



**CULTURE
HOUSE**

CultureHouse Manual



Creating a community hub from an unused space
culturehouse.cc

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 Olin College of Engineering

 **BETTER
BLOCK**

 Forest Foundation

Introduction



Between the summer of 2017 and the summer of 2018, the CultureHouse team developed a pop-up community and cultural space in the Boston area. CultureHouse is a place to hang out, meet people, create, share skills, and learn. During July 2018 it served as indoor public park and communal living room to the Union Square neighborhood in Somerville and hosted free events.

The July pop-up in Union Square exceeded our expectations and filled a community need for a non-commercial place to work, play, and socialize. People of all ages connected strongly to and enjoyed the CultureHouse experience. Though many people requested CultureHouse stay open, this iteration was designed as a one month experiment to test the concept.

The CultureHouse team learned a lot over the course of the project. We have published this report with the goal of sharing what we've learned and empowering others to create indoor public spaces in their own communities.

The answer to the most common question we received



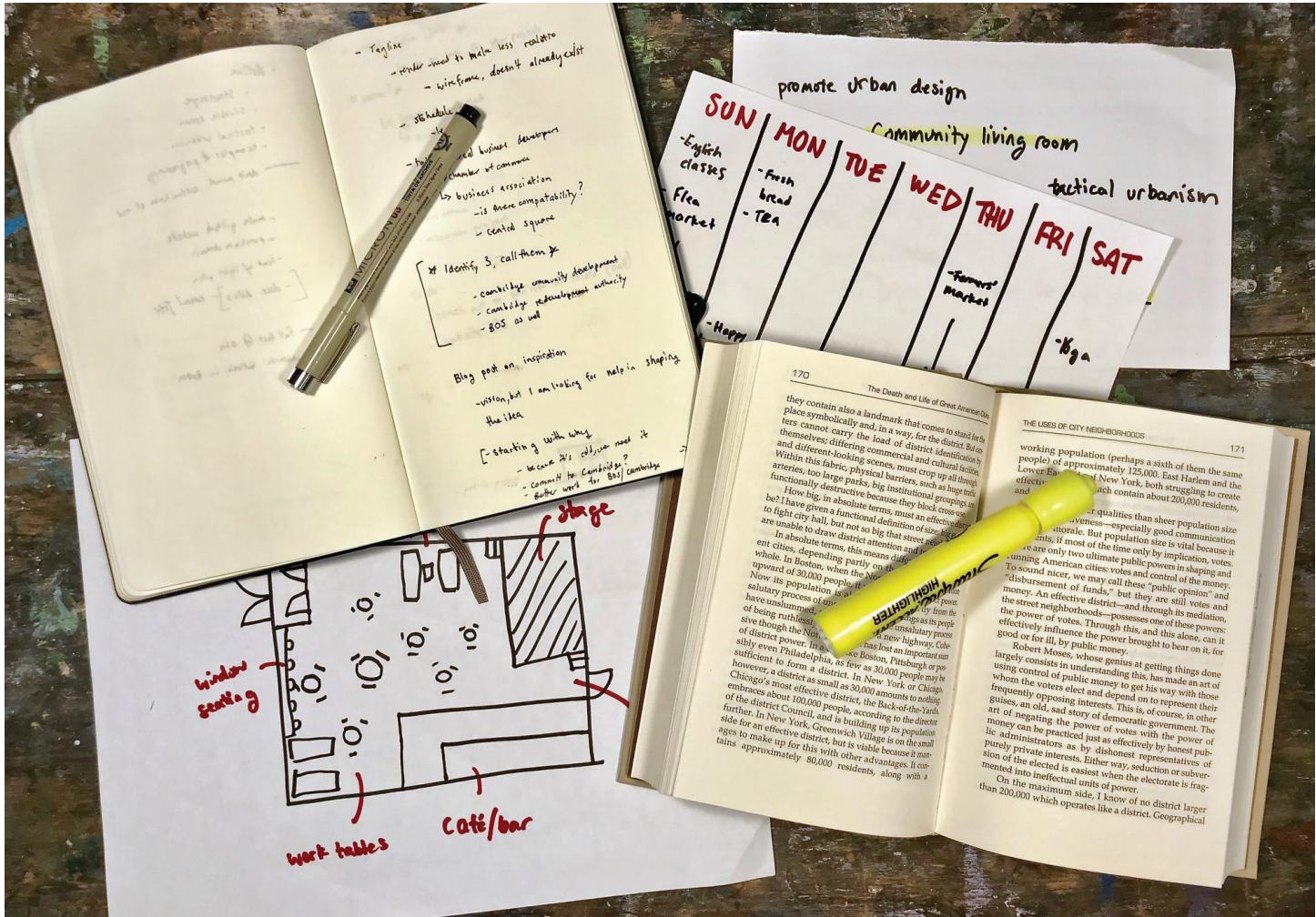
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Our work space for the month



Prologue



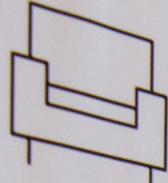
CultureHouse started out with a question. *What would a pop-up indoor public space look like?*

This question came from CultureHouse founder Aaron Greiner's experiences while studying in Denmark. In Copenhagen, he saw a dedication to public life that he had not previously experienced. Though Aaron had worked on projects to bring people together, seeing how urban design could be used to create public gathering spaces finally connected all the dots. He saw how creating spaces that are accessible to all can increase livability and joy in an area.

After returning to the United States, Aaron spent a summer working at Better Block, an urban design non-profit that transforms downtown areas with temporary streetscape renovations. During his time at Better Block, he saw how using temporary pop-up and tactical urbanism techniques could help to prove urban design ideas in a place that was unfamiliar with the concept. At the same time, Aaron noticed a significant lack of public spaces in the US, especially ones that were indoors.

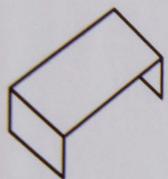
With this initial seed of an idea, Aaron went in search of the answer.

We are



A living room for the community

Like a living room, CultureHouse is a place where all should feel comfortable to hang out with no requirement to purchase anything.



An urban design test kitchen

Employing DIY and tactical urbanism, we work to create a livable space that works for people using methods that can be applied elsewhere.



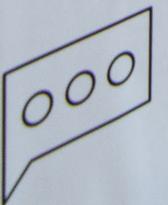
A third space

CultureHouse is a third space between home and work to hang out, meet people, create, share skills, and learn.



An indoor public park

As a vibrant cultural institution in the Boston area, CultureHouse brings the community aspect of a public park inside to use year-round.



A host for regular programming

We host regular programming determined by the community such as board game and trivia nights, conversations, community dinners, and live music.

How to

create a CultureHouse



Create your mission

Research other cultural institutions that inspire you and create the mission for your CultureHouse.



Connect with partners

Reach out to community leaders and partners to co-design the idea and get feedback.



Select a location

Work with your partners to find a location to host your CultureHouse, often near places where good people to contact.



Build

Create the vision for your space and use open-source resources to build out the space.



Open

Open your space to the public and have it adjust and respond to feedback to how well the space is what the community is looking for.



Create your mission

Research other cultural institutions that inspire you, create the mission for your CultureHouse, and build your team.

How we created our mission

With a rough concept and a whole lot of blind optimism, the CultureHouse team went in search of the answer to the question: *What would a pop-up indoor public space look like?* We started by looking at places we had experienced that we thought captured the essence of CultureHouse. By researching these places, we were able to pull elements from them that started to shape CultureHouse. We connected with the concept of a public space you didn't have to pay to enter in Studenterhuset, a student center in Copenhagen. It acted as a *third space* between home, school, and work. In Better Block, we saw how a temporary framing could work to our advantage and how CultureHouse could act as an *urban design test kitchen* to test design principles using tactical urbanism.

At the same time, we went in search of mentors who could provide us guidance and advice on how to turn this dream into reality. We first went to Better Block with the idea and they happily agreed to advise us on the project. We then went to Jeff Goldenson at Olin College, who also agreed to serve as a mentor to CultureHouse. From the beginning, having advisors like these allowed us to workshop the idea with people who had experience starting projects like CultureHouse. Our mentors stressed the importance of programming in the space, so we decided that CultureHouse would be a *host for regular programming* to create a space that gave people a reason to visit.

We also started to look at touchstones that would allow the general public to access our idea. We realized that public parks are a great example of the kind of space we were imagining CultureHouse could be. However, public parks, especially in Boston, are only really nice to be in for a few months out of the year. We had encountered the mentality that we can't have year-round public life in Boston because it's too cold and dark. We doubted that mentality, because as cold and dark as Boston is, Copenhagen is colder and darker. With this in mind, we started describing ourselves as an *indoor public park*. Another touchstone we looked at was the living room. A living room is a communal space in a house that serves as a meeting place, a social space, and much more. We saw the potential for CultureHouse to serve as all of these things, and began to see ourselves as a *living room for the community*.

We gathered all our research, conversations with mentors, and inspirations, and crafted our mission. This living document served as the foundation upon which we built CultureHouse.

How to create your mission

Research inspirations

Your project does not exist in a void; it builds on the work of community organizers, urban designers, and activists in your region and across the world. At the start of a project, it is essential to get an idea of what projects have been done and currently exist in your area of work. Research cultural institutions, community and public spaces, and vacant storefront activations in your immediate vicinity, which could be future collaborators, and successful projects from other places, which could serve as inspiration. Creating a list of interesting projects and what they teach you can be an effective way to synthesize this information.



Copenhagen Street food transformed an unused warehouse to a vibrant street food market.

Once you have a basic outline of the work being done, extract key ideas and values that you want to inform your project. You can see a basic table of our inspirations and what they taught us on the next page.



For more information on CultureHouse's inspirations (and more), visit our [Medium page](#).

Build a team

Developing a team of people dedicated to the idea with a variety of skills and backgrounds is essential to the success of your project. A project like CultureHouse touches many different areas such as space design, graphic design, fabrication, social justice, communications, and community organizing. Take note of the strengths of each of your team members and be explicit about what you are lacking. Then, you can find friends and community members who can help out when the need arises.

Having a core team of people dedicated to the project will ensure that one person is not doing all the work. A larger number of people invested in the project and putting in a small but consistent amount of work can be effective as long as there is someone coordinating efforts. Cultivating a list of supporters and volunteers that can be called in for important occasions will become important for build out and staffing.



Three CultureHouse team members worked full-time on the project during the summer of 2018.

Inspiration table

Project	Description	Value inspiration
<u>Studenterhuset</u>	A nonprofit student center, cafe, and bar located in central Copenhagen.	A gathering space that you don't have to pay to enter, with inviting space design and a variety of programming. A place people want to return to.
<u>Better Block</u>	An urban design non-profit based in Dallas, Texas that improves public life for all through changes in the urban landscape.	Pop-up and temporary interventions that show local officials and residents how small-scale projects can have large impacts on city life.
<u>Design Museum Boston</u>	A nomadic museum curating pop-up exhibitions about the importance of design.	Using the city as a canvas, freeing "culture" and "design" from traditional institutions and bringing it into the public sphere.
<u>Copenhagen Street Food</u>	A waterfront marketplace with independent food trucks that has had projects on Paper Island and Reffen in Copenhagen.	Transforming unused space into a cultural hub and destination through temporary, flexible, and sustainable DIY methods.
<u>Olin College Library</u>	A flexible, dynamic work and resource space that strives to serve its small community in every way.	A flexible and multipurpose space and an attitude of constant improvement.

Find mentors

Finding mentors is a critical step in forming a strong base for your project. Look for personal connections to people or organizations that have done work in urbanism or pop-up spaces. Having multiple mentors with different areas of experience can be helpful, as they can give you advice on different parts of your project. When asking someone to be your mentor, make sure you are clear about what you expect of them. It is a good idea to set up regular meetings, especially in the early stages of the project.

Be sure to let your mentors know when you are stuck or need help, and always keep them updated on the status of the project. When you need their advice, don't be afraid to ask. That's what they are there for! Having strong mentors will help you avoid some of the pitfalls that are easy to fall into for anyone who is new to a field.



Better Block has been an important advisor to CultureHouse throughout the process.

Craft a mission statement

A mission statement clearly and succinctly communicates the mission of your

organization. It should articulate what you do, who you do it for, and how you do it. Mission statements do not share your organization's ultimate vision, but are concrete and action-oriented. The creation of a mission statement can be an important process for figuring out your organization's core activities and goals.



Example

Mission: CultureHouse is a vibrant indoor public space with regular programming to hang out, meet people, create, share skills, and learn. It also serves as a model for others looking to create similar spaces.
Vision: For people around the world to benefit from access to community-driven indoor public spaces.

A mission statement that is short and easy to understand is essential to communicate your work with stakeholders (like volunteers, donors, or those you serve) and as a touchstone to ensure all your actions are consistent with your values.



The following sites have a variety of tips to help write and evaluate your mission statement: [How to Write an Amazing Nonprofit Mission Statement](#), [The Eight Word Mission Statement](#), & [Don't Make Your Organization's Statement of Purpose A "Mission Impossible"](#).

Create your pitch

Using your mission statement, develop a strategy for explaining your work. This can be accomplished through the creation of a one pager. This document should talk about what the project is, why it is important, and

how you are going to accomplish it. While adapting your pitch to meet the goals of whoever you are communicating with is important, it is also essential to be consistent with the language you use. Creating a language bank full of organizational phrases, as well as a list of arguments for your existence will help you when you are put on the spot to explain yourself. Images of places that inspire you can be a great way to communicate your idea to someone who is unfamiliar with it.

CultureHouse

creating a community hub from an unused space



About

With support from Olin College of Engineering, the Forest Foundation, and the Better Block Foundation, we are working to develop a pop-up community and cultural space in the Boston area called CultureHouse. CultureHouse is a place to hang out, meet people, create, share skills, and learn. As a vibrant cultural institution in the Boston area, it will serve as indoor public park or communal living room that will be inviting to all as a place to work, learn, play, create, and relax. CultureHouse will work to promote urban design in Boston by acting as a test kitchen for public space and streetscape improvements. Partnering with affordable, local businesses, the space will regular programming determined by the community such as board game and trivia nights, a coffee bar, community dinners, and live music.

Why

Residents of the Boston area are often left without a 3rd space, a place between home and work to form community. With a large population of students and young professionals, our communities stand to gain from a space that can help foster a sense of belonging and promote sustainable community networks. In Copenhagen, investment in public life has made the city more livable year-round and increased health and happiness across the population. We believe we can use Copenhagen's best practices to improve community building and quality of life in the greater Boston area. By creating this multipurpose public common space, we hope to build off the success of urban design projects in the Boston area, connect people across the region, and enhance public life in the city.

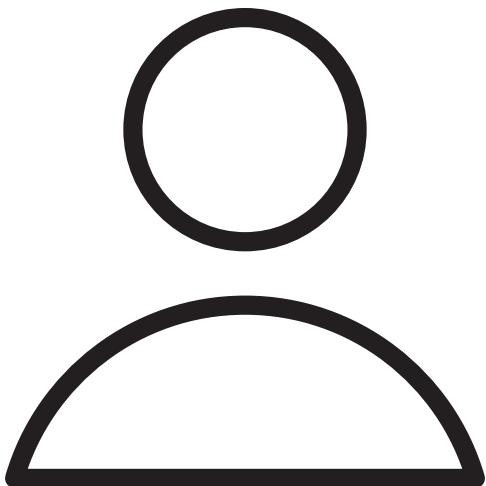
How

Taking from DIY urban design philosophy, CultureHouse will employ tactical urbanism to create a livable space and streetscape. With a one-month pop-up in July, we will use design strategies and inclusive programming to activate a unused commercial space. Through active prototyping and evaluation, we will develop a template for creating a CultureHouse so the project can be iterated on in the future.

The CultureHouse one pager

Our first pop-up, in Central Square in Cambridge





Connect with partners

Reach out to community leaders and partners to co-design the idea, get feedback, and secure funding.

How we connected with partners

Now that we had a vision for CultureHouse, we had to connect with the people who could make it come to life. We started by reaching out to main street directors and community leaders in the Boston area. For the first week, we were so nervous about how people would react to the idea that we couldn't even make a phone call. The first phone call was the hardest, but it got easier each time. The positive reception we got from many of the people we contacted boosted our confidence. Though we did not always reach the right person on the first try, we were often referred to other people who ended up being amazing resources.

We quickly discovered that main streets directors connected strongly with our idea. We had a solution to the problem of vacant storefronts in their respective areas. They understood how CultureHouse could drive traffic to their downtown area and encourage people to stay. This finding confirmed our belief that CultureHouse could be mutually beneficial to the community and local businesses. So we did some research, found the contact information for every main street or business district director in the Boston area, and called all of them. Though not all returned our calls, we ended up with quite a few people who wanted to work with us. Through conversations with these people, we were able to refine the idea to address the problems that they were seeing.



A one-day CultureHouse pop-up in Allston, funded by Olin College, allowed us to test out our idea and gather feedback.

Through conversations with existing contacts, we also got connected with industry leaders and groups who were working towards similar goals. Talking to these people and organizations gave us new inspiration and advice that helped us refine our idea. We reached out to many of these contacts again when we were further along in our process and looking for community input and programming.

In addition to community partners, we also connected with funding partners. We received a grant from Olin College that allowed us to do some initial prototyping of CultureHouse and set up basic structures, such as our website. While we were creating our mission, connecting with partners, and selecting a location, we also held small 1-day pop-ups where we tested our ideas. Our first was in Central Square, Cambridge in December 2017. During this pop-up, we created an outdoor living room as well as a large prompt board and a photo booth. These elements were so popular that we ended up including the prompt board and living room elements in all of our subsequent pop-ups.. Our second pop-up, in April 2018, was in Allston, Boston. During this pop-up, we further tested our assumptions with light programming, free coffee and tea, and by creating a gathering space. These pop-ups gave us valuable insight into what worked and what did not. From these learnings, we had a clear sense of which elements made a pop-up uniquely recognizable as a CultureHouse production.

As a partner on the project, Olin was also critical in providing us institutional support and fiscal sponsorship. Having this support proved to be critical as we began to apply for larger grants, which often require a legal entity with 501c(3) status to receive the money. With Olin as our fiscal sponsor, we could focus on the things that mattered to the project. We were lucky enough to get connected with the Forest Foundation, a non-profit organization whose work includes funding young people starting up non-profit ventures. They believed in our idea and awarded us a venture grant that allowed us to set our sights on a month-long summer pop-up. This partnership was a key step in setting events in motion and holding ourselves accountable to move forward with the project in a focused manner.

With partners in place, we set in motion a plan to open a one month pop-up of CultureHouse in the summer of 2018. The partners provided a strong first floor to build on the foundation of the mission we had created.

How to connect with partners

Contact district directors

Main street and business district directors are the people most likely to connect with the idea of a pop-up community space. Since they are the ones in charge of making their area vibrant, it is in their best interests to fill vacancies and create spaces that encourage people to stay. Look on your city website for a list of main streets or business districts and reach out to as many people as you can. While it might be tempting to just send an email, a phone call will give you a much higher chance of reaching someone. After you make the call, follow up with an email and include your one pager so they can have more information about the project.



Community partners can provide opportunities to test out ideas, as we were able to do with short interventions in Central Square and Allston.

While main street and business district directors tend to be great resources, your city may have other structures or resources in place for creative placemaking or activating unused space. Connect with local government officials and ask them to point you towards resources that will help you. Even if you think someone might not be the right person to help you, contact them anyway. Local officials want to serve their constituents, and they may be able to pass you along to another person who can help.



When you make a call, be sure to have your pitch and your one pager ready (see *Create your mission* for more details).

Talk to community and industry leaders

In addition to forming relationships with people who might be able to help you find a space, it is important to connect with community members and leaders in the field. Community members can give you a sense of what the community's needs are and help you to tailor your pitch and project to address those specific needs. These community partners will also be critical for when you need to gather community feedback, to build, or get the word out.

At the same time, contact leaders in the field and ask to set up a meeting with them. These people can be involved with projects you have named as inspirations or names you have heard others reference. When you meet, be sure to bring materials to show them your idea and come up with specific problems you would like advice on. While an in person meeting is best, a phone conversation will do if they are too far away. After each meeting, write up notes with key learnings and be sure to always send a thank you.

You can never contact too many people, so err on the side of calling every phone number you can find. As you progress, continue to stay in touch with your partners, and don't be afraid to reach out to them again if you need advice or help on something.

Seek out partners and grants

Finding a grant is an important step in ensuring your CultureHouse can open. For your first opening, look for smaller grants that will allow you to run a pop-up where you can prove yourself. This will make it easier to apply for larger grants in the future.



When looking for grants, one useful strategy is to find organizations similar to yours and see who has funded them. They might be interested in funding you in the future.

It is helpful to create a grant template that you can adapt to different applications, but always be sure to tailor each application to the specific grant. Organizations will have different priorities, and it is important to communicate how you fit their specific goals. When applying, have a funding goal in mind. You can pretty much apply for grants forever, so having a set amount as a goal will help you know what is worth applying for and what is not. Make sure to look at the specific requirements of each grant. While some may be completely open, others will have location

or topic restrictions. These are not necessarily bad (in fact sometimes limitation can be good), but make sure that the requirements will not clash with the goals of your project.



Keep a list of your partners with their contact information so that you can reach out to them again in the future.

Once you have found a funding partner, communicate with them often to make sure you have a mutual understanding about timelines and requirements. If you have not reached your funding goal yet, continue to look for grants, but also explore how you can run your CultureHouse with the budget you have. If you have reached your funding goal (congratulations!), write down new grants as you find them so you can apply to them later.



Dave Sullivan and Laney Makin of the Forest Foundation came down to CultureHouse to check out the results of the grant they gave us.

The public courtyard outside at Bow Market





Select your location

Work with your partners and do research to find a location to host your CultureHouse.

How we selected our location

We had an idea and partners, but we didn't have a location. At least not yet. We searched online for vacant spaces, went in person to search, and called phone numbers in windows. We quickly found that real estate agents had pretty much no reason to even have a conversation with us. Their goal was to sell the space, and we were just looking to rent for the month, so they often dismissed us and said that the property was not available for short-term uses. Though the property owners tended to be more receptive to the idea, it was almost impossible to get their contact information.

When we were able to get through to property owners, it was because of main street and business district directors who were interested in CultureHouse. They were the ones with the leverage, connections, and motivation to reach out to the property owners and convey our message. While there was a lot of interest when we were still five months out from the opening, property owners were hesitant to give us the space in case they were able to sell it in the meantime (even if the space had been vacant for a long time). As we got closer to the opening, they became much more open to the idea of a CultureHouse pop-up.

Eventually, we found a partnership with a main streets director who had a vacant storefront space we could use. With the space locked down, or so we thought, we began to move forward on community engagement and design. Three weeks before opening day, we got some bad news: the property owner of the space we were planning on using was in litigation with the fire department, and no one could use the space until the legal issues were resolved. Not good. After a brief moment of feeling sorry for ourselves, we refocused.

Luckily, we had amazing relationships with our partners and contacts. We reached back out to all the community, main street, and business district leaders we had talked to previously. Many of them responded to us, but we were operating on a timeline that was much quicker than most could accommodate. They were all eager to help and worked to connect us with other people that they thought might be able to aid us.

During this time, we worked mostly out of libraries, though not everyone around us was always excited to hear our loud phone conversations about the square footage of vacant storefronts. If only we had a space where we could work without paying that would allow us to talk and gather!

We eventually got connected with Bow Market in Union Square, where we found people who believed in our idea and could work on the quick timeframe we needed. We also had a lead on the ground floor of a property owned by a large real estate company. It quickly became clear that if we wanted to open by the first of July, Bow Market was the most suitable option. Five days before our scheduled opening day, we signed the lease for the space and had our location.

How to select your location

Pitch your idea

You believe in your project, and believe it has value to the community, but you have to convince business district leaders and landlords of its value. A CultureHouse should not have to pay rent to activate a vacant space – you are providing a service for the community that would be expensive for local governments and businesses to provide themselves. Here are some key points to include in your pitch.

Business benefits of a non-commercial space

CultureHouse provides a service to the community and to surrounding businesses. It will draw people to the area and provides incentive to stay rather than just walking by. By providing a non-commercial space, you are lowering the barrier to entry to be in public - people can get out of the house or workplace and into the public sphere with greater ease because they aren't required to buy anything or even have a plan. Then, once people are out and about, they are more likely to patronize local businesses.

Activating vacant storefronts

Vacant storefronts have a number of negative consequences, and the proliferation of commercial vacancies is an issue many cities and towns are starting to address. CultureHouse is a great way to activate an otherwise empty space while also providing a community service, all without much construction or many resources. Even if the intervention is temporary, once a vacant space is activated, people will feel comfortable going there in the future. Having a CultureHouse pop-up in a vacant space is an efficient way to make an area more vibrant.

Improves health and happiness

A CultureHouse allows people to spend more time and public and develop closer ties to their communities – both of which make people happier and healthier. Having a population that is sick and sad is expensive, and CultureHouse can be one part of an effort to eliminate that risk.



Even though we all believe these things to be true, and they can sometimes seem intuitive, it's important to have research to back them up. Here are some sources that can point you in the direction of the statistics and studies that will backup and perfect your pitch:

- [The Value of Public Space](#), Design Council UK
- [10 Benefits of Creating Good Public Spaces](#), Project for Public Spaces
- [Economic Development](#), Project for Public Spaces
- [Health & Wellbeing](#), Project for Public Spaces
- [A Streetcorner Serenade for the Public Plaza](#), Michael Kimmelman, New York Times
- [The Pursuit of Happiness: How Do Communities Make Us Happy?](#), Kaid Benfield, the Atlantic

Determine location goals

When deciding which location is right for you, consider both the specific space you'll be activating and the surrounding neighborhood and context. In terms of the space itself, you should consider both ownership and physical

characteristics. The ideal landlord does not put too many restrictions on your ability to operate freely, but is also supportive of your idea and accessible in the case of issues.



Questions to ask yourself for ownership:

- How quickly will they be able to process paperwork and approve your lease?
- Are there many restrictions on what you can do in the space?
- Will you have freedom to plan events without supervision, and if not, what will the approval process be like?
- How easy are your landlords to reach in case of an issue?

A space around 1,000 square feet is usually a good place to start. Setting an ideal square footage will help you find spaces that will be able to meet your needs. Additionally, be sure to visit the space early in the process and make note of any features that would make design more interesting or difficult.

In terms of the neighborhood as a whole, you should consider community need, expressed interest, your connection to and knowledge of the community, and your space's location in terms of other neighborhood features.



Two CultureHouse team members at Bow Market.



Questions to ask yourself for neighborhood:

- Does the community need this space?
- Do you feel connected to and knowledgeable about this community?
- Have community members expressed interest, and do you have strong community partners?

We believe that almost everywhere needs more community spaces, but certain neighborhoods that are under resourced or poorly planned may benefit more. It's also important, however, that you be cognizant of your position and the way in which your work, if not done right, can be seen as contributing to gentrification. If you aren't from the community, or don't have ties to it, it's especially important to have strong community members on your team. Your skills and passion can still have a positive impact on a community even if you don't call it home, but you should always be mindful about whether your presence is wanted or needed and whether your relationships are equitable.

On a more basic level, the physical position of your space within a neighborhood will also affect how many people you are able to reach. A space in the downtown of a neighborhood that is accessible by different forms of transportation, has decent foot traffic, and is near other neighborhood amenities will probably give you the most benefits.

Research your area

Doing research to understand an area is important before, during, and after location selection. If you are choosing between two relatively ideal locations in two different

neighborhoods, these tools can help you determine which location would better suit your mission. Once you determine your location, a deep understanding of the surrounding community is essential for making design decisions that will properly serve that community. The following steps can help you make your CultureHouse as effective as possible.

Area demographic overview

Creating a basic area demographic overview gives you a base knowledge of who lives in your neighborhood and helps test your assumptions. Later on, it will help you ensure that you are reaching a representative cross-section of the community you serve and identify segments of the population you may not be reaching. Basic metrics to include are sex, race, household income, age, education level, languages spoken, homeownership, and citizenship status. However, additional metrics such as disability status, household categorization, etc. can also be very useful.

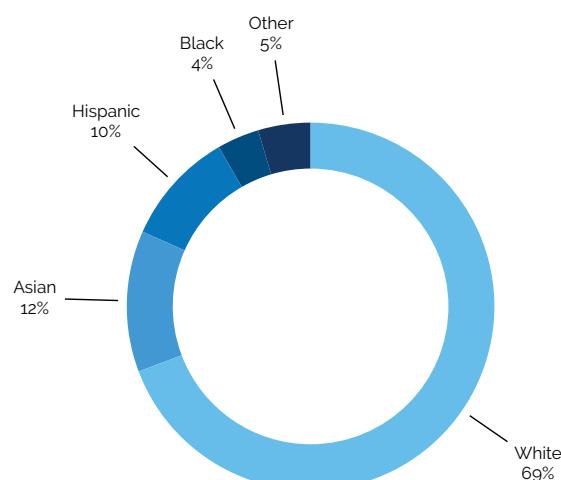
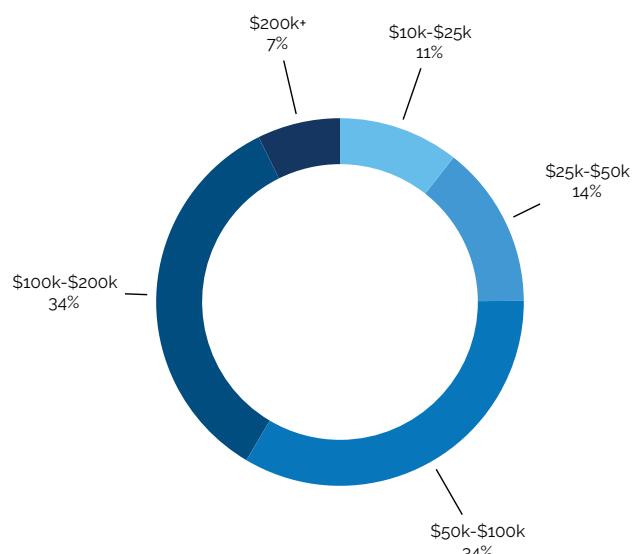
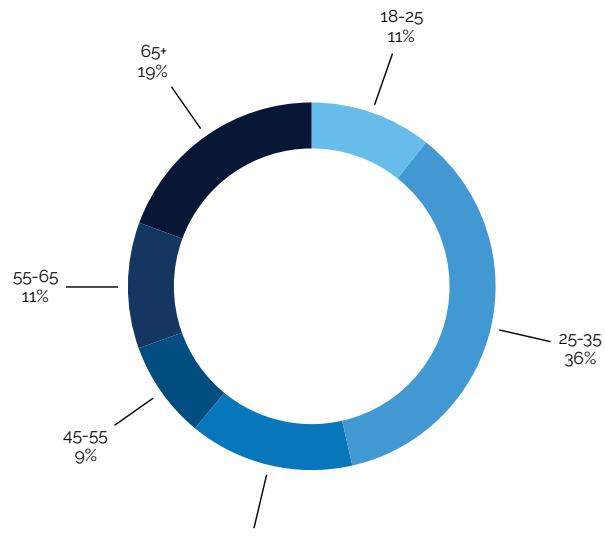
An effective way to get demographic information in the United States is through the [Census Bureau FactFinder](#) database. The database contains American Community Survey estimates to supplement census data that often provide the most up-to-date information if the census has not been conducted several years.

Census tract is usually the best geographic measurement through which to get data for local projects. Although census tract lines are not always along what communities may consider to be “neighborhood lines”, it allows for neighborhood-specific data.



Example:

To the right is our demographic analysis of five census tracts around Union Square in Somerville.



Stakeholders analysis

For a community space to be successful, it needs to be truly embedded in the community it serves. With proper outreach, CultureHouse can be a place that solidifies community and a platform to promote and sustain the work of local people. There is no need to reinvent the wheel – there already exists a wealth of knowledge about the community, and many people are already working to make the community better. CultureHouse is a physical manifestation of that community and a place to bring those people together. Therefore, identifying potential collaborators and cultivating a relationship with them will strengthen your project.

After getting the initial lay of the land, the next step is to create a list of project stakeholders and what they bring to the table. For example, a local community organization may be able to spread the word about your work, and a local resident may be able to provide you with up-to-date knowledge about community interests and concerns.



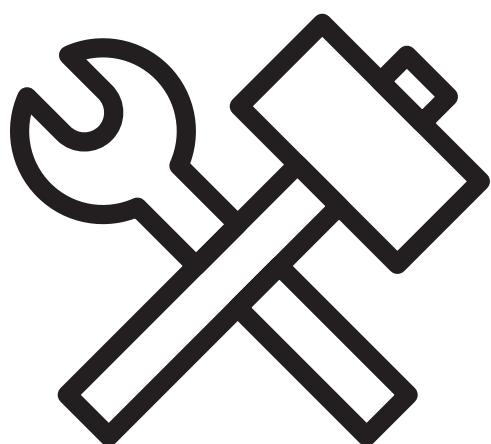
There are many categories of stakeholders to keep in mind, such as:

- Residents
- Nonprofit, community, and activist groups
- Local businesses
- Local government
- Public libraries
- Schools
- Individuals with special expertise

For more information on stakeholder identification and public participation, check out [Involve's report *People & Participation: How to put citizens at the heart of decision-making*](#) or the [Community Planning Toolkit's report](#) on community engagement.

A Wikiblock adirondack chair.





Build

Create the vision for your space, use open-source resources to build it out, and connect with the surrounding community.

How we built

With a strong concept, partners, and a location, we set out to build. Throughout the previous months, we had been building up a list of requirements for the space. While we had made a plan for the original space, we were easily able to adapt it to our new footprint at Bow Market. We made a to scale illustrator document with the approximate floor plan and laid things out. We were blessed with some unique elements, such as a wall made of windows and a very tight corner, which narrowed our options and made decisions easier.

Play elements were an important part of the space. We put up swings and installed mini trampolines as a way to visually communicate the idea of an indoor public park. We also made HUGE cornhole boards that created a fun and silly atmosphere. These elements were unexpected and thus served both as a memorable moment and also as a way to get people to let their guard down when they entered the space.

We created a coffee bar where we served free coffee and tea, which also gave people a central point to come to in the space. Next to it, we found a creative use of a glass brick wall as a calendar. An important element in the space was a stage. This stage served as a platform for performances and a natural focal point of the room during events. We created two large tables that we imagined would be used for work. We bought some snap-on ping pong nets along with



Visitors could quickly see which World Cup teams were playing on which days because of the little flags we drew on the calendar.

some paddles and balls, thinking it could be fun to have games once in a while. The ping pong tables ended up being incredibly successful, and people often played late into the night.

When it came time to construct, we held a few build days where we invited partners and community members to come help out. We got a lot of extra hands, and it made everything go a lot more quickly. We turned to open source and cheap (but good-looking!) construction methods to build out the space. We used Better Block's Wikiblock library to get designs for chairs that we could cut ourselves on a CNC machine. We also developed new furniture such as a cube stool that can also serve as a coffee table, a storage bin, or a shelf. We ended up using this building block so much in the space that we had to make more!

While we were planning the physical space, we also created an active social media and community presence. We created consistent materials so we would be easily recognizable. Using social media, we were able to get the word out about the space before we were open. Giving people a behind-the-scenes look at the process engaged our followers and was a fun way to share the work we were doing before the opening. We also created and hung posters around the Union Square neighborhood that let people know we were coming. By broadcasting on every possible channel, we reached a wide variety of people.

We had initially planned to spend the majority of the month of June on community engagement, but after we changed location, we had to condense that work into a much shorter time frame. We reached out to community contacts and local business to get their feedback on what they would like to see at CultureHouse. This gave us opportunities to connect with the community and make the space fit the needs of those it was designed to serve. These conversations led to a number of interesting and beneficial collaborations. A woman who owned a lighting shop in the market ended up loaning us a lighting installation for our space, and the brewery next door sold us coffee beans at a discounted rate.



Before, during, and after build out. The last two photos were taken on the same day (really).

On Saturday, the day before opening, the space looked... well... like a construction zone. Everything was covered in a thin layer of sawdust, and even moving around the space was difficult. Somehow, by the time the day came to a close, the pieces fell into place. We went home for a quick wink of sleep before opening day.

How to build

Design your space

Designing a space that feels welcoming and communicates your mission is important to a successful CultureHouse pop-up. By using inexpensive and available materials, you can build out a space cheaply while still making it look nice. Open-source resources are a great way to find easy designs and projects that you can do yourself. Borrowing from friends and family is a great way to test out more expensive items (such as a couch, speakers, or coffee equipment) in your first pop-up before making big investments.

The design of different CultureHouses will vary drastically based on the space, the setting, and the needs of the community. Here are some tips to help with design decisions.

Start with known elements

Do you know you want to have a stage? Do you already have some of the furniture? Can you move it easily? Are there known constraints such as egress paths, emergency exits, or landlord wishes? Which elements are most difficult to change after build out? Is this a temporary pop-up where minimizing build out and breakdown time would make sense? Starting off with constraints can make decisions much more clear.

Visit the physical space

Being in a space can offer inspiration and lead you to notice things that aren't clear from a blueprint, such as natural light, ceiling and wall details, and necessary repairs. Walking into the space and imagining yourself as a visitor can offer insight into how to place things for the most welcoming atmosphere.



Our location before build out.

Take advantage of what is already there

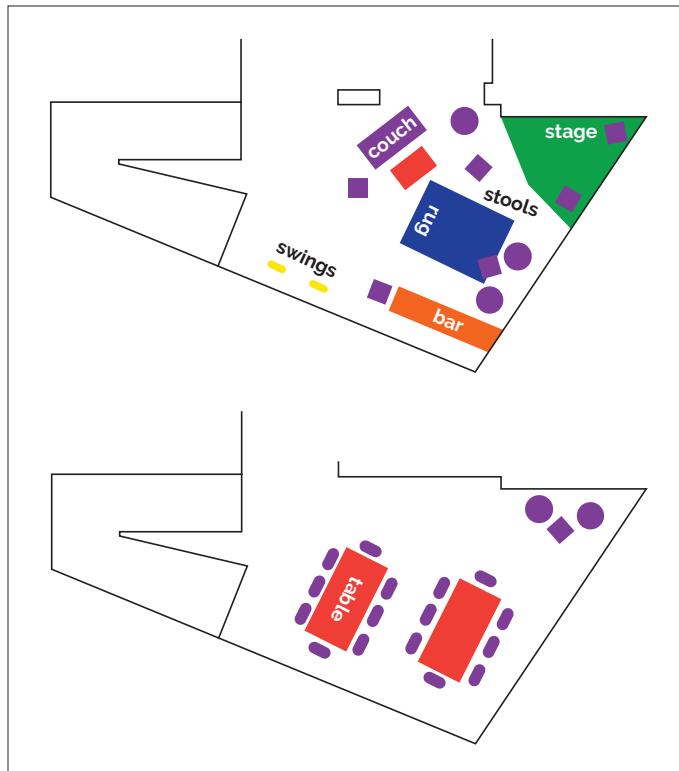
Any space will have unique elements that can be turned into unexpected delights. For example, CultureHouse in Somerville had never intended to have a calendar drawn on the wall or a stairway reading nook, but the glass brick wall and the raised landing turned out to have great uses. If there's something unique in your space that makes you say "we have to find a way to use this" make a note of it and keep it in the back of your mind.



People reading books donated by Candlewick Press, a local publisher, in our cozy reading nook.

Put it on paper

Actually drawing out what you're imagining (in scale) is essential, especially if you're working in a team. Make lists, draw pictures, and discuss.



The floor plan of our Bow Market space.

Create a memorable moment

Plan to have one or more elements that will immediately stand out to someone and make them take a picture and tell their friends. These elements give you space a way to draw people in and make them remember it.



Our trampolines provided a great opportunity to take photos.

Don't be afraid to adjust

If your perfect plan starts to look less perfect during build out or execution, make as many adjustments as the situation calls for. If necessary, you can reference the old pictures you drew when exploring different plans, but sometimes an obstacle can inspire creativity that wasn't available during the initial design process. Adjusting in response to visitor feedback or things that come up after the space is running can also be extremely fruitful.



Useful items to purchase

- Indoor/outdoor area rug
- Dog Treats
- Pillows for sitting on the floor
- Containers for food and drink
- A guest book

Build out

Building elements yourself is not only cheaper, but can also serve as a learning opportunity and a great way to get the community involved. Pinterest and DIY sites can offer inspiration for your space.



A group of visitors test out our trampolines during build out.

Better Block has a large library of open source designs that you can use in your space. The trampoline parklet is a fun play element that can be built fairly easily and is fun for people of all ages. The Wikiblock adirondack chairs are comfortable and are great to provide more intimate seating arrangements in your space.



Wikiblock has many more designs that you may find useful. You can check out their entire catalog online at betterblock.org/wikiblock.

Below are some elements you can build yourself.

Tables

Large tables are a good way to encourage people to work, play, and socialize together. You can make an easy table with a sheet of OSB (a cheap plywood-like material) and some legs or saw horses. Sanding and finishing the tables gives them a quality look (and prevents splinters!). The tables can also multitask as ping-pong tables with the help of inexpensive snap-on nets.



Our tables were a great place to get some work done.



Our weekly ping pong tournaments ensured our tables were used at all times of day.

Bar

You can build a bar out of the same materials as the tables, and even use the same legs. An open box design allows for storage inside the bar and raises the bar top from table height to standard bar height while still using table legs. Sanding and finishing is also great here to protect people from splinters and the bar from liquids. If you want to build a more robust bar, putting it on wheels can allow you to keep the flexibility of the space and not sacrifice strength.



We served free coffee and tea from our bar during all staffed hours.

Cube stools



The CultureHouse team has designed multi-purpose furniture cubes that can function as small tables, crates, shelves, or stools, and allow your space to be infinitely flexible. You can cut these stools on a 3-axis CNC machine. They have four handles for easy carrying, and interlocking notches that are meant to simply press fit together.



A detailed design and guide for the stools is available at bit.ly/culturehousestool.



Volunteers helped us sand down the interlocking sides of our stools.

Stage

You can construct a simple stage without ever drawing a design. Use a frame of 2x4s lying on their short sides to outline and support the stage floor, then cut pieces of OSB to fit over them and screw everything down. A higher stage will need more support,

but this method can be used to build a custom stage in nearly any space.



Kian Raissian performs Bach cello suites on a Friday night.

Giant-ass corn hole

You can build this fun yard game by framing a 4x8 sheet of OSB with 2x4s, cutting a hole, and adding legs. Given its size, it is a bit difficult to move and store, so you may want to consider experimenting with slightly smaller options.



Giant cornhole in the Bow Market courtyard was a favorite activity of many visitors, even on hot days.

Lighting

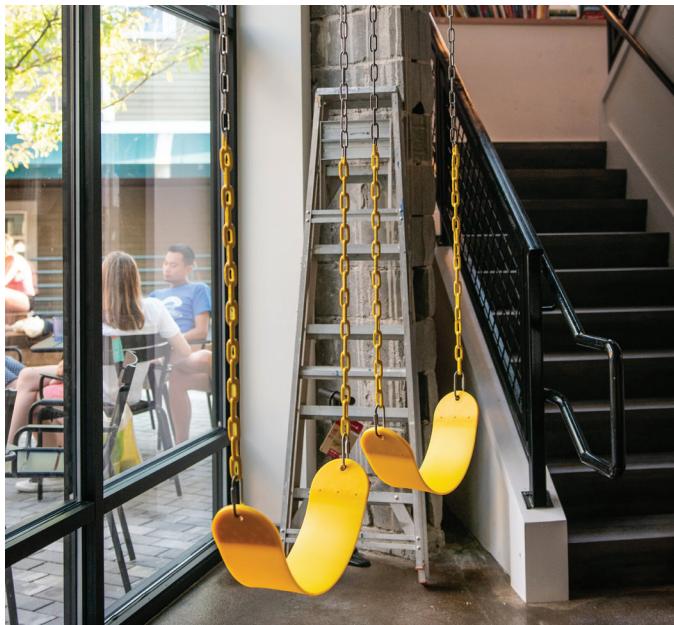
The brightness and temperature of light in a space can transform how comfortable it feels to be there. Make use of whatever natural light you can, and supplement with warm toned ceiling lights. If you can include any fun or artistic lighting pieces, these can be used to change the mood during performances and give your space an extra flair.



This lighting installation, made from old traffic lights, was lent to us for the month by kmoe, a Bow Market vendor.

Swings

Playground swings are a fun play element. They can be purchased on Amazon and hung them from the ceiling on chains. You can screw eye bolts into exposed wooden rafters if you have them, but there are many ways to safely set up a swing indoors.



People were astounded that swings could be installed indoors – and more than a few people (adults included) wanted them in their home.



Build out is a completely different animal depending on the condition of the space and the timeline. Some spaces will simply need to be furnished, some will require light work such as painting, and some will require professional work.

- Plan ahead by fully designing the space and planning what order to build things in. This will also allow you to figure out what types of help you need and plan "build days" at times that work well for volunteers.
- Build in extra time and be realistic about what you can accomplish. This will allow team members to stay happy and healthy!
- Having extra hands is a great way to engage the community and get work done faster. It's great to get people that have a diverse set of skills so you can all learn from each other.

Reach out

While you are building your physical space, it is also important to build relationships with your stakeholders. Initial outreach has two main goals which should be kept in mind while drafting communication. During this time, it is also a good idea to send out a community survey to reach as many people as you can.

Introduce your organization & yourself

This is your first chance to tell people what you are doing and why you are there. Make sure you have specific and succinct language so that person you're speaking with not only understands what you do, but would be able to explain it to others. While the way you describe your work should remain consistent, changing up your pitch to highlight how your organization's mission aligns with the

interests of the other party helps them understand why you are reaching out and how you could work together.

Form a foundation for potential collaboration

Articulate your desire to work together and any specific avenues you see for collaboration. Additionally, ask what projects or goals the other person believes CultureHouse could support. These contacts will be important when you start to develop programming.

Community survey

A community survey allows you to garner input and suggestions on the project. The community survey can be distributed by stakeholders and included on marketing materials. Not only does it provide important and useful information, it demonstrates the flexible and community-centered nature of the space. Even if someone does not respond to the survey, write on prompt boards, or respond to calls for ideas, it provides a sense that if they did have strong opinions, they would be listened to. Of course, for this atmosphere of inclusion and community control to be maintained, it is important that structures are put in place to implement feedback.

Pair questions about suggested CultureHouse programming and design with questions that provide information on (a) what people see the strengths of their community and (b) what they believe could be improved in their community. These answers will help you articulate why CultureHouse is needed in a community.



Example:

Our survey is available at bit.ly/culturehousesurvey.

Advertise

Advertising both drives traffic to your space and exposes the community to your brand and ideas. Promotional materials can be interesting and exciting but must also answer the questions a community member would have, including:

- Who we are
- What we are doing
- What is our timeline
- How to get involved

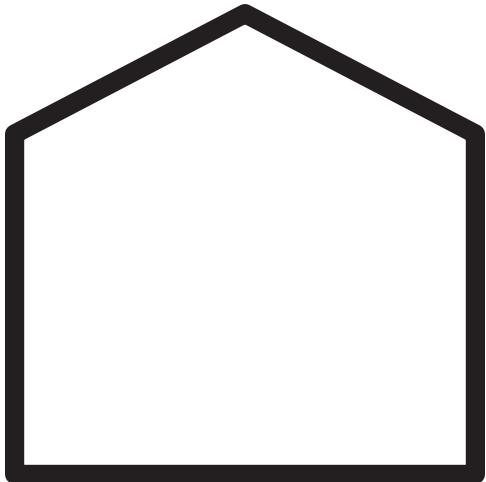
If all the information is not included in an advertisement, instructions on how to acquire it should be included. A diversity of promotional methods should be used to ensure a variety of people get your message. Stakeholders can help spread information to those in their networks, and you should also post flyers around the neighborhood and in your window during build out, as well as utilize social media, traditional media, and newsletters.



We put around 100 of these posters around Somerville in addition to posting them to social media.

Our bar where we served free coffee and tea





Open

Open your space to the public and be ready to adjust and respond to feedback.

How we opened

Opening day was a surreal experience. This concept we had been working on for the past year finally existed. Our first day brought a lot of friends of family, but as the month went on, we started seeing more and more new people staying in the space as well as regulars who came back often. Initially, our scope of the pop-up was that we would open for a month and then close. However, in just the first week, we had gotten such positive reactions from the community that we decided we would work to do another CultureHouse pop-up in the future.

We found that people who came to the space for the first time tended to have one of two reactions. On one side, there were people that had experienced this kind of space before (maybe they were from or had lived in Europe) and were excited to finally see a space like this in Boston. On the other hand, there were people who instinctively knew they needed a place like CultureHouse but had never been able to put words to it or imagine it before. It was powerful to see such a strong connection to an idea that we were not sure everyone would understand.

We decided to staff the space in two shifts, one from 10am-4pm and one from 2pm-8pm, with one person on the morning shift and two people on the evening shift each day. We chose this schedule based on the opening times of the other vendors in Bow Market and our assumption that more people would be around in the afternoon, which turned out to be correct. We took the 4th of July off, as well as the next three Mondays, and people took individual days off where needed. We didn't staff at all on Mondays, and volunteers often filled in when someone was taking a day off. Working six days a week can get tiring, even if it's only for six hours a day, so we are very thankful for our volunteers.

When we were staffing the space, we did a lot of work making sure everything was set for upcoming events, running events, and maintaining the space, but we also talked to people and answered their questions. Interacting with visitors was one of the most enjoyable parts of the project for us, and we made some very valuable connections for the future through our conversations.

To reflect on the experience and gather information, we had a document in which we all wrote daily notes and quotes and other feedback from visitors, as well as a guest book where visitors could sign their name or leave a response themselves. Towards the end of the pop-up, we wanted to get some more quantitative data on who came to CultureHouse, so we created a spreadsheet in which we counted the number of people in certain age ranges in the space at given times. We only managed to do this for 11 days (8 weekdays and 3 weekend days) and we wish we'd done it for longer.

We put a large chalkboard surface on the wall near the entrance of the space, and wrote a variety of questions at the top. We received great responses and well as plenty of (not exactly on-prompt) drawings by kids. More successful questions included: "What event do you want to see at CultureHouse?", "What's your favorite thing about your neighborhood?", "What's your favorite public place in the Boston area?", "What's something you wish you had in your neighborhood?", and "What's something that makes you feel welcome in a new place?". We really enjoyed that someone said CultureHouse was their favorite public space and their favorite part of their neighborhood was "the trampolines and swings in CultureHouse". We got many useful and

heartfelt responses as well.

During our one-month pop-up, we hosted 50 events and programs over 27 staffed days including 5 concerts, 5 tutorials, 4 ping pong tournaments, and 4 trivia competitions. Our programming both helped to engage those who already coming to or passing by the space, and bring new people to the area. All of our programming was free and open to all, with the exception of our Intuitive Art Workshop with artist Jessica Young. Due to material and space constraints, people bought a ticket using a pay-what-you-can model where we listed the cost per person and then people made a donation. Using this model allowed us to explore how to have more expensive and elaborate events without compromising our commitment to inclusion. We hosted a variety of programming from fun (concerts, DIY Spa Day, a dog show, world cup screenings) to educational (tutorials on different design softwares and on the process of starting a nonprofit). Some of these were run in collaboration with community partners, such as local artists or nonprofits, while others were run completely by the CultureHouse team.



Giving dogs awards like "floppiest ears" and "best pupper" was both fun and low-cost.

Regardless of whether people were in the space for an event or just to hang out, we were able to learn a lot from the way people interacted with our design. One of the first things we noticed was the importance of the playful elements of the space in getting people to engage. When people first entered CultureHouse, they were often confused about where they were or afraid to sit right down on the couches or join in on an activity. However, the swings and trampolines provided a strong visual cue to invite people into the space. They represented both a familiar item and an unknown at the same time. People know how to swing or jump on a trampoline, but they don't usually do so indoors. Not only were they able to engage in a familiar and low-effort activity, but these unusual elements also prompted questions about the space that forced them to interact with the CultureHouse team or other visitors.

The visual imagery of the living room was also important to our design and interesting to play around with. There was a similar tension between known and unknown with this aspect. People feel "at home" in a living room and comfortable to lounge, but when you take the living room out of the personal sphere, people can be unsure if they are allowed to relax. At first, we had our couch positioned such that it created a closed-off space with one central seating location. When we moved the couch more to the side and broke up the seating areas, we noticed that people tended to come and sit down, talk, and stay more often. It still maintained the feel of the living room but made it more inviting to first-time visitors.

One of the most interesting aspects of the space was a small, elevated landing area in the stairwell that connected our ground floor with our second floor. We knew we would be able to do something fun with that space, but didn't have any specific plans during build out and during the first few days. At the same time, we were working with Candlewick Press, a local book publisher, to provide a little library of their books for people to browse and enjoy. When the books came, one of our team members set them up on the edge of the landing, sorted by color. Soon after, kids looking at the books began climbing up on the landing, creating their own little reading nook. We responded to this creative use of space by putting down blankets and pillows, and a stool to help them climb up.



Visitors loved to sit in our reading nook and flip through picture books.

When the month was over, we were sad that this amazing experience was coming to a close. We talked to our landlords, planned for breakdown, and discussed how best to share our story. At the last minute, one of our landlords asked if we would be willing to leave some things in the space for another week or so. We agreed and quickly restructured our breakdown plan. As we were writing this very report, we needed an (air-conditioned) place where we could meet to work, but not necessarily buy something. Where did we go? CultureHouse.

How to open

Run the space

The most financially sustainable model for a CultureHouse is to be primarily staffed by volunteers with one full-time manager or coordinator. Open hours that make sense will vary depending on location, season, and the community being served. If your space is able to be open without staff present, the financial sustainability and accessibility of the space increase. When community members run the majority of events, the impact of the space increases, while running costs decrease. We intentionally chose not to put up detailed signs explaining what was going on in order to encourage people to engage with us to fulfill their curiosity. Since the space as a whole is unfamiliar, people aren't as wedded to scripts of social behavior. In this way, CultureHouse team members can use visitors' curiosity to engage them with the idea of the space and the activities going on in it. When a visitors' curiosity is satisfied, the uniqueness of the space becomes an asset.

“

I feel like a Starbucks, while it has many advantages as a third space, it's a known environment, and we work in that environment, and we know the rules. We sit there silently, and we open up our laptop, and we do our thing, and then we leave when we are done with our coffee. This had no such preconceptions. It had no rules because it was different, and I like that.

”

Develop programming



Example:

Events we ran in July 2018, by type.

- ♪ Music – 5
- 🎓 Educational tutorials – 6
- ⚽ Game and movie screenings – 15
- 🍴 Food and drink – 5
- 💻 Classes and workshops – 6
- 🏓 Ping pong – 4
- Trivia – 4
- Other – 5

Programming is essential to draw visitors to your space and begin to build a community, especially directly after your space opens. We developed programming by capitalizing on both the talents of the community and our own skills. It's good to have a variety of programming, and to incorporate variation outside of topic area. Not every event can (or should) take hours and hours of planning and attract a large crowd of people. We think about events as existing on a continuum with four main factors.

Effort of engagement

How much effort does this event involve from the people attending or participating? Something that is long, has a strict start and end time, or involves pre-registration requires high buy in from those attending.

People can't just come across it and stay for a minute, they need to make the active decision to attend the event. Other events don't require this level of commitment; people can just wander in off the street and engage at their comfort level. These types of events are typically easier to plan and easier to attract people to, but can sometimes have a lower impact. Variety is important, because people have limited time and energy. Someone probably won't attend 5 really intense events in a week, but might attend 1 more structured event and a handful of casual ones.



Screenings of sports events, like the World Cup Final, are great low-effort events.

Ease of organization

How many resources does this involve from your team? This doesn't just refer to the cost of the event; your time and energy is often your biggest resource. It's good to spend a lot of time crafting events that will be unique and meaningful to those who attend, but you don't need to spend all of your time on this. Events that are casual and low-effort still can drive traffic and make your space lively. Regardless of their intention to participate, people like spaces where it feels as if things are happening. Sometimes the perception

“

I liked the swings, I liked that it was cozy, I liked the daily activities you had and the polls like "Which kombucha do you like better?"

– Local business owner

”

of activity can be more important than the activity itself – and you do not need to spend the same amount of time planning these events as others.



A board with the events we had happening on July 29th.

Flexibility

Often correlated with buy-in and effort, the flexibility of an event is also important to keep in mind. Events with low buy-in and effort are often more flexible. Flexibility is important because it allows you to adapt to changing realities. While an art workshop where you've paid an artist is hard and costly to reschedule, a kombucha giveaway is not. Having some events that can be adapted or just canceled because of bad weather, low interest, or whatever else comes your way can be beneficial. On top of the 50 events and programs that community members attended, we had a few events planned that never came to fruition. This occurred even though people who visited the space had expressed interest in the idea. People often like the idea of events and are glad they are happening even if they don't feel like attending or engaging. While being realistic about what things are working and what

aren't important, having some events with low attendance isn't a sign of failure. These events play a role even if they didn't directly engage many people. Having a full calendar helps people feel excited about the space and its liveliness, and helps communicate that it's a place where something will always be happening.



Members of the local band *The Dirty Dottys* performed a unique duo set at CultureHouse.

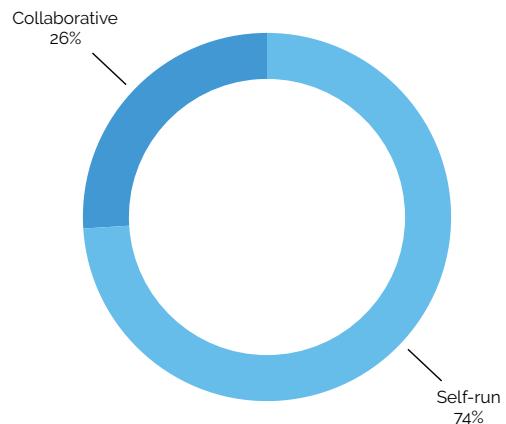
Community involvement

The final criteria is related to the first programming strategy mentioned above, capitalizing on community talents. Having community involvement in an event can make it more effective and meaningful, but it also requires more effort and makes it less flexible. While you should try to involve community stakeholders as much as possible, it's okay to have events that are easy and enjoyable for your team to plan and execute. These types of events build camaraderie and allow for flexibility.

Engage the community

First and foremost, CultureHouse should be a place that supports local projects and provides a platform for community members to share their skills and efforts. While programming developed by

the CultureHouse team is important in developing an identity and meeting community needs, you should also support existing community work. This can mean hosting local artists for performances, providing meeting space for community groups, and coordinating workshops and tutorials where knowledgeable residents share their skills. At this point in the process, you should already have some local collaborators and a list of even more to contact. While you develop programming, you should reach out to them to offer up your space for any events they, their friends, or their neighbors may want to put on. Programming is better able to reflect the needs of the community if community members play an active role in their development and execution.



Our breakdown for collaborative and self-run events for July, 2018.

Two avenues for finding willing collaborators, besides your community partners, are reaching out to students, and contacting nonprofit organizations who work with social enterprises. Students are often looking for ways to practice and showcase their work, and art and music colleges have strong networks. For example, we hosted a concert with two masters students at Boston Conservatory, who we found through the Berklee College of Music Career Portal. They then pointed us towards other musicians who may be interested, two of whom came and played later in the month.

“

I love that this space exists. It's wonderful to have an open shared space that everyone in Somerville is creating bits of together.

”

Nonprofit organizations that have a social enterprise component are also often willing collaborators. You should also take advantage of chance encounters – some people who randomly wander in will be interested in hosting events! For example, we hosted a somatics workshop run by a regular CultureHouse visitor who is starting his own somatics practice.



Example:

We hosted two one-day pop-up used book sales with the nonprofit More Than Words. More Than Words empowers youth who are in the foster care system, court involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. With this collaboration, we were not only able to bring a fun event to the space, but also support a local organization whose mission we admired.

Community engagement can't end once you've finished build out and developed a good amount of programming – it's an ongoing process. To the best of your ability, continue communication with your community partners – checking in, making plans for the future, and thanking them for their help. Outreach to the general community should also continue in order to keep increasing the number of people who know about and engage with CultureHouse. While social media can't be the only method of reaching people, it's an important way to stay in touch with the community. When we asked people what they like in a community space, one of the top responses was an up-to-date online calendar that showed what was happening at CultureHouse. An online Google calendar with links to Facebook events worked well for us. Creating and growing an email list is another good way to reach people. Just by providing a sheet on our bar for people to sign, we garnered 100 email addresses. Also consider posting events on local event posting websites, creating updated posters and hanging them up around town, and having community partners share things with their networks.

Press can also be a good way to reach more people. A number of local newspapers wrote small articles about us over the course of our pop-up, which directed some traffic to our space. Some press can come organically, but it's smart to create a press release and a packet of images and information to send to local reporters.



A More Than Words student and employee enjoy our trampolines during their used book sale.



COMMUNITY JULY 19, 2018

A 'Living Room for the Community' Pops Up in Bow Market

Trampolines greet you as you walk into CultureHouse, leading to a bright room with a workspace that easily converts to a stage and yellow swings hanging from the ceiling. CultureHouse's creators have many aspirations for the pop-up that's set up shop in a spare Bow Market space for the month of July. "A living room [...]

A profile of CultureHouse by local media.

Spend wisely

It is essential to be deliberate (and somewhat consistent) about how you spend money on programming. It's a difficult balance to maintain – you are a nonprofit project, probably don't have a large programming budget, and need to save money wherever you can. However, you also want to ensure that your collaborations are mutually beneficial and that people you work with are adequately compensated for their work. A standard we have used is that if we actively recruit someone to come to our space, we offer some kind of monetary compensation. If they ask to collaborate on an event with us, we do not, because the compensation is in the form of the in-kind "donation" of our space.



If you are serving free food or drink, having a tip jar can give people who are uncomfortable accepting free things a way to contribute something. Non-monetary exchanges, such as a jar for feedback notes or a place for someone to draw a picture in exchange for the refreshments, can also be fun.

The most important thing is to be up front, honest, and compassionate when it comes to paying collaborators. Most people would love to support a community organization like CultureHouse by donating their time and energy, but that's not possible for everybody. If some are able and willing to collaborate with you with no monetary benefit, that's great! Take advantage of that. However, be respectful of those who do not want to or cannot work without concrete compensation.

Monitor and evaluate

A CultureHouse will only be the best it can

be if it is constantly assessing its work and adapting to feedback. Monitoring the space and its impact can be difficult, and is one area where we wish we had done better. More research is definitely needed in general on how to measure people's experiences in public spaces, but some good work is currently underway. For example, towards the end of July, we spoke to a team member from Supernormal and learned more about their project, *Third Spaces through the lens of data*. If you have the resources, enlisting someone from outside the project to help with monitoring and evaluation can be very helpful.

There are many ways to approach monitoring, but there are three main tactics we used.

Numerical data

Counting things such as age, length of stay, or how many people in the space at certain times is useful to evaluate who is coming to CultureHouse. You can use this data to see if you are skewing towards a certain age range and to see what time of day is most popular.

Observations and maps

Your own observations can be an important source of qualitative data. Create a document where you can write down things that happen as well as feedback and quotes from visitors. You can also structure your observations using public life measurement tools such as those from the Gehl Institute.

Opportunities for input

In addition to recording the feedback we received spontaneously, we also provided some concrete ways for people to give feedback. Our initial survey remained open throughout the pop-up and was included in the footer of our emails. We also created a large chalkboard where we posed questions and gathered responses to questions such as "What event do you want to see at CultureHouse?"



Our prompt board and some of our favorite responses we got over the course of the summer..

Break down

If you are doing a limited time pop-up, you will need to break down at the end. Break down is very similar to build out in that it goes much better with proper planning and many hands, but it can be quite a bit shorter depending on the landlord's future plans for the space and how many changes are permanent.

Plan ahead

If at all possible, build out with breaking down in mind. Unless you're making multiple time consuming and permanent changes to a space, build out and break down will likely take similar amounts of time. Planning for break down also includes communicating well with property owners and other stakeholders, planning for the future of all furniture, and returning the things you've borrowed. Make a spreadsheet with every item and its destination in order to move things most efficiently.

Let go of things

If there are items you built or purchased and likely won't use again and someone else might want, selling them can be a good way to avoid the hassle of storage. Planning ahead also helps with this part, and putting signs on items in the space a few weeks in advance can allow interested visitors to purchase items. If items are really worn or broken, don't be afraid to scrap them.

Recruit help

Aiming to move out on a weekend can be wise to allow maximum participation of friends and family, but some situations aren't that flexible. If you're on an extremely tight timeline, or are moving everything to a new space, hiring a professional crew is an option. If you need a large vehicle to move things with, Home Depot and U-Haul both offer cheap truck and van rentals.

Participants in an affordable housing hackathon discuss their ideas.



Impacts

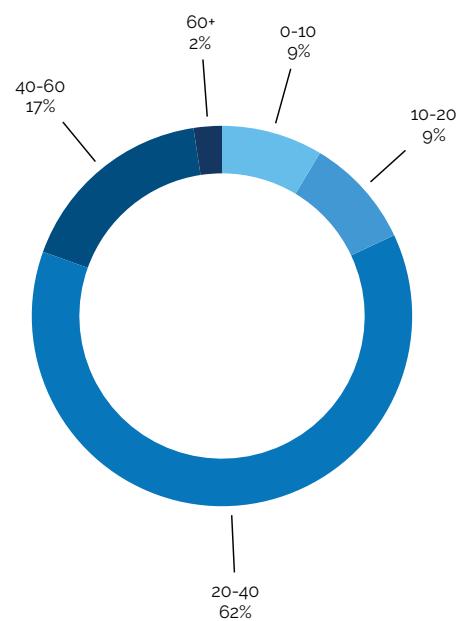
CultureHouse increased livability and joy



After getting the lay of the land, people really enjoyed themselves. It's a simple fact, but an important one. Feedback showed two main reasons why people responded well to the space: it felt fun and playful as well as cozy and inviting.

When people entered CultureHouse, the swings and the trampolines were often the first things they would comment on or engage with. Visitor responses indicated how important these opportunities for play were for people to feel comfortable and happy. They shared thoughts like, "Swings are awesome", "This is so fun", and "I feel so inspired by this space."

Visitors also pointed to elements of our design that made them feel comfortable and welcome. A local man who often came by the space reflected that "it was cozy, I liked the couches and the pillows. I think



Ages of weekend visitors.

that made it really inviting." Other people seemed to agree, describing the atmosphere as "open", "artsy", and "friendly".

With swings, games, picture books, and trampolines, it wasn't hard to sell the space to kids. One young girl who spent her morning jumping, swinging, and playing at CultureHouse exclaimed, "This is the best day of my life." and, "Why do we have to leave? I like it here." One local business owner noticed, "little kids stayed around longer, on weekends especially". Another local business owner shared, "My daughter was down there all the time and she's six. Because you guys had trampolines."

Adults responded equally well to the opportunity to jump and swing. A third local business owner said that CultureHouse felt "like a playground for adults". A visitor who immediately sat down on the swings when she entered said that she was really happy to see the swings, because swinging is so enjoyable but she doesn't feel like she can go to a playground as an adult. It is pretty hard to be upset when you are bouncing on a trampoline or swinging on a swing. Having active and interactive play and seating elements lowered the barrier of entry and attracted people of all ages to CultureHouse.

CultureHouse addressed a community need



There are not many places, safe from the elements, where someone can be without spending money. When confronted with such spaces, people come to recognize what they've been missing. One person who came back to CultureHouse often to do work or watch the World Cup shared, "it was nice to work here and not have to pay for anything." A local business owner shared, "as a parent, I like knowing that there's a place that I can go without feeling like I have to buy coffee."

And during the height of a particularly hot summer, people enjoyed the indoor aspect of the space as well. One of our most dedicated ping pong players shared that he kept coming back because it is an "indoor air conditioned activity" that, as his friend provided "gets us out of the house." In a region known for its sometimes extreme and always rapidly changing weather, having spaces that allow you to escape the heat, rain, snow or cold is valuable. A visitor told us, "I love that it's indoors. There are plenty of parks and beaches but this is a place without bugs, with AC, for when it's raining."

CultureHouse filled that general need, but also helped provide for the specific needs of our area. In the market where we popped up, there was an empty space that was not being utilized. By activating that space, we were able to provide something not yet available in the community. A woman who owns a shop in the market said that her initial reaction to CultureHouse was that, "we really need something in that space that's like this". Another shop owner said, "it was a great addition that area."

Other locals described CultureHouse as "a terrific idea to create a more 'town square' vibe to Bow Market, as well as generate foot traffic", and, "a wonderful use of space" that, as opposed to vacant storefronts, "maintains the neighborhood identity". The issues of vacant storefronts and lack of public space are often discussed, but once they physically saw a solution, residents were able to dive deeper into the needs of their communities.

Local residents liked that they were able to return to the space whenever they wanted to in the month of July, and the consistency of a space to hang out where things would be happening was appealing. As soon as people heard that the space would only be open for one month, they often expressed their desire for it to stay longer. That was one of the most heartening parts of the month – it proved the other points we wanted to make: that CultureHouse was a good idea, that it brought people joy, filled a need, and should ultimately become a community fixture. Visitors said they were "sad that this is the last month" and expressed the need for a space like CultureHouse to be open in the winter.

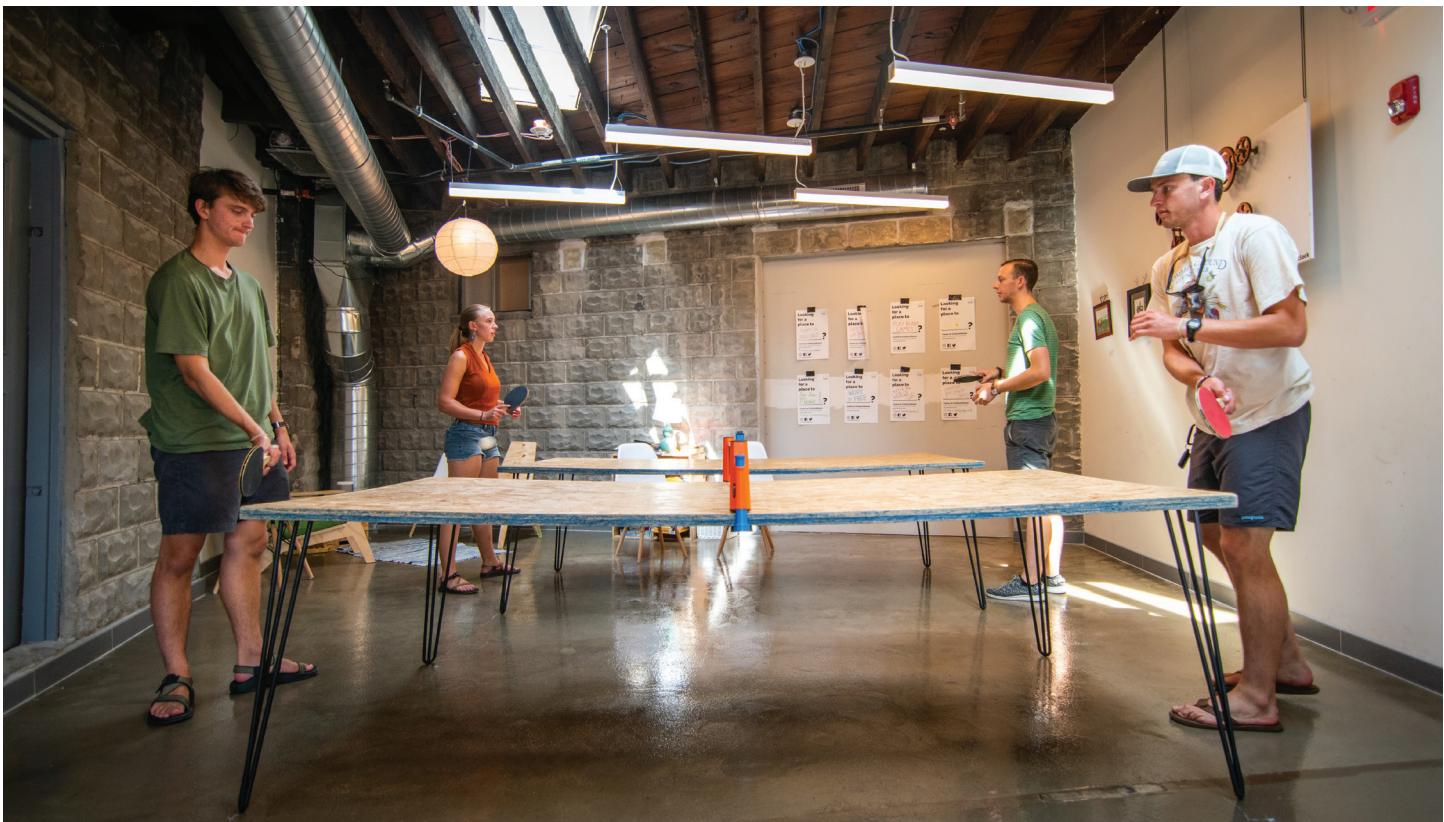
CultureHouse attracted people and gave a reason to stay

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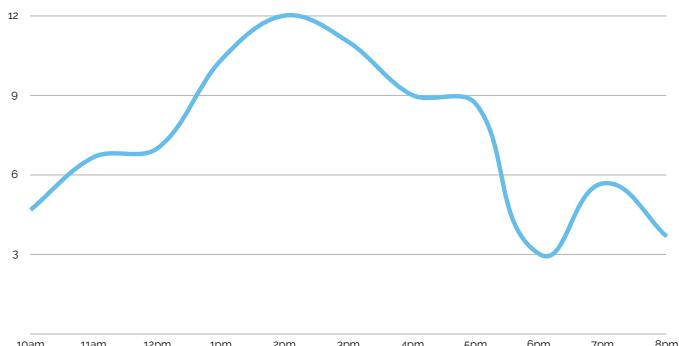
I like that it was very casual, very relaxed, it didn't look professional – and I mean that in a positive way. It looked like a place where you could sit, you could spread out a little bit, and you could talk.

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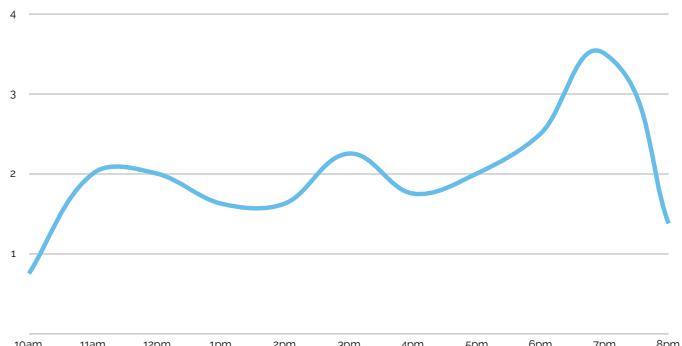
As a frequent visitor shared, "There aren't a whole lot of free spaces to hang out, and I was excited to see that you guys were doing that." Normally, when people are done working or shopping or eating they will leave public and return home, but a space like CultureHouse provides them with another option – to hang out. Before CultureHouse came to the market, there was no place to do that. As a local resident shared, CultureHouse took the space, "from weirdly shaped and sized to something that was a lot more functional and that people could feel comfortable in."



It is difficult for us to quantify CultureHouse's impact on the space in Bow Market for several reasons, including a lack of prior data, inability to monitor the space 24/7, and Bow Market's youth. Bow Market itself only opened up in Spring 2018, and many vendors are still moving in, so there is no baseline level of summer traffic. People from the surrounding community are still learning about the market, so it would be hard to attribute an increase in traffic to CultureHouse or any other factor.



Average weekend CultureHouse visitors.



Average weekday CultureHouse visitors.

However, we observed many people who had just stumbled upon the space stopping to spend time jumping on the trampolines, playing a game, or reading a book. We know that these people would not have stopped in the empty lobby, and we can say the same for the people who attended our events. One visitor told us that CultureHouse is "one of the only reasons I came here – all the businesses were closed and I just jumped on the trampolines". He continued, "I'm actually furious that this is leaving. It's such a pull for the area." Ping pong provided additional staying power – people would wander in and end up playing a game (we could hear the ball bouncing upstairs at all hours).

Through the CultureHouse frame



Epilogue



Working on CultureHouse has been an incredible experience, and our partners have been extremely important in helping us make it happen. We are grateful for everyone who has helped us along the way, but in particular we need to extend a huge thanks to Olin College of Engineering, the Forest Foundation, and the Better Block Foundation. Without these three partners, this project would not have had nearly the same level of funding, publicity, and guidance. Olin College served as our fiscal sponsor and publicized the project through all of its channels. The Forest Foundation provided our main grant and connected us with Allie Girouard, a Forest Foundation Summer Fellow who is now a long term team member. Better Block provided crucial mentorship and guidance, as well as some great inspiration and open source designs. These three organizations believed in Aaron and his idea, and without them this summer's pop-up would not have been possible.

While we are sad that the July 2018 CultureHouse pop-up has ended, it is only the beginning for this project. We are currently exploring what our long term funding model and organizational structure will be, and sharing what we have learned with people who are working on similar projects or trying to start CultureHouses of their own. We aim to open up again in the future, so keep your eyes open for the next CultureHouse pop-up!

