

The Space for Creativity

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How do we create spaces in our organizations that invite youth to be creative with media and technology? This resource explores examples of how youth development organizations organize and maintain their spaces in ways that foster creativity, agency and collaboration.

What's the Issue?

When entering new spaces—whether it's a community organization, a store, someone's home, an office—we can tell pretty quickly whether we want to stay and engage with that space, whether we feel lackluster about that space, or whether we want to run as fast as possible away from that space. We may feel safe or unsafe, invigorated or bored, welcome or unwelcome, all from the way a space is organized. For youth-serving organizations whose goals are to encourage specific skills (including creativity or independence), dispositions (related to civic participation, self-confidence, resilience), and the use of digital tools as creators and not just consumers, designing physical environments to be both inviting, inspiring and supportive of creativity is an issue that deserves thought and consideration.

Through descriptions of how organizations like YOUmedia and AS220 Youth approach aligning their spaces with their respective pedagogical purposes, this resource explores the ways organization of informal learning spaces can lead to a variety of outcomes, from supporting youth curiosity and creativity, engaging in collaborative projects, feeling welcomed and supported, and even taking ownership over their learning and how programming looks. We also share considerations for how to organize space for creativity, challenges that may arise, and the role of media and technology in either supporting or limiting innovation.



What Does it Look Like?

Various organizations focused on rapid ideation and creativity have gained recognition for the ways they organize physical spaces to support such innovation. For example, the co-directors of the Environments Collaborative at Stanford University describe the importance of making it easy to visualize and materialize ideas in ways that make it equally easy to throw them away, allowing room for people to move smoothly and have active physical postures in and out of groups, and lowering everyone to the same “eye level” status in ways that support transparency so all voices are heard ([Harvard Business Review interview](#)). Similarly, IDEO has shared tips for making workspaces more creative by installing communal tables that force people to gather in a shared space, putting things on wheels so that perspectives are forced to shift alongside bodies/objects, making values visible with signs describing what people care about or believe in, or ensuring creative tools are visible and “in the way” ([IDEO blog](#)).

The San Francisco Exploratorium’s Tinkering Studio describes how environments for creativity and learning should include things like putting projects on display in ways that make people curious about what might happen in that space, creating intentional opportunities for people to share and display their project iterations over time so the history of ideas are visible, or allowing for whimsical personalization of the space by participants that allow people to engage when and how they want to in ways that are most comfortable for them ([tinkering blog](#)).

We highlight here two organizations focused on creative media and technology pedagogies—YOUmedia at the Chicago Public Library and AS220 Youth in Providence, Rhode Island. They demonstrate how spatial design can powerfully impact the ways young people engage with materials, tools, and focal activities, as well as whether or not people feel a sense of belonging and ownership of their experiences that can fuel creativity.

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YOUmedia—‘Controlled Chaos’ for Teen-driven Creativity

Some of YOUmedia’s goals are to support youth in being able to explore creative interests and use these to express their ideas and contribute to their community. Jeremy Dunn, the director of Teen Services at Chicago Public Library shared that YOUmedia aims to help teens “to create things and have an impact at least on their immediate environment in terms of something they’ve been able to accomplish, something they’ve been able to share, something that helps them develop the narrative of who they are in relation to their peers and their community. The thing that gives them hope about what they can do the next day or the next month.”

YOUmedia wants to see personal, social and academic growth for their youth. What this means is that, for personal growth, they want to see teens excited to come to their library spaces while demonstrating increasing curiosity and creativity, persistence

in problem solving and critical thinking, and confidence to take ownership in self-driven projects. For social growth, they want to see teens feel welcome, accepted, and supported in ways that help them develop communication skills while growing a sense of social responsibility and wanting to make positive contributions to the community. Academically, they want to see youth engaged in career development and acquiring the skills necessary to pursue their post-secondary plans with digital and information literacy. Yet to achieve these goals, YOUmedia recognizes that experiences in their space must be youth-driven and interest-driven.

YOUmedia's teen spaces might be characterized by the idea of "controlled chaos"—large open spaces where the layout can change dynamically in order to keep things "fresh, new, and flowing." YOUmedia staff describe how the adults never know exactly which activities or tools youth will get excited about, so organizing the space takes an element of "accepting cycles of trial and error" to see what teens want to do and when. This means not only having all materials and tools visible and available for teens to use—from guitars to computers to sewing machines to cameras in different areas of the room—but also giving teens free rein to use both materials and the space as they want. Teens can come and just hang out with friends, play video games, dabble with musical instruments, paint, or sew. But these seemingly informal interactions with one another and the materials in the space quickly lead to youth involvement with designing video games, recording a music track, or filming and editing an animation piece with adult mentors present for support and inspiration. Walls do not separate activities or people, allowing for youth to see and be inspired by their peers and mentors nearby or the materials and tools available.

Yet it is not simply the openness of the space or availability of materials/tools that inspire youth to engage and create. Importantly, the space needs to feel welcoming to the teens both aesthetically and socially. Teens cannot feel forced to be there and participate, but rather the space invites them to choose what they're interested in and pursue that line of interest with friends and mentors. Teens need to feel that the space is warm and friendly and that the code of conduct is focused on respect towards others is maintained in the space. As one staff member noted, "tech might get them in the door, but it's the relationships that keep them involved and coming back" and so the space needs to reflect those positive relationships.



YOUmedia Key Considerations for Space

- Keep layout fresh, flowing, flexible, dynamic
- Accept cycles of trial and error in organizing the space
- Make materials/tools visible and available to use at all times
- Give teens free rein to use materials/space as they want
- Do not separate activities or people - make all visible to inspire one another
- Make teens feel welcome by maintaining a code of conduct of respect, and building positive friendships do not let space be secondary to programming goals

One example from YOUmedia about how the openness of the space and the strength of relationships developed there resulted in new opportunities for creativity, was when one of the educators noticed that there were a lot of teens playing video games and she wanted to get them engaged more deeply beyond the games. She introduced the idea of creating a blog together, but the youth were not interested in writing after a long day of school. So instead, she invited youth to create a podcast about gaming, which developed into a multi-year project. However, after some time, one teen suggested creating “lets play” videos for the new Smash Bros. game coming out, which led to innovation in the ways youth created media for broader audiences. This, in turn, led to participation at the annual Comi-con event as a celebratory party involving multiple teens outfitted as Team Skull from Pokemon, wearing costumes put together by two of the teens in the group. In this case, providing an open space where youth could hang out and play video games, combined with the availability of interesting tools and materials as well as building relationships with mentors who facilitated an opportunity for youth to share their gaming expertise more broadly inspired youth to think beyond what adult mentors imagined. Innovation came to life when the space was designed for teen-driven engagement and interest with materials and activities, relationship-building, and youth ownership.

AS220 Youth - Surrounding Youth with their Creative Works

In downtown Providence, AS220 fosters creativity in their physical environment by inviting youth to constantly co-create the look and feel of that space. This dedication to ensuring youth have co-ownership of the space is immediately palpable upon entering the building. The posters youth have designed, the t-shirts and costumes youth have created, the paintings youth have made, youth-driven work is celebrated and displayed on every wall. Additionally, one of the main rooms has two walls covered in portraits of all AS220 community members, acknowledging their participation and presence. One of the recording studios is named after an early youth participant of the programs. The current youth keep



his creative dream alive. Another space displays beautiful black and white photos of youth participating in political activism in the community in ways that prioritize youth voice. It feels as if youth are welcomed to engage and own almost every inch of space at AS220's downtown location, paying homage to their interests and values.

Even the hallway connecting recording studios, dark room, performance space, and offices serves as a monument to youth ownership of creativity and innovation. This area of the building—called the Indigo Hall—was completely conceived and created by the youth as part of their FUTUREWORLDS project. It is lit by a calming blue light that illuminates murals of main characters in the FUTUREWORLDS theatrical/multimedia production. Draped over these murals and across all the walls are green vines, giving one the sense that they are walking through an urban space that Mother Nature has finally reclaimed. This space represents the ways that youth have been thinking about their own racial/ethnic, gender, and young adult identities in the world through explorations of Afrofuturism, speaking out against violence and the recent murders of young African Americans, and rising through revolution toward liberation and utopia. The Indigo Hall stands as a celebration of the youth's creative efforts, as well as inspiration for future work.



AS220 Key Considerations for Space

- Recognize that 'space' is not just a physical thing, but also something that can be experienced emotionally and socially as 'room for possibility' and 'room for growth'; space is not just about 'being' but also about allowing room for 'becoming' your best self
- Invite youth to co-create the look and feel of the space
- Celebrate youth voice by displaying the ways they express themselves or participate in the community
- Celebrate youth creativity by showing their work and efforts everywhere
- Acknowledge youth participation and presence not only by displaying their self-portraits, but also by putting up photos or posters of the current and historical artists, leaders, and change-agents who come from the same communities and backgrounds of the youth
- Ensure the space feels safe to be oneself and learn to be oneself

In these ways, AS220 does not approach 'space' as just a physical concept. Space is not only about the materials, tools, and objects of an environment at AS220, but also a

Careful consideration of how youth can feel like they have room for possibility, space for growth, and the opportunity to become the adults they want to be. Participation at AS220 is not just about ‘being,’ but also ‘becoming.’ As such, posters and images of the community and historical leaders that youth can identify with and look up to—such as artists and activists of color—are hung up on the walls as reminders of who every young adult can both be and become. The organization takes seriously the saying “hateration gets no toleration” that was co-developed with their youth, to ensure that all adults and youth recognize there is no room for hate or meanness in the shared space, which, in turn, allows breathing room to be oneself, express oneself, and be creative. Creating space for innovation at AS220 is not just about making the physical space exciting to be in and look at, but also a place where people can feel supported in creating artistic projects while simultaneously creating themselves.

In alignment with the organization’s goal to be an “unjuried, uncensored forum for the arts” that not only provides “space to access tools, technology, and knowledge” but also offers “space to come together, collaborate, innovate, experiment, and take risks,” everything is conceived with youth and not just for youth.

What Does it Lead to?

A space for youth programming that’s thoughtfully designed and maintained to lead to a variety of outcomes, including:

- **Agency.** Youth taking charge of their own learning and driving the direction of programming.
- **Ownership.** Youth feeling a sense of ownership of a space and, as a result, greater commitment to the community and experiences they build within that space.
- **Belonging.** Youth feeling supported in developing their unique identities as their experiences both being and becoming are acknowledged, welcomed, and supported.
- **Curiosity.** Youth feeling safe to explore and experiment with new ideas, materials and tools.
- **Collaboration.** Adults and youth growing together in the shared space they build together.

Guiding Questions

As you consider designing your space for creativity, your organization can consider the following questions:

- Who is your target audience for your programs? How do you want to invite them into your space?
- Is your space specifically for program-use only? Or is it also for administrative and organizational purposes as well?
- Moving beyond the technological tools or digital materials, what are your goals for your programs? What is your greater mission, and how does that align with an effort to instill creativity and innovation in your space?
- How do you want to make those goals and that mission visible to the outside world through decisions you make about your space?
- Do you want program participants to feel ownership of the space and, therefore, do you want to co-create your space with program participants? If so, how do you want to invite the community into designing your space together?
- How can you avoid getting locked-in with the space you design, allowing room for flexibility and change over time as your community shifts and grows?

Tensions and Challenges

While the spaces designed by YOUmedia and AS220 may seem utopian, as the saying goes, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Creating these learning environments required experimenting with a range of ideas and possibilities until things were just right for local communities these organizations are part of. Below are various tensions and challenges to keep in mind while designing your own space for creativity:

- **Space-making is dynamic and ongoing.** As suggested above, not all spatial organization ideas work identically for all learning communities, and even in our own communities, what ‘works’ or ‘doesn’t work’ toward supporting our programmatic goals can shift with each new group of youth who enter that space. At the same time, there are aspects of a built environment that generations of youth in our programs will find comforting when maintained through the years, that can therefore make a space feel more welcoming to people who have seen their older siblings or cousins or neighbors in the space before them. Thus, designing the best space for your program requires being both nimble and open to experimentation, but also cognizant of what works or doesn’t work for your youth.
- **Space-making requires adults ceding control.** Relatedly, it can be a challenge to balance control of a space between adults and youth. As we see at spaces like YOUmedia or AS220, co-creating a space with youth can positively impact the sense of belonging, ownership, and innovation among youth. However, this also requires that adults are willing to listen to what youth want, giving youth opportunities to be part of decision-making processes, and relinquishing some of the control that adults are used to having of a space.
- **Balancing safety and accessibility.** Another challenge that may arise comes with tool management: how do you make tools and other materials easily accessible to youth so that they can exercise their creativity while testing ideas and building things, but at the same time ensure their safety? Designing your space to make tools and materials visible to youth so that they feel welcome to use anything and everything, yet balancing this with appropriate safety measures and proper-use tutorials can be challenging but necessary when designing space for innovation.
- **Keeping things organized.** Similarly, in spaces that encourage creativity, there is often a lot of stuff. Finding ways to organize materials so that they are accessible and visible (to inspire innovation), but also not cluttering or taking up too much work space can be tricky.
- **It’s hard to let go.** Tensions can also arise around when to keep or let go of projects, decorations, materials, and tools that once served a purpose in the space, but over time have become dusty reminders of hoarding tendencies rather than creativity.
- **Not all spaces can be persistent.** Finally, not all organizations have buildings or even rooms dedicated solely for youth programs. Some organizations lead mobile programming, traveling to different locations throughout a region in order to reach their youth. Others use a single room for multiple purposes that

serve a range of youth programs and/or administrative needs. As a result, these organizations must make different kinds of choices about how they shape their temporary, shared, and/or fluid spaces to maximize youth ownership and belonging toward creativity and innovation.

The Role of Media and Technology

When designing spaces for innovation, the technological tools themselves are not the focus of attention. This is because, too often, adults and youth can get caught up in the tools alone to a point where the tools eclipse their greater purpose and stymie active experimentation and creativity. Instead, organizations that seek to design spaces for creativity must consider how to make new technology feel accessible and not overwhelming, exciting and not intimidating, useful but not the only thing to use. This can involve making sure that the process is visible in the room, not just the results of using new technology. In other words, incomplete projects that people are working on using the different technological tools can be shown in varying stages around the room. Or the different ways one can engage or make use of technological tools can be on display in different areas of the room. Youth can also be assigned as peer-teachers and mentors to help newer technology-users gain confidence with tools.

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