I'd known:

1. Mindset shifts needed from clinical OT to housing OT - Learn to speak 'builder'—understanding construction terminology transforms your credibility.
2. Shadowing is invaluable; no textbook can teach you how to apply the general knowledge to a specific property.
3. Changing layouts has cost implications; your understanding of construction, structure and infrastructure will help you consider this. Every project has a budget limitation; know what it is and consider it when making recommendations.

### Essential learning/training:

Learning to measure and create layouts for properties.

Understanding the construction, structure and infrastructure of buildings.

Design for physical, visual, mental, sensory and cognitive impairments.

### One piece of advice:

If you have good spatial awareness—if your brain can manipulate and play with space, shapes and structure—you have a skill that's invaluable for housing OT. This specialism is misunderstood and undervalued but witnessing the transformation in a client's life when their home finally works for them is totally inspirational. Don't overlook this career path; it's one of the most rewarding areas of OT practice.