कला मोहल्ला
art in my neighborhood

Priyata Vandana Surendra Bosamia
Conceptual Thesis 2023
for my mumma my biggest pillar of support and confidant for life - without your daily check-ins, constant encouragement and love I wouldn't be able to achieve everything I did

for my dearest papa your “Hi Vaiu, how are you?” messages always put a smile on my face - your care and love is irreplaceable, thank you for everything you do

for bhai for all the memes and song recommendations, on the most stressful days your sense of humour and ‘meme check-ins’ made my days brighter

for devaunshi the person who gets me and supports me, thank you for always supporting my work and understanding it

for suneet for being my constant cheerleader and celebrating my smallest wins

for francesca for helping me grow as a designer, finding my voice and being the most amazing mentor I could ask for

for all my sisters & masis for all your love and blessings

for all my friends in providence for all the big laughs, warms coffees and making this place feel like home

for all my friends back home for your love and encouragement

this book is dedicated to all the incredible people in my life
Kala in my Moholla
Art in my neighborhood

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Design in Interior Studies [Exhibitions & Narrative Environments] in the Department of Interior Architecture of the Rhode Island School of Design

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When Saba was forced to drop out of school at the age of ten, her days went helping her mother at home and evening playing with friends. This changed, when a community art space opened near her house, a space so inviting with tables and chairs, art supplies and books—Saba got curious and went inside. That day Saba made her very first zine about her cat with the help of the didis (elder sisters). Saba continued returning to this little pocket with excitement and zeal to share a new story and create something new. The space allowed for Saba to use art and making as tool to freely express herself. At a time which would be difficult for any child of not being able to school, the space gave her the opportunity to create and feel a sense of community.

The zine-making workshops were part of a 6-month community program called the Govandi Art Festival, where I met Saba and she shared her story with me.

190 million children go to public schools in India, where art education and creative practice are not given any importance or priority. The question that I am trying to answer through this thesis is “How do we build safe spaces for free creative expression?”

This question led to a series of investigations in the city of Mumbai, where this project is based. Through the research process, I evaluated art museums and other cultural institutions, festivals, and pop-ups in the public realm to understand how each typology served different intentions. Some used spaces for seeing & spectatorship, where art was conserved and consumed visually. Some became symbols of national identity that attracted tourists more than the local population. And then some recent examples of art in public spaces were temporary spectacles, not responding to its communities and leaving them into mere selfie spots. The common critique in these examples was that they viewed their audience as passive receptors, not active participants. Rather than focusing on making, doing, or creating, the spaces positioned art on an inaccessible pedestal. As a result, they restricted art to visual representations rather than offering youth the opportunity to imagine new possibilities.

The project “Kala in my Moholla”, which means “Art in my neighborhood,” looks at art as a force and intends to create space for free creative expression by inserting a network of hyper-local, easy-to-build spaces for making, creating, and sharing that are designed to be accessible, participatory, and democratic. A modular design consists of basic forms and a catalog of materials that can be used for its construction. Designed to be malleable, transformable, and customizable, it can be adapted to the specific needs of the community. A co-designing game and zine are created as part of Kala in my Moholla’s approach to imagine the designer as a facilitator. These tools would help the community with the opportunity to imagine possibilities, as well as the freedom to create the space they want. Each kala in moholla would look different and become a responsive and dynamic space for the community without the imposition of specific aesthetics or layout. With workshops, maker spaces, libraries, and experiments with multiple art mediums, these spaces are intended to foster creativity. Kala in my Moholla hopes to bring people together and empower them through art.
“a space to work, to feel safe and free and be who you are, to speak your mind, to work with others, to experiment and discover, to create collectively, to join forces to build and to counter dominant powers — art as a space of political imagination”

- Carin Kuoni, Perspectives from a Changing World : Forces of Art, 2021
**Evolving Modalities & Experiences**

This section looks at the various typologies and experiences of art. Trying to understand to their intention and whether they provide opportunities for learning. Each of the typologies and experiences are analysed in Mumbai, with a particular focus on accessibility, learning, and participation. The chapters cover both the history as well as contemporary practices, which are analyzed through a combination of research, interviews, and on-the-ground research.
museums: from the everyday to spectacles

overview

India’s first museum opened in 1814 in the city of Calcutta during the early stages of colonial rule. The museum in the Colony served the specific mission of aesthetic edification and knowledge production - “educate the native population about their geographies, history, and religion”. In their collecting and display practices, the British, through an orientalist lens, carried out rigorous surveys of Indian arts and crafts. The seemingly ‘chaotic’ variations of art and crafts were ‘neatly’ organized and ultimately exhibited in the Museum. These crafts and arts which had been deeply connected to traditions, living, and communal practices were, in their museumification, disconnected and fragmented.

This fragmentation intentionally imposed a limited form of seeing and experiencing, leaving Indians as mere spectators of their own arts. Indian visitors viewed Museums as “ajaib ghars” (a house of wonders) for “darshan” (a form of passive viewing). This conception of the museum further broadened the gap with its visitors. Over the seventy-five years since independence, these museums have continued to serve as spaces for collecting and preserving artifacts and have failed to become spaces for active participation, learning, and engagement.

1: Kulishreshtha Salla, "Museums and Colonial Representations of South Asia, February 2023, Dubai, Fiker Institute
**Brief introduction: living art traditions**

Kala a singular entity of what the western world defines as art & craft was an integral part of everyday life. During the past few decades, museums and the commodification of the arts have changed the role of these arts, from being rooted in traditions, rituals and acts of doing to becoming disconnected from those traditions and become part of the visual art. The term "social practices" is used a lot in the contemporary art world to refer to blurring art and everyday life and encouraging active participation in art - both are in fact very much part of these traditional practices.

"historically in India, there is a conflation of the terms concept, form, and function in the comprehensive term kalā; and kalā combines what Western culture typically separates as art and craft."

- Manisha Sharma, Undisciplined Space: Indian Craft Heritage Sites as Texts for critical practice

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The next subsection examines the museum’s journey from its colonial beginnings to its current contemporary position. Case studies were conducted through on-site observational studies and interviews. In addition, interviews with museum professionals were conducted to gain insights into the museum’s role in the modern world. Finally, the conclusion highlights the museum’s image and how it engages its audience.
When the British colonized the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century, the European idea of the museum percolated to India. The Government Museum in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, opened in 1851, aimed to “awaken, inspire and teach” the illiterate Indian masses — who nonetheless flocked to museums in record-breaking numbers and stood apart from the English-educated Indian elite — who they feared “do not really care for museums or believe in them.”

1800
When the British colonized the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century, the European idea of the museum percolated to India.

1814 Imperial Museum
Kolkata, West Bengal
Now known as the Indian Museum

1851 Government Museum
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

1904 Prince of Wales Museum
Mumbai, Maharashtra
Now (2023) known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMV)

1947 India receives Independence

1954 The National Gallery of Modern Art
New Delhi

1996 The National Gallery of Modern Art
Mumbai, Maharashtra

a site for nation building & spectatorship

1855 Victoria & Albert Museum
Mumbai, Maharashtra
Now (2023) known as the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum

1996-2023

Now known as the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum
Mumbai, Maharashtra

Now known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMV)
Mumbai, Maharashtra

Now known as the Indian Museum
Kolkata, West Bengal

"to ‘awaken, inspire and teach’ the illiterate Indian masses — who nonetheless flocked to museums in record-breaking numbers and stood apart from the English-educated Indian elite — who they feared ‘do not really care for museums or believe in them’"

-Kavita Singh,
no touching, no praying, no spitting :
Museum in South Asia

A site for aesthetic edification and spectatorship
“We would be hard-pressed to report that the museum was ‘indigenised’ with quite the same flair as cricket in India, or with a comparable degree of populism and zeal. The makers of Indian museums did not appear, in other words, to fully erode the Victorian moral and didactic structure of the museum, or completely hijack its ‘Western-ness’ to make it entirely their own.”

- no touching, no spitting, no praying - The museums in South Asia, Mathur & Singh

literature review

It is interesting to note that the title of the book is derived from a sign that appeared in a colonial museum - it announced the rules of conduct and, looking back, it reveals the authoritative nature of these institutions. Museums came to India as part of the Raj’s vast knowledge-creating project - they were instituted as repositories of natural histories and crafts as well as registers of development and improvements. Institutions created by colonizers for colonizers, where Indians were ignored and remained an outsider. Thus, they became ‘ajiab ghars’ - houses of wonder - where ‘wonderous’ was never transformed into ‘knowing’, resulting in passive interactions. As the country gained independence, many national museums emerged in an attempt to reinvent the typology. However, they failed to indigenize the institution and could not erode Victorian morals or completely hijack its westernness.

Bringing us to the conclusion of how little has changed and how these institutions have failed to become a vibrant part of the public cultural life of its people.

6: Appadurai Arjun, “Museums are good to think”, no touching, spitting, no praying - The Museum in South Asia, 2015, India, Routledge
"only 1% of the visitors of the visitors of the museum are from Mumbai. The rest are Indian or foreign tourists who are visiting the city. Some come from smaller towns and suburbs; the true Bombayite' does not visit the museum, but uses it as a landmark to navigate the city"

- Saloni Mathur, Kavita Singh; No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying : The Museum in South Asia

### case studies in mumbai

The section includes case studies of museums that had opened during the colonial period - CSMVS and Bhau Daji. It charts their original intention when opened during colonisation and the efforts it shed its colonial roots. The two museums are studied on the efforts towards participation, the overall atmosphere of these spaces as well as their efforts towards educational programs. The three case studies help better understand the limitation of these institutions but also what draws the visitor in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>Previous Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>bhau daji lad city museum</td>
<td>previously known as the victoria &amp; albert museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>chattrapati shivaji vastu sangralaya</td>
<td>previously known as the prince of wales museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>national gallery of modern art</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
BHAIU DAIJ LAD CITY MUSEUM
previously known as the Victoria & Albert museum

1855 opened as Victoria & Albert museum
1975 renamed as Bhau Daji Lad City museum
1997 museum falls to despair and shuts down (closed from 1998 - 2008)
2008 museum reopens to the public

**before** treasure house of decorative and industrial art which the British would export out of the country

**now** fine and decorative arts focused on the city’s cultural heritage and contemporary art

400 visitors on an average weekday and 800 visitors on weekends and public holidays

60% tourists
40% locals
20-40 age group

Timelines, numbers and statistics: https://www.bdlmuseum.org
accessibility

where is it located? what's the neighbourhood like?
The museum is very well located. It is situated in the Byculla, situated in the southern part of the city, and is considered one of the oldest neighborhoods. It is surrounded by a diverse mix of commercial and residential areas and is also close to multiple high schools.

what is the atmosphere of the space?
Accessibility depends greatly on the atmosphere of a space, which is dictated by its architecture and interior language. Bhau Daji Lad's atmosphere is formal and frozen in time. This stems from its Victorian architecture and interior design, along with its cabinet of curiosity style display. These prevent the space from being more dynamic and present. The only time there is a gentle shift in these energies is during the temporary contemporary art installations, which challenge the space and its colonial history. It is also important to note that the museum is located in a botanical garden complex and is adjacent to a zoo. For locals looking for open spaces in a dense city like Mumbai, these spaces tend to become their main destinations. They become points of accessibility where trips to museums become secondary destinations after a trip to the zoo or a picnic in the park. In a lot of cases, the outside of the museum seems to work better than the inside.

education and participation

does the museum have workshops and programs?
There are several programs and workshops offered by the museum for the community. A few of them are aimed at youth, while others are aimed at adults. A variety of events and workshops are offered, including art making, poetry readings, movie screenings, live performances, and celebrations of local festivals. All of these events are geared towards engaging the community, and the museum is bustling with activity on the days of these events.

is there a learning center or library?
The museum has an education center that is only activated when a workshop or event is taking place. It is not an open learning center with facilities, books, or furniture, but just an empty space with foldable chairs. Additionally, there are open spaces at the back of the museum which are activated when workshops are held.

are the methods of display participatory?
the museum continues to use cabinet of curiosity type vitrines, distancing the visitor from the artwork and promoting a passive viewing of the objects on display.

is the environment for sharing, discussing and learning together?
the formal atmosphere of the interior spaces discourages an atmosphere of sharing and discussion.

The architecture and interiors continue to be the biggest barriers - there is something worth contemplating and wondering if there is a way where the restoration had taken place in such a way that half the building was from the past, and the other half was juxtaposed into something more contemporary. Would that change its relationality? There is much to learn from its engaging programming, workshops, and events, including how local festivals can also function as celebrations within museums.

Lastly, despite having an education center at the museum, the space hasn't been fully maximized. The space could be used for permanent learning with creative infrastructure geared toward making and doing.
1922 opened as Prince of Wales Museum
1998 renamed as Chattrapati Shivaji Vastu Sanghralaya

**before** It was built to commemorate the visit of King George V. The primary collections included artifacts from the Maratha Empire, miniature paintings, sculptures, Indian textiles, and decorative arts.

**now** Over the years the collection has grown with additions like temporary galleries and a contemporary art gallery.

2500 visitors on an average weekday and 4800 visitors on weekends and public holidays

80% tourists
20% locals
20-40 age group

timelines, numbers and statistics: https://csmvs.in
accessibility

where is it located? what's the neighbourhood like?
The museum is located south end of the city, in a historic and wealthier neighborhood. It is not located in the most accessible place. It is far away from most public schools and surrounded by other public institutions and government buildings. It is in close proximity to many tourist attractions therefore a large number of museum visitors are tourists.

what is the atmosphere of the space?
Indo-sarsenic architecture contributes to the familiarity and accessibility of the interiors. The sunlight passageways and the central atrium become in-between spaces for people to refuge and rest while visiting the numerous galleries.

education and participation

does the museum have workshops and programs?
A range of outdoor workshops, artists’ talks, and architecture talks are offered at the museum. They are most often curated for audiences with certain intellectual abilities. In addition to regular curated programs for students, the museum offers "Museum on Wheels", a mobile educational initiative that travels to various schools throughout the state.

is there a learning center or library?
the museum does not have a learning center but has a library which is accessible to scholars and researchers looking to do specific studies and research.

are the methods of display participatory?
CSMVS also continues to use cabinet of curiosity type vitrines, distancing the visitor from the artwork and promoting passive viewing of the Some of their displays incorporate technology - some feel forced while others feel outdated. The physical methods of display are not participatory, but they provide curated walks through within the museum that make the pieces more accessible and conversational.

is the environment for sharing, discussing and learning together?
the inbetween spaces and the outdoor become spots for ideal spaces for discussions and conversations.

analysis

Changing modalities and experiences: art as a tool for aesthetic edification

The museum’s location, ticket prices, and outdated display methods are its biggest barriers to further interaction. As for the positives, it’s interior spaces, where there are many pause points, seating, and rest areas, which are full of sunlight, where I observed people enjoying their time more than the actual dark galleries. Reminding me how important the inside-outside relationship is, especially in an Indian context. They don’t have a designated learning center, but they have an outdoor garden that is used for workshops and installations. Due to their temporary nature, they do not provide a conducive learning environment.

Tourists are the museum’s main audience, but I think they would attract more locals if they added permanent programs like a learning center, library, or cafe. Currently, they don’t offer much to local communities.

conclusion
OPENED AS THE COWASJI JEHANGIR PUBLIC HALL, MUMBAI

1911

1954

1996

1954 The first gallery of Modern art opens in Delhi, India.

Public hall transformed into the National Gallery of Modern Art.

Before & now: Modern and contemporary art from 1970s onwards made by Indian Artists.

100 visitors on an average weekday and 300 visitors on weekends and public holidays.

50% tourists

50% locals

20-40 age group

National Gallery of Modern Art previously was Sir Cowasji Jehangir Public Hall

Changing modalities and experiences: Art as a tool for aesthetic edification.

White cube: Sterile environment.

Workshops and talks.


Please note the numbers and statistics mentioned above are speculative and based on site observation and are not fully accurate.
accessibility

where is it located? what’s the neighbourhood like?
The museum is located south end of the city in close proximity to CSMVS, in a historic and wealthier neighborhood. It is not located in the most accessible place. It is far away from most public schools and surrounded by other public institutions and government buildings. It is in close proximity to many tourist attractions but not as popular with tourists. The typical visitor of the museum would be an art enthusiast or art student.

what is the atmosphere of the space?
The museum interiors are that of a typical white cube. It creates a sterile environment with security guards present on every floor watching you constantly. There are no pause or between spaces - one gallery connects to the next providing a very linear approach of viewing and experiencing the art.

education and participation

does the museum have workshops and programs?
The museum has some workshops and talks in relation to their current exhibitions. The programs include movie screening, artists talks and sometimes live performances. They do not provide many hands on or creative making workshops.

is there a learning center or library?
There is no learning center or library. Even a cafe they use to have closed a few years back. Leaving the museum only full of galleries.

are the methods of display participatory?
I believe the methods of display are not very participatory.

is the environment for sharing, discussing and learning together?
The formal atmosphere of the interior spaces, the lack of inbetween spaces or spaces for reflection discourage discussions and sharing.

NGMA Mumbai, despite being the sole museum in the city dedicated to modern and contemporary art, has unfortunately developed a sense of insularity due to its unchanged interior spaces and lack of adaptability. This restricts access primarily to art enthusiasts and individuals with prior knowledge of the arts. Another factor that contributes to this limitation is the exclusive use of English for all labels and signage, further narrowing down its audience.

Moreover, the museum adheres to highly standardized practices and fails to explore innovative display techniques or curatorial processes. This lack of experimentation prevents the space from fostering further learning and meaningful dialogue. Consequently, visitors are confined to a singular and predetermined way of experiencing the museum.
A brief summary of the conversations:

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of the art, culture, and educational practices in India, a set of interviews were conducted with museum professionals and educators. The candid discussions brought about some insightful and helpful pieces of information. During our conversation, we discussed the museum’s struggles, its image, and the barriers to accessibility, as well as some possible solutions or methods for overcoming these obstacles. It reaffirmed the museum’s history as a colonial institution and its intimidating reputation that prevented it from becoming an accessible cultural center. As a result of these discussions, the need for a public cultural institution was also brought up. “We need to create more collaborative art spaces in the city so that young artists can showcase their work,” Pooja Savansukha commented. Paulomi Das explained that we can only connect with our people when we ask them what they want and stop copying westernized museum practices. Bhanu Galot strongly felt we need to move away from this colonial typology as “it does not fit the Indian context or build connections with the people. These conversations reaffirmed my observations and research that the museum as a typology had failed to evolve with time and didn’t provide the safe space for creative thinking and doing.

“Museums become a play ground for the artists and students”
Pooja Savansukha
Curator, Museum of Art & Photography, Bangalore

“Museums don’t consider the voice of the visitor”
Paulomi Das
Consultant, Museum & Heritage Spaces

“Museums don’t fit in the Indian context - they were made during the colonial period for the colonizers - we need to find our own ways of experiencing art and culture”
Bhanu Galot
Curator and researcher, Rereeti Foundation
Museums in India follow a colonial-era template, with an Orientalist gaze, and debatable issues of class, caste, and gender are not visible in their programming. Museums in India cater only to experts in the field or tourists. They are very detached or irrelevant to their surrounding communities. Indian Museums are boring and don’t push the envelope in terms of art and expression. They are not experimental and exciting enough.

What is the perception of Museums in the India audience? These pie charts highlight preconceptions that the audience have towards museums in India. These showcase the image of the Museum.

Conclusions: As a result of my observational studies and extensive research, I have concluded that Indian museums perceive their audiences as passive spectators rather than active participants. As a result, museums are failing to evolve and transform into spaces that encourage creativity and engagement and are instead mainly focused on passive viewing.

By failing to recognize the potential for museums to be dynamic spaces for co-creation, exploration, and dialogue, there is a missed opportunity to cultivate a deeper connection between the audience and the exhibits. Museums have the potential to become catalysts for knowledge-sharing, cultural exchange, and community building, but this potential remains largely untapped.

All the findings and research shared above was conducted and recorded by MAP - Museum of Art and Photography, Bangalore, and ReReeti Foundation. In the form of an ‘Audience Research Project’ document.

pop up festivals, art in public spaces

overview

When art transcends the confines of institutional spaces and ventures into the urban landscape, it becomes accessible and approachable to a wider audience. However, it is important to note that these temporary festivals often undergo a transformation, sometimes evolving into large spectacles that may overlook the contextual nuances of their surroundings and fail to effectively respond and engage with the environment.

Through this small chapter which includes a short essay I speak about my personal experience of visiting the Urban art festival. The anecdotal essay helped me reflect on my experience and incorporate some of the conversation I had with the local communities.
The art is in our community but it is not for us - I don’t understand it, no one asks us what we want or think, these spaces continue being for the rich and educated

- Community member from the Sasoon Dock

A SUNDAY AT THE URBAN ART FESTIVAL, MUMBAI

As I entered the vibrant and bustling Urban Arts Festival in Mumbai’s historic dockyard, the vibrant energy of the event enveloped me. The festival’s mission of “art for all” resonated deeply with my own beliefs, and I eagerly immersed myself in the curated artistic experiences scattered throughout the venue.

The festival’s core focus was on integrating art into the fabric of the urban environment, creating an accessible and inclusive space for people from all walks of life. The array of installations and immersive video works showcased the innovative and boundary-pushing nature of contemporary art. The industrial architecture that surrounded us was transformed into colorful and thought-provoking murals, capturing the imagination and stimulating conversations.

Yet, as I explored the festival, a nagging thought surfaced. Who exactly was being included in this notion of “all”? The festival’s success in attracting a diverse crowd was evident, with college students and families with young children eagerly engaging with the art. However, I couldn’t help but notice the absence of the local community that called this neighborhood home.

Questions began to arise within me: How were the voices and perspectives of the community being incorporated? Were they active participants in shaping the festival’s narrative? Did they feel a sense of ownership and pride in this artistic celebration taking place in their own backyard?

It became clear that the festival, while visually captivating and accessible to a broad audience, lacked a genuine connection with the local community. The focus seemed to be more on creating a spectacle rather than fostering meaningful engagement and dialogue. The festival had become a surface-level experience, prioritizing the visual impact of the artworks over the deeper connections and relationships that art can cultivate.

As I engaged in conversations with locals, their perspectives echoed my concerns. The festival, they felt, catered to a predetermined group of people, excluding the very community that resided and worked in the area. The potential for collaboration, co-creation, and mutual learning seemed untapped, leaving the festival’s mission of “art for all” feeling incomplete.

Reflecting on my experiences, I believe that the Urban Arts Festival has immense potential to bridge the gap between art and community, offering a space for authentic dialogue, cultural exchange, and empowerment. By actively involving the local community in the festival’s planning, curation, and execution, it could truly live up to its motto. The festival should aim to empower the community by valuing their input, supporting local artists, and fostering an environment where the diverse stories, traditions, and talents of the neighborhood can be shared and celebrated.

In conclusion, while the Urban Arts Festival in Mumbai exhibits tremendous artistic prowess and has attracted a diverse audience, there is a pressing need to delve deeper into its purpose. By embracing a more community-centered approach and actively engaging the local residents, the festival can transform into a catalyst for social cohesion, collective expression, and true inclusivity. Only then can it truly embody the spirit of “art for all” and make a lasting impact on the neighborhood it seeks to celebrate.
"It is fascinating to look at these artworks, I wish I could be a part of something like this and create something of my own - we need spaces where we make things!"

- Student, 17 at the festival

"I am not sure if I fully understand these artworks - seems like best out of waste"

- Student, 14 at the festival
As art becomes integrated into the fabric of a community, it transcends being a mere visual representation and transforms into a powerful tool for learning, sharing, and empowering individuals. This chapter serves as the culmination of my research in Mumbai, where I had the opportunity to closely study two powerful community-based art practices. These initiatives were thoroughly understood through a range of interactions, including interviews, both formal and informal conversations, as well as experiencing the perspectives of a remarkable group of teenagers during a photo walk together.

These initiatives within the community proved to be immensely powerful and impactful, providing invaluable insights and lessons along the way. They became a significant source of inspiration for me as I began envisioning the spaces I wanted to create. They prompted me to question how we can cultivate more of these transformative experiences. How can every community and every child gain access to the benefits of creative thinking and learning?

This chapter takes on an anecdotal approach, offering snippets from the conversations I had with the children involved in these initiatives. Their perspectives and experiences provide a rich tapestry of insights, highlighting the transformative power of art within their lives and communities. Additionally, the chapter includes glimpses of the zines they created during our interactions. I am grateful that they generously shared a few copies of these zines with me, serving as tangible expressions of their creativity and voices.

Through the stories, conversations, and tangible artifacts shared in this chapter, the transformative potential of art within communities is brought to life. It emphasizes the importance of fostering creative thinking and learning opportunities for all, while showcasing the remarkable impact that such initiatives can have on individuals and their communities.
On Saturday, 25th February, I found myself in a room on the second floor of a barber-shop in Dharavi, an informal settlement. Gathered there were 15 teenagers, each with a unique story to tell. The room, no more than 10 feet by 10 feet, served as a creative space where their voices could be heard.

As I sat among them, a girl proudly presented a zine she had crafted on global warming. It was inspiring to witness her passion and creativity. After a brief introduction, we embarked on a photowalk through their community.

Dividing ourselves into small groups, we ventured into the vibrant streets. My group chose to explore the diverse religious practices that coexisted and intertwined harmoniously. Through our cameras, we captured the essence of this unity and diversity, aiming to create a zine that would reflect our experiences.

In that moment, it became clear that Nazaria, was building a platform for these teenagers to express themselves. In this 10x10 room, this non-profit provided them with agency, tools, and opportunities that were otherwise scarce.

By giving the youth a means to share their stories, Nazaria empowered them to reshape societal understanding of poverty, inequality, and injustice. Their narratives had the power to ignite empathy and drive collective action. Through art and expression, they gained a deeper appreciation for their community’s challenges, fostering a sense of empathy and inspiring change.

Nazaria’s work demonstrated the profound impact that arts education, media democracy, and social justice can have when intertwined. By unlocking the creative potential of marginalized youth, she gave them the ability to challenge norms, influence systemic change, and create a more inclusive and just society.

In that 10x10 room, I witnessed the transformative power of storytelling and artistic expression. It was a testament to the importance of providing platforms for the young voices, allowing them to reclaim their narratives and shape a brighter future.

They were not only grateful for the creative workshops held in this space but also for the myriad of other activities it offered. It became a sanctuary where they could gather to do their homework, immerse themselves in books from the little library, and simply be themselves. It was a space they could truly call their own.
“I feel so confident sharing my stories”

“I think I want to be an artist”
“This festival brought our neighborhood together in a way I’ve never seen before. We danced, laughed, and celebrated the talent that exists right here in Govandi. It was a reminder that we are more than just a marginalized community. We have so much to offer, and this festival showcased our strength, resilience, and creativity.”

**BRINGING JOY - GOVANDI ART FESTIVAL, MUMBAI**

In an often overlooked neighborhood of Govandi, a spark ignited within the hearts of its residents—an unwavering creative resistance that demanded recognition. The community craved a platform to showcase their talents and unleash their artistic prowess. It was from this collective desire that the Govandi Arts Festival was born.

Recognizing the lack of easily accessible mentorship opportunities for local artists, the festival aimed to fill this void. It sought to bring sustained mentorship programs to the neighborhood, nurturing the skills and talents of Govandi’s artists, both young and old. Embracing an alternative pedagogy, the festival organizers envisioned a transformative engagement with the marginalized issues that surrounded the community—ones that revolved around expression, joy, and celebration.

The festival’s pedagogy was rooted in the belief that building and platforming the skills of spatially and culturally marginalized communities could be achieved through inclusive processes. They set up two art centers and a library within the community, providing a dedicated space for artistic exploration and growth. Six talented artists and designers wholeheartedly engaged with the community, working side by side with the residents for six months. Through their guidance, they introduced different art practices and mediums, empowering the individuals to express their unique voices.

The culmination of these efforts was the highly anticipated arts festival. A jubilant celebration of creativity, it served as a showcase for the students’ remarkable works. The festival buzzed with activity—workshops, events, and interactive exhibits filled every corner. However, it wasn’t just about the art. The true essence of the festival lay in the presence of the students themselves, passionately sharing their stories and journeys. Their voices echoed with newfound confidence, breaking down barriers and demolishing preconceived notions.

The impact of the Govandi Arts Festival was profound. It brought about a sense of empowerment and visibility within the community. By creating joyful festivals and uniting distinct marginalized neighborhoods, Govandi’s resilience and creativity reverberated on a global scale. No longer reduced to a place of have-nots, Govandi emerged as a beacon of artistic talent and a testament to the power of inclusive engagement.

Through the festival, the neighborhood of Govandi rewrote its narrative—one that celebrated its vibrant spirit, resilience, and unwavering creativity. It became a shining example of how a community can reclaim its identity and reshape the world’s perception.
"Before the festival, I used to hide my artwork away, thinking it wasn’t good enough. But being a part of this festival and seeing people appreciate my work has given me the confidence to believe in myself. Now, I know that my art has the power to inspire and bring joy to others."

"I never thought I could create something so beautiful. With the help of the artists, I learned new techniques and explored different art forms. The festival made me feel like a real artist, and I am proud to see my artwork displayed alongside the professionals. It showed me that age or background doesn’t define creativity."
A brief summary of the conversations:

In India, a staggering number of 190 million students attend government schools where art education and creative expression remain largely absent. Manasi Mehan highlights the urgent need to address this gap, emphasizing that art and creativity should extend beyond formal educational institutes. Providing avenues for artistic exploration becomes essential.

Nandini emphasizes the significance of creating safe spaces for children to voice their opinions and share their stories. By nurturing an environment that encourages self-expression, young individuals can develop their confidence, critical thinking, and communication skills. Art becomes a powerful tool for empowerment and amplifying marginalized voices.

Ridhhi brings attention to the importance of building platforms specifically tailored for youth to reclaim their voices and document their own communities. Such platforms enable young individuals to showcase their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations. By taking charge of their narratives, they can challenge stereotypes, bridge gaps, and shape a more inclusive society.

Collectively, these conversations underscored the urgent need for art and creativity in educational settings, emphasizing the role of safe spaces, platforms, and opportunities for young individuals to express themselves. By incorporating art and creative practices, students can cultivate their unique voices, foster empathy, and contribute to the cultural fabric of their communities. It is through these initiatives that we can empower the next generation to become confident, compassionate, and socially aware individuals who contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive society.
ART + COMMUNITY

In this section, we explore how art practices intersect with communities. By delving into the existing literature, the focus is placed on perceiving art as a powerful force and tool within institutions and initiatives that foster the creation of secure spaces for unrestricted creative thinking and expression. The analysis of various examples and research findings aids in imagining the potential, programs, and structure of "Kala in Moholla."
The examples presented in this section are focused on community engagement through various mediums, methods, and typologies. The Queens Museum extends itself beyond its institutional boundaries to engage with the local communities. The Precarious Museum situates itself within the community and empowers the people by giving them authorship over the museum’s creation and management. Similarly, Philadelphia Contemporary reaches out to the community by bringing art experiences to different neighborhoods, while Proyecto MARTadero transforms unused parcel of land to create a ‘common space’ for art and creative practices. Each of these examples serves as inspiration for the possibilities of Kala in my Moholla and its ability to create meaningful connections between art and the community.

precedents

- Queens Museum, New York, 1972
- Proyecto MARTadero, Cochabamba, 2004
- Philadelphia Contemporary, Philadelphia, 2016
going beyond the institution by taking programs and activities in other public spaces responding to the communities needs constantly evolving its role and mission views their audience as active participants

QUEENS MUSEUM
MUSEUM & EDUCATIONAL CENTER, NEW YORK

The Queens Museum is more than just a typical museum; it serves as a hub for community-focused art initiatives. Nestled next to one of New York City’s most diverse and densely populated neighborhoods, which is predominantly inhabited by immigrants, the museum has a strong focus on caring for the people around them. In addition to managing their extensive collection, the museum works closely with the community, responding to their needs through an array of educational programs, workshops, and outreach initiatives.

What sets the Queens Museum apart is their dedication to community engagement, making it more like a community art center than a traditional museum. With the assistance of dedicated full-time community organizers, the museum actively leverages their resources to help build the leadership capacity of Corona residents, empowering them to actively participate. Through a series of creative engagement initiatives, the museum has become an integral part of the community.

“The Queens Museum strives to be a cultural institution that is open, responsive, inclusive, and empathetic.”

1: https://queensmuseum.org/about/
2: https://queensmuseum.org/about/
The precarious museum was a makeshift museum set up by artist Thomas Hirschhorn in a Paris suburb for a period of three months. The museum displayed a selection of modern masters borrowed from the Centre Pompidou. A group of twelve young members from the community were trained as art handlers, docents, security guards, installers, and public programmers. The museum was created, run, and used by the local residents, and this created a strong sense of belonging that “Musee Precaire” was their space.

The end result was a space that was fun, engaging, and relaxed - they had music playing, kids hanging out at the cafe and playing around the exhibit, but at the same time, the group of twelve took their responsibilities very seriously and made sure nothing went too out of control. This example is particularly relevant as taking art into the community and outside the institution completely transforms its relationship, making it more interactive. The precarious museum had numerous events, debates, workshops, communal meals. The space was dynamic and alive. The precarious museum as an example proves how institutionalization of art limits its possibilities and when we break out of it, the possibilities are endless.

“The Museum was not the building nor the artworks but the process of affirmation, “in agreement with the neighbourhood, its inhabitants, its location, its program, its visitors, its activities”
transforming unused parcels of land into cultural hubs
promoting the works of young and emerging artists
building relationships between artists and local communities

"contemporary art to 'take over' an abandoned building, and to create conditions for synergy among artists, and between art and other dimensions of social and political life."²

PROYECTO MARTADERO
MUSEUM & EDUCATIONAL CENTER, NEW YORK

The Proyecto mARTadero is a project that transformed an old slaughterhouse into a cultural center with the goal of promoting education, experimentation, and circulation of contemporary art practices in the city. It offers a diverse range of programming, including exhibitions, performances, workshops, lectures, and other events that enable visitors to engage with contemporary art and culture in a dynamic and interactive way.¹

One of the primary objectives of the project is to promote education and experimentation in contemporary art practices. The Proyecto mARTadero seeks to provide a platform for emerging artists to showcase their work and to foster creative collaboration and exchange among artists, curators, and the public. It is a space that celebrates the arts and fosters creativity, collaboration, and community engagement.

Image & text: https://martadero.org/quienes-somos/

¹ "Proyecto mARTadero," Martadero.org.
² "Proyecto mARTadero," Martadero.org.
non-collecting
multiple sites within the city
transforming urbanscapes with different mediums of art
interactive and participatory art intervention

"The Museum was not the building nor the artworks but the process of affirmation, “in agreement with the neighbourhood, its inhabitants, its location, its program, its visitors, its activities”.

PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY
POP-UP ART SPACE

The Philadelphia Contemporary is a non-collecting, nomadic art organization that connect people and places through art. They collaborate with community organizations to produce immersive experiences, festivals, and installations in various locations throughout Philadelphia. The organization’s motto, “art anywhere,” breathes life into public spaces and provides a platform for experimentation. The aspect of non-collecting permits the exploration of multiple mediums and serves to inspire younger artists. Additionally, by situating itself in urban environments, the organization aims to create accessibility and inclusivity to art for the community.

https://philadelphiacontemporary.org/get-to-know-us
“the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes - or at least dealienates a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”

- education for socially engaged art

**literature review**

*Perspectives from a Changing World: Forces of Art*

By Carin Kuoni, Jordi Balta Portoles, Nora N. Khan & Serubiri Moses

"Forces of Art" delves into the role of arts and culture within societies. It goes beyond perceiving art solely as a representational tool and encourages readers to view it as a force capable of transformative impact.

The book emphasizes the idea that art is not just a passive medium but an active event and act that operates within society. It advocates for the creation of spaces that enable individuals to work, feel safe, express themselves freely, collaborate with others, experiment, discover, and engage in collective creation. These spaces provide opportunities to challenge and counter dominant powers, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among participants.

The text explores the potential of art to open up spaces of possibilities, enabling new ideas, perspectives, and dialogues to emerge. By investigating projects that attribute art a significant role in advancing civil society, the book highlights art practices committed to social change. It examines how these practices challenge hegemonic systems and develop alternative infrastructures that prioritize inclusivity and participation. Through polyphony, which embraces diverse voices, these art practices actively challenge dominant structures.

A central theme in the book is the importance of hyperlocal initiatives and the creation of open spaces that foster imagination, creation, and community engagement. By emphasizing the transformative power of art, the text underscores how it can inspire civil action and address local needs. Through empowering communities, providing them with a voice, and utilizing art and culture, these initiatives offer spaces that are accessible to everyone.

By investigating various art practices and their social processes, the book highlights the power of art and culture to empower communities, create inclusive spaces, and ignite positive change.
"Kala in my Moholla", which means "Art in my neighbourhood," looks at art as a force and intends to create space for free creative expression by inserting a network of of hyper local, easy to build spaces for making, creating and sharing that are designed to be accessible, participatory, and democratic. This section provides an in-depth examination of the core design principles, material inventory, modular design, diverse space-making possibilities, and tools for co-designing.
When contemplating the qualities of transformability, malleability, and simplicity in construction, my thoughts turn to the cityscape and the concept of soft urbanism, as well as the inherent mobility within urban environments. Structures like pandals, which are temporary tents erected for festivals, community gatherings, weddings, and protests, exemplify this notion. These modest yet functional fabric, bamboo, and jute-thread constructions appear one week and vanish the next, embodying the transient nature of urban spaces. Mobility is further exemplified by the presence of mobile carts selling vegetables, flowers, and snacks, where the sellers come to your neighborhood.

These aspects serve as strong references for the construction and transformation of spaces. Urban public gestures or spaces serve as guides, inspiring the forms these spaces take. The nukkad, a meeting point, manifests as an L-shaped structure. The cona, or street corner, takes the shape of a recess, while the otla, or stepped seating, becomes movable furniture within the spaces.

These relatively uncomplicated forms, when combined, create dialogues and versatile spaces. They can be pushed, pulled, opened, closed, disassembled, packed up, and passed on.

Although initially envisioned as spaces for creative practices, they are not limited to such pursuits. Instead, they can be repurposed as a community kitchen one day, a venue for festive celebrations the next, or even a blood bank. The malleability of these spaces is entirely dictated by the people who utilize them, allowing for adaptation to their needs and desires.

In essence, these spaces embody a fluidity that enables their transformation and adaptability to suit the requirements of the community.
**unlearning**: creating a non-institute

**Institute**
- large scale
- monumental presence
- strong aesthetic
- singular
- monolithic
- fixed circulation
- hierarchies
- insular
- focused on the visual representation of art
- unresponsive to the community

**Non-institute**
- small scale
- non-monumental
- blends with local urban fabric
- multiple and decentralized
- flexible and open circulation
- lesser defined hierarchies
- accessible
- blurring boundaries
- open
- focused on creating and sharing

**Core Principles**: what makes these spaces?

- **Accessible**
  - location
  - architecture

- **Easy to Build**
  - co-designed
  - co-built
  - using locally available material and building practices
  - using design tools and workshops to co-imagine and co-create the spaces with the community

- **Transformable**
  - small scale
  - using a modular system to be able to transform the space depending on the needs of the community
how do you select a site?

Kala in my Moholla is imagined as a network of decentralized spaces within the city. For it’s intended impact, three types of sites are identified. There is a distinction between each site and it’s typology, but the collective goal is to create a space for creating. Here are a few examples of potential locations where Kala in Moholla could be situated. The possibilities are endless since the modular design can allow for it fit and mould into any given site. However, the identified site typologies have been specifically chosen for their optimal impact and accessibility.

SITE TYPE 1
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

open spaces in public schools could be transformed into a learning and making space.

Pros: providing schools creative infrastructure and an opportunity to incorporate creative learning into the curriculum.

Cons: becomes inaccessible to children who are not able to go to school and restricts the use of the space to when the school is open.

Example: Shivner Vidya High School

SITE TYPE 2
UNSUSED POCKETS

unused pockets of land or existing community spaces could transformed into a communal learning space.

Pros: a space for the community, different age groups can use it and come together through creative learning. A space they can call their own.

Cons: it could be tough to find pockets like this in a city as dense as Mumbai.

Example: Nehru Nagar Petrol Pump

SITE TYPE 3
WITHIN COMMUNITIES

inserting them within communities could give people a sense of authorship towards the space.

Pros: the spaces and programs could be catered specifically to the needs of the communities.

Cons: it might get difficult for everyone to see the point of the space and its benefits. A long term space could only survive if the community sees the benefits and does not look at it as an imposition.

Example: Dattareya Chawl
Urban gestures are physical and cultural activities that occur within urban spaces. These gestures can be seen as the actions, behaviors, or forms that are characteristic of a particular urban environment. For the design of Kala in my moholla four such urban gestures were identified.

The first one - "nukkad" is a Hindi term that refers to street corners or public squares where people gather for various activities, such as socializing, discussions, or performances. These spaces often serve as hubs of community engagement and interaction. In the context of the design, elements inspired by nukkads could potentially create spaces that encourage socialization and community bonding.

The second "conas" is another Hindi term that denotes small market spaces or informal marketplaces found in many urban areas which are dynamic and full of activity. Lastly, "alla" is small niche used for smaller communal meetings, and otlas are generally stepped seating outside the home that acts as spillover space for informal gatherings. The four elements selected reflect a sense of community and gathering that was intended to be translated into the spaces created for Kala in Moholla.

Nukkads, conas, allas and otlas have been translated into simple forms which transformed into easy build modular units.
creating familiarity: using local materials

wood

bamboo

metal

corrugated metal

jute thread weave

bamboo screen

woven bamboo
In order to demonstrate how these modular components work together, a series of combinations have been created. Each of these units can be opened up to create a range of spaces as shown in the following pages.
1. gathering space
2. maker space
3. library
4. outdoor screening
5. workshop space
1.2
1. Library
2. Learning space
3. Maker space
4. Outdoor workshop
1. maker space
2. learning space
3. maker space
4. learning room
5. library
2.1
1. maker space
2. library
3. workshop + screening space

2.2
1. maker space
2. library
3. outdoor performance + workshop space
3.1
1. Library
2. Screening + workshop
3. Maker corner
4. Gathering space

3.2
1. Maker corner
2. Library
3. Screening + workshop area
let us design together: a co-design tool kit

The development of a zine and a space-building game has resulted in the creation of a community co-design tool. This tool allows the community to actively participate in visualizing and crafting their own spaces. By engaging with the kit, individuals are empowered to contribute to the design process, fostering a sense of ownership and agency within the community.

This innovative approach transforms the designer into a facilitator who works alongside community members. Through this collaborative process, the designer gains valuable insights into the specific needs and desires of the community. By stepping back from a traditional top-down approach, Kala in my Moholla aims to establish a democratic framework for design.

The co-design tool, comprising the zine and the space-building game, serves as a catalyst for this democratic process. It empowers community members to express their ideas and aspirations for their spaces. By providing a platform for active participation, the tool facilitates dialogue, collaboration, and a deeper understanding of the community’s needs.

Ultimately, the use of this co-design kit within Kala in my Moholla contributes to the creation of spaces that truly reflect the community’s values, aspirations, and sense of identity. It promotes inclusivity, empowers individuals to shape their environment, and establishes a democratic and participatory approach to design.
In My Pocket
Workshop with community members of Nehru Nagar

On Sunday, March 26th, 2023, I organized and facilitated a workshop with the residents of Nehru Nagar, an informal settlement located in the northern part of Mumbai. The workshop primarily involved the participation of mothers and children, ranging in age from 14 to 50 years old. The objective of the workshop was to engage with the community and gain insights into their preferences and priorities for a community space within their locality.

To facilitate discussions and gather input effectively, a set of stickers with prompts was created. These prompts aimed to encourage the participants to express their ideas and opinions regarding the desired features and aspects of a community space. By utilizing these stickers, the workshop aimed to elicit a visual representation of their priorities and preferences.

Conducting a workshop of this nature is crucial before introducing the zine+game concept, as it provides an invaluable opportunity for the designer to understand the community and its specific needs in greater depth. By actively engaging with the residents, observing their perspectives, and gathering their input, the designer can ensure that the subsequent design process is more responsive and tailored to their requirements.

The workshop serves as a platform for meaningful dialogue and collaboration, allowing the community members to contribute their unique insights and experiences. It establishes a sense of ownership and inclusion, empowering the participants to actively shape the design and development of the community space. By prioritizing community engagement through workshops like this, the resulting zine+game tool kit can be better aligned with the needs of the community.

What were their top priorities?
- Spaces outside of school for learning and making new things
- Green open spaces
- A space for community gatherings and festivals
- A library and media lab

a big thank you to this amazing group for participating in this workshop with so much enthusiasm!
annotated bibliography

This book looks at the visitor not as a passive receiver but as an active participant who provokes, facilitates, and inspires. It has several case studies, most of which focus on the users of museums and how they can be viewed as social powerplants and contribute to society at large. It addresses such issues as ownership and power dynamics, collective pedagogy, co-curation, and crowdsourcing.

Throughout his book The future of the Museum, Andras has conversations with 28 professionals from different countries about the museum’s future. Most of the discussions focused on how to look at the Museum as more than just a space for culture and art - especially in the chapter with the Garage Museum’s director Anton Belov; he discusses the importance of a museum’s “human size” and how a cultural space can serve as a space of comfort, learning, and refuge. All the discussions questioned the conventional role of the Museum and how it can go above and beyond those standards to become a place for people.

"Out of the Ruins" is a thought-provoking book that delves into the concept of creating spaces that challenge traditional power dynamics and foster transformative learning experiences. The introduction chapter sets the stage for exploring spaces that are critically reflective, dialogical, horizontal, and mutual, in stark contrast to anti-dialogical, vertical, and hyper individualistic environments.

The book emphasizes the importance of radical learning spaces that are not homogenous, but rather situated in different locales, acknowledging the diverse contexts in which learning takes place. These spaces are not passive, but rather serve as platforms for action, intervention, and transformation. They challenge the conventional notion of formal education by embracing radical informal learning spaces that promote self-directed learning and critical thinking.

A key aspect of these spaces is the creation of non-hierarchical, voluntary, and non-authoritarian learning experiences. The book advocates for participatory democracy within these spaces, where individuals have a voice, agency, and an active role in shaping their own learning journey. This approach empowers learners to actively engage with the subject matter, collaborate with others, and co-create knowledge.

Hlavajova Maria and Hoskote Ranjit, Future publics (the rest can and should be done by the people) : a critical reader in contemporary art, 2015, Valiz/BAK, Utrecht


Claire Bishop’s book challenges the traditional dynamics of art by overturning the relationship between the art object, artist, and audience. She reimagines the audience as co-producers and participants rather than passive viewers. Participation in art, according to Bishop, transcends the notion of spectators and introduces a new understanding where everyone becomes a producer. By engaging in participatory art, individuals are empowered, promoting democracy and dismantling the idea of art as solely the creation of a single artist. Bishop emphasizes collaborative creativity, which fosters a positive and non-hierarchical social model. Through activation of urban spaces, collective authorship, and community building, participatory art aims to create a shared space for social engagement and free creative expression.

Pablo Helguera’s book dives into the realm of socially engaged art, providing a profound exploration of its impact on social interaction. Unlike other art forms, socially engaged art emphasizes the social process of creating the work, going beyond traditional exhibitions by actively involving the public. This empowers individuals to take on active roles, moving beyond passive observation.

The book showcases the transformative power of socially engaged art in promoting empowerment, collective action, and the exchange of ideas. By challenging the boundaries between art and life, it aims to counter a fragmented and consumer-driven society, seeking to rehumanize our world numbed by repetitive spectacles. Through participatory practices, socially engaged art fosters a more creative and participatory social fabric, fostering new relationships and connections.

Helguera draws parallels between art and education, exploring how socially engaged art engages audiences through inquiry-based methods, collaborative dialogues, and hands-on activities. The book highlights the importance of focusing on the transformative potential of the process itself.

In her paper, Litz uses a very interesting metaphor - she compares the museum to a dining room - a formal, very orchestrated space where things are arranged in a set fashion, resulting in restrictive interactions and behavior, and suggests that they should be thought of more like kitchens, a place for experimentation, conversation, and collaboration.