

Empowering Urban Youth

How can after-school community programs provide constructive environments for girls' personal growth?

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Due to our combined interest in youth and community spaces, we met with a local community organization, Earthen Vessels Outreach (EVO), which serves to unite the East end of Pittsburgh. Our research with the group consisted of conducting contextual observations at a weekly community dinner as well as an evening activity group that meets Tuesday nights. We interviewed participants, volunteers, staff, and leadership team members to understand the organization's approach to youth programs and if a design intervention could improve or enhance the overall experience.

We narrowed our focus to EVO's evening activity group called 'Girls Group' held on Tuesday nights for middle and high school girls aged 10-18 years. During our fieldwork, we realized the activities conducted and the spatial layout in which they are

conducted are the backbone of the girls' experiences. We decided to use this particular space and its resources as a case-study for determining how similar programs can play a more constructive role in young girls' lives through the location's environment. EVO lacks substantial funding, hence our design sought to maximize the potential of existing resources in favor of the girls' progress.

Our solution focuses on 3 key areas:

1. Organization Strategy
2. Physical Environment
3. Activities: 'Expression Framework'



ORGANIZATION STRATEGY

Participatory Design

Involve youth in collaboratively designing or contributing to the existing design of the space in order to promote space ownership and membership.

Activity Leader

Every session should be led by an 'activity leader' who will serve to function as a focal point, commanding attention towards instructions at the start, middle and end of activities.

Activity Coordinators

Organize a team of activity coordinators to guide current activities. The Activity lead should manage activity coordinators.

Designated Points

Direct all attention towards designated points (tables) circling the room's focal point.

Consistent Roles

Activity coordinators will couple with specific sets of youth (depending on total group size) in order to play a consistent role in the individuals' lives.

End-Goals

All activities should have an explicit end-goal that contribute to the 'Expression Framework.'

Presentations

Activity coordinators should encourage presentation and/or discussion of youth artifacts after activities conclude.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Spatial layouts create intangible qualities that contribute to 'place-making' and can either foster or inhibit growth. To allow for the best possible experience, location and layout must not be overlooked in the planning process of community programs. Recommendations are provided below:

Furniture

Utilize circular furniture and/or an overall circular distribution
Circular furniture and orderings of 'Workstations' facilitate easy discussion and participation opportunities.

Focal Point

Seating should extend outward from a point of focus
Allotting a point of focus, indicated by a visible marker (for example: a carpet), will allow for directed attention towards the activity leader.

Resource Stations

Provide easy access to a variety of resources
Dedicating 'Resource Stations' on the peripheries of the room will facilitate repeated access to resources when needed by participants and create a manageable distinction between work areas and resource areas.

Flexible Technology

Leverage technology if available
Existing technology resources such as computer rooms, projectors and mikes, and musical instruments should be made available for use as they can serve as catalysts for participation and interaction.

ACTIVITIES: 'EXPRESSION FRAMEWORK'

Activities should engage youth in forms of expression that enable personal development. Workstations should have a larger emphasis (body, mind, identity and community); the emphases overlap to create a holistic experience. Recommended forms of expression, known as the 'Expression Framework' are listed below. Resources available to organizations may be used flexibly.

Mental expression

Will seek to further logical, analytical and decision-making skills.

- Logic Games: Such as Checkers, Scrabble, Monopoly, Sudoku.
- Make a presentation: Providing a topic for quick web research with the intention of making a verbal presentation at the end.
Example: Give a presentation on your favorite musical artist.

Physical expression

Will allow creative expression through craft-making/performance.
Create using materials such as clay, Lego, popsicle sticks, dance activities that reveal various genres such as hip-hop, stepping etc.

Soulful expression

Will enable exploration of self-identity.

- Give students a selection of words to build a poem.
- Documenting interests over time. For example: Youth records activities she has engaged in during a time period (i.e., week, month, year, etc.) in order to monitor her own progression.

Communal expression

Will help youth play a participative role in their community.

- Helping the neighborhood. For example: Sketching ways to keep the neighborhood cleaner.
- Inviting community to visit public showings of youth work.
For example: Putting on a dance recital.