

**Making Place Through Making:
Makerspaces, Third Places, and Queer Belonging in the Finger Lakes Region**

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By
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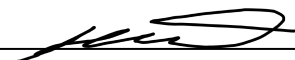
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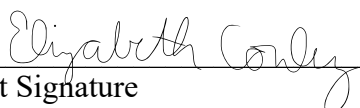
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"There's no prescription. You can just show up whatever way you are." — Jackie, Soil Factory

"The act of existing is protest." — Suz, Hammerstone School

ABSTRACT

As traditional third places contract under the pressures of rising rents, shifting social habits, and chronic underfunding of public institutions, questions about what fills the gap have become increasingly urgent. For queer communities, this contraction takes form, as spaces once anchoring queer life, the gay bar, the lesbian café, the LGBTQ+ nightlife district, are disappearing not only through economic displacement but through the gradual erosion of the need to hide. As acceptance has expanded in many places, the explicitly queer gathering space exists in limbo, their necessity harder to name, even as the need persists. This study asks where queer community goes when those spaces disappear, and whether the informal, sociality of the makerspace is producing a new and durable form of queer third place, organized around shared making rather than shared identity and operating through ambient culture.

This study examines six makerspaces in the Finger Lakes region of New York as contemporary third places and sites of social infrastructure: the Soil Factory, West End Ceramics, ARQ Barn, Hammerstone School, Ithaca Clay School, and the Tompkins County Public Library Makerspace. Drawing on interviews with organizers at each site, reflexive thematic analysis identifies five consistent themes: belonging through shared making; craft as a social leveler; the irreplaceability of physical presence in community formation; inclusion as a spectrum from structural to programmatic intervention; and physical space as a constitutive part of community life. A sixth finding concerns queer friendliness and the functionality as sites of queer belonging, operating through ambient culture, ownership identity, and sustained community. This study argues that makerspaces are producing a new form of queer third space with direct implications for planners, who may recognize in these spaces a form of community infrastructure.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Conley is a second-year Master of Regional Planning student at Cornell University, with a focus on environmental and community planning, land use, and placemaking. She earned her undergraduate degree from Binghamton University, where she studied environmental policy, administration, and law. After graduation, Lizzi worked as a Town Planner for the Town of Jupiter, Florida, where she worked in current planning, evaluating site plans and development proposals and translating the Town's comprehensive plan into day-to-day land use decisions. Following her time at Cornell, she will continue her work as a public servant at the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council as a Transportation Planner II.

Lizzi came to this research through her own practice as a ceramic artist. She is queer, and her thesis on makerspaces, third places, and queer belonging began in the studios where she first felt like she belonged somewhere. She co-runs Somersault Ceramics with her partner, Ravenel Davis.

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Introduction

Ray Oldenburg (1989) called them “third places” or the spaces beyond home and work where community forms, where people become known to each other, where belonging is built through habit rather than intention. His examples were the pub, the barbershop, the café. He was writing in 1989, and even then, he was writing a kind of elegy, documenting spaces that were already under pressure, already beginning to disappear. The definition has held up, but the spaces have not. For queer communities, this contraction takes a particular form where the spaces that once anchored queer life are disappearing not only through rising rents, shifting habits, but through the gradual erosion of the need to hide. Acceptance has expanded even as explicitly queer gathering has become harder to sustain. This study is one attempt to ask whether makerspaces are doing what bars, clubs and cafes once did — and if so, how, for whom, and whether, for queer communities in particular they are filling a gap and producing a new and durable form of queer third place.

I came to this question through a studio. When I moved to Ithaca as a new graduate student in regional planning, I did what ceramists do, I looked for a place that I could use a wheel. I found the Ithaca Clay School, applied for a scholarship, and spent the next several months discovering this studio’s community, one that had been quietly building itself for a decade before I arrived. It also gave me a methodological orientation, as a queer ceramicist I am drawn to the ways that third spaces, particularly artist studios and makerspaces, take shape and support creative practice. After integrating into or trying out several of these spaces, I began noticing how differences in energy, building typology, membership structure, and overall business model shaped my experiences within them. These variations were not superficial; they altered how I felt, created, collaborated, and belonged.

The contraction of third places is uneven, and its consequences fall hardest on those who had the fewest options to begin with — a pattern Klinenberg’s (2018) research on neighborhood mortality and Forstie’s (2020) work on small city queer community both illuminate, as this study addresses in the literature review. For queer communities specifically, the spaces that once anchored community formation, the gay bar, the lesbian café, the LGBTQ+ nightlife district, have been closing in significant numbers, displaced by rising commercial rents, shifting generational habits, and a mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ visibility that has paradoxically made explicitly queer spaces disappear. What is less clear and what the scholarship has not yet fully answered, is where queer community goes when those spaces disappear. This study proposes that in the Finger Lakes region of New York, at least part of the answer is to the makerspace. Not by design, and not under that name, but through the same mechanisms Oldenburg (1989) described of regular, voluntary, informal gathering organized around shared activity rather than shared identity.

These spaces in the Finger Lakes include a feminist carpentry school, a rural artist residency, two ceramics studios, a free urban ecology lab and art space, and a public library makerspace. They differ dramatically in cost, governance, physical form, and mission. This study argues these spaces share a set of mechanisms through which making things together becomes the foundation for community, and through which queer safety accumulates. While these spaces often occur or exist on the peripheral, so often do traditional queer third spaces.

This project examines examples of these spaces through the frameworks of third place theory, social infrastructure, and queer placemaking, drawing on semi-structured interviews with the organizers and leaders who built and sustain them. It is guided by four questions: How do these spaces form, and what social, cultural, and spatial intentions guide their creation? In what ways do they foster community, belonging, and identity, particularly for marginalized and queer

makers? How does the physical environment shape the experiences of those who use them? And what can their design and governance teach planners about how to support the kinds of community infrastructure that existing zoning, tax, and funding categories were never built to recognize?

Literature Review

Oldenburg (1989), in *The Great Good Place*, coined the term “third place” and theorized a category of social space that offered a framework to capture what informal public life can and should offer people. Oldenburg's framework has held up remarkably well as a diagnosis, even as the specific spaces he described have declined in measurable ways — between 2008 and 2015, civic and social organizations decreased by 33 percent nationally and food and beverage stores by 23 percent, with almost all categories declining after 2012 (Finlay et al., 2019). Third places, they argue, may be closing at an alarming rate, with consequences for public health and community wellbeing that planning has yet to fully reckon with. The corner pub, the diner, the civic club are all contracting, changing, or disappearing under the combined pressures of rising rents, shifting habits, and the erosion of the informal neighborhood economies that once sustained them. These spaces were the basis of community itself, the places where people became known to each other, where civic identity formed through repetition and ease, where belonging was built not by design but by habit. “Third places,” he wrote, are places that “offer both the basis of community and the celebration of it” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 14). Without them, he argued, what remains is a society of strangers living parallel lives. The literature that followed Oldenburg has worked to extend his definition beyond its original examples to basketball courts, dog parks, community gardens, farmers markets, and hair salons have all been claimed as contemporary third places (Project for Public Spaces, 2026).

Eric Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People* (2018) provides the bridge between Oldenburg's social observation and a planning relevant framework. Klinenberg defines social infrastructure as "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact," arguing that it plays an essential and systematically underappreciated role in democratic life, as the material precondition for community itself (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 5). Importantly, he distinguishes social infrastructure from social capital, explaining social capital describes people's relationships and networks; social infrastructure describes the physical conditions that make those relationships possible. Without the places, the bonds do not form, leaving people disconnected from their own community. Klinenberg explicitly cites Oldenburg's third places as one category of social infrastructure, positioning the two frameworks as complementary and synthesizing third places are the informal end of a broader spectrum of civic infrastructure that also includes libraries, parks, schools, and community gardens. Together, Oldenburg and Klinenberg conclude that where people can gather matters enormously, and we have been systematically underinvesting in the conditions that make gathering possible. This argument has deeper theoretical roots. Lefebvre (1996) understood the city itself as an *oeuvre*, a work of use value, under chronic pressure from the logic of exchange, which tends to subordinate gathering, making, and belonging to the demands of the market. Capitalism continually pressures towards exchange and profit rather than social capital. Klinenberg's social infrastructure framework extends Lefebvre's diagnosis into planning practice, when exchange value crowds out use value, the physical conditions for community disappear with it.

When Klinenberg showed that neighborhoods with stronger social infrastructure had dramatically lower mortality rates during the 1995 Chicago heat wave, he was demonstrating, that physical space is not neutral and is always political. "People forge bonds in places that have healthy social infrastructures," he writes, "not because they set out to build community, but

because when people engage in sustained, recurrent interaction, particularly while doing things they enjoy, relationships inevitably grow” (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 5). The phrase “doing things they enjoy” points toward the makerspace, a space defined precisely by shared voluntary activity, as a form of social infrastructure that neither Oldenburg nor Klinenberg fully theorized.

The distinction between third place and third space matters for this study. Elmborg (2011), drawing on Lefebvre and Homi Bhabha, argues that third places risk becoming commodified destinations when institutions attempt to market and manage them into existence — what Lefebvre calls “dominated space,” governed by rules and explicit structures that crowd out alternative uses. Third Space, by contrast, is “open, symbolic, playful, and generative” (Elmborg, 2011, p. 345), emerging through human encounter and appropriation rather than design. The makerspaces in this study function less like third places in Oldenburg’s original sense and more like third spaces in this expanded understanding — claimed through sustained presence and use rather than built for a designated community or purpose. This distinction also speaks to a limitation in Oldenburg’s framework. Writing in 1989, Oldenburg could not have anticipated the social media platforms, digital connectivity, and shifting generational habits that have since transformed how community forms. David Harvey (1989), writing in the same period, identified an “intense phase of time-space compression” driven by accelerating capitalism — the collapse of distance and the acceleration of exchange — that has fundamentally reorganized how people relate to physical space and to each other. Where Oldenburg mourned the loss of the corner pub, Harvey helps us understand why, not simply through economic displacement, but through a broader cultural transformation that has made physical presence feel optional in ways it never did before. Oldenburg was right to be elegiac for these spaces and in his claim that physical, recurrent, voluntary gathering produces something that digital connection does not.

The library occupies a particular position in this landscape. Elmborg (2011) argues that libraries have historically functioned as what Lefebvre calls absolute space, so defined by their cultural identity and institutional rules that they resist appropriation or reinvention. Yet Elmborg sees this as a choice rather than a fate. When library space is understood as Third Space rather than Third Place, its openness to appropriation by diverse users becomes its most powerful feature. "Every user of the library," he writes, "can be understood as a borderland person, intellectually crossing boundaries and moving between what she or he is and what she or he hopes to become" (Elmborg, 2011, p. 346). The Tompkins County Public Library Makerspace, free and publicly accessible, enacts exactly this logic and its presence among the six sites in this study raises the question of whether publicly funded institutions might be better positioned than private studios to sustain the kind of open, unlabeled gathering this study describes.

The scholarly literature on makerspaces has grown rapidly over the past decade, but it has mostly been looking in a different direction. Mersand's (2021) comprehensive review of the field shows that early scholarship celebrated the maker movement primarily for its technological novelty, democratizing access to fabrication tools, enabling distributed manufacturing, empowering amateur inventors. As makerspaces spread into public libraries, community organizations, and nonprofit arts spaces, researchers began documenting broader civic functions, like informal learning, intergenerational mentorship, peer skill sharing, and community capacity building (Taylor et al., 2016). But the dominant lens remained economic and technological, centered on urban innovation districts and entrepreneurial ecosystems that bear little resemblance to a ceramic studio in Ithaca or a feminist carpentry school in Trumansburg. Kumar and Summers (2023) argue that definitional ambiguity in the field is itself a problem. The word "makerspace" flattens real and meaningful differences between spaces that operate under very different missions, governance structures, and social logics. The craft based, materially

grounded, community-oriented makerspace remains on the margins of mainstream scholarship, which has focused heavily on digital fabrication and STEM oriented spaces.

Not only is there a demonstrated gap within the community created makerspace, but a geographic gap as well. Ensign and Leupold (2018) are among the few scholars to take nonurban makerspaces seriously, arguing that rural and small city spaces serve markedly different functions from their metropolitan counterparts. Ensign and Leupold (2018) find that rather than connecting to innovation districts or creative economy strategies, they emerge from grassroots community need, serve as hubs for local skill and mutual aid, and operate within tightly knit communities where relationships between makers, organizers, and the surrounding landscape are direct and visible. Van Leuven (2004) argues too that the primary contribution to the communities that third spaces inhabit are as generators of social capital, rather than revenue, economic development, or even attention from policymakers or local leaders. The Finger Lakes region is a particularly interesting case, because makerspaces here have emerged not from institutional planning but from personal vision, community response, and the particular cultural character of a region shaped by agriculture, adaptive reuse, and a long tradition of informal creative networks. Understanding them requires a framework attentive to craft, landscape, and community life.

Not only are makerspaces social infrastructure, but they cultivate and offer an incubator for individual connection. Richard Sennett, in *The Craftsman* (2008), argues that making things with your hands is not just a technical activity, it is a social and ethical one. Craftsmanship, he writes, names “an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake,” but its implications extend far beyond the individual maker (Sennett, 2008, p. 9). The ancient ideal of craftsmanship, he shows, was always “joined skill in community,” the workshop, not the lone genius, was the original site of making (Sennett, 2008, p. 51). Working with resistant

materials, failing in public, developing skill through repetition alongside others are not incidental features of craft practice. They are, for Sennett, how people learn to deal with the resistances and ambiguities of human relationships. “The craft of making physical things,” he writes, “provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others” (Sennett, 2008, p. 289). This framework enables people to have a shared struggle and come together in a neutral way, as humans with a shared experience to attempt to confront these material challenges.

Fountain (2025) extends this insight into explicitly queer territory, arguing that crafting is "not just an engagement with materials and techniques but often an encounter between people and places" — and that queerness itself primarily exists in connection with others and the world around us. The makerspace, where both of these logics operate simultaneously, becomes a particularly dense site for the formation of queer belonging.

The social dimensions of craft that Sennett identifies take on additional resonance when considered alongside queerness. Fountain (2025) argues that both craft and queerness have historically occupied marginalized positions, queer in opposition to heteronormativity, craft in opposition to fine art, and that this shared marginality is not coincidental. LGBTQ+ practitioners have long been drawn to craft precisely because its materials and processes offer a way to give form to identities and communities that have themselves been marginalized or deemed lesser. The art/craft binary, Fountain argues, has little to do with distinguishing between types of creative activity and everything to do with power, mirroring limiting binaries of masculine/feminine and legitimate/illegitimate that queer practice has always worked to dismantle.

While the craft and making brings people together, one of the main and unseen difficulties of a space is its inclusionary form. Despite their frequent rhetoric of openness, makerspaces reproduce the exclusions of the broader society around them. Smit and Fuchsberger

(2020) identify “diversity hurdles” that disproportionately affect women, racial minorities, and newcomers, through intimidation by equipment, masculine or male dominated cultures, or opaque norms about expertise. Hedditch and Vyas (2023) go further, showing in an ethnographic study of nine spaces that marginalized women, particularly under-resourced women of color with migrant backgrounds, face distinct “threshold barriers” before even feeling entitled to enter. The threshold is not just physical; it is psychological and cultural. Inclusive environments, they find, require targeted partnerships, culturally sensitive practices, and active recognition of intersectional identities. DesPortes et al. (2021) extend this into questions of governance and design, demonstrating how a social justice makerspace can embed equity-oriented practices structurally, treating inclusion not as a value to aspire to but as an outcome to design for.

Where inclusion work happens can also be explored, where Hedditch and Vyas locate the problem at the threshold in the structural and cultural barriers that prevent entry in the first place. DesPortes et al. (2021) locate the solution in governance and deliberate design. Smit and Fuchsberger (2020) point to the subtler work of cultural norms and everyday interaction. The implication is that there is no single solution and inclusion is a spectrum of interventions operating simultaneously at different scales, from pricing structures and physical layout to the tone set by staff and the informal rituals of a community.

The traditional anchors of queer community are in structural decline. Amin Ghaziani (2010) documents this shift in what he calls the “post-gay era,” in which assimilation has expanded queer people’s residential imagination beyond discrete gay enclaves while simultaneously erasing their identifiable location in place, gays “deselecting traditional gay neighborhoods” even as straights move in. The result is not the death of queer community but its dispersal. Stillwagon and Ghaziani (2019), in their landmark study of queer pop-ups, document the creative response to this decline are ephemeral events that temporarily transform non-queer

spaces into sites of queer belonging, producing what they describe as enduring experiences of community and self-exploration despite their impermanence. The decline they are responding to is well documented for example in San Francisco, LGBTQ+ bars dropped from thirteen to three between 2004 and 2015; in London, the number of queer venues fell by 58% in a single decade; researchers have found similar patterns across Europe, Canada, and Australia (Stillwagon & Ghaziani, 2019). Bitterman (2020) describes this spatial transformation as a “rainbow diaspora,” a dispersal of queer community away from concentrated gayborhoods and nightlife centered gathering toward smaller, more distributed, more varied social geographies.

These shifts look different outside major cities. Forstie (2020), in research on LGBTQ communities in small cities, shows that the “gayborhood” model was never the primary form of queer community in non-metropolitan contexts and that queer belonging in smaller places has always operated differently, through social networks, informal gathering, and spaces not explicitly labeled as queer. This matters for the Finger Lakes, where there are no gayborhoods and where queer community has always been more ambient than institutional. The question this study asks is not whether these makerspaces are queer spaces in the traditional sense, but whether they are functioning as the kind of distributed, informal queer gathering that both Stillwagon and Ghaziani’s pop-up model and Forstie’s small-city research suggest is the emerging form of queer belonging outside urban centers. Understanding where queer community goes in this dispersal requires rethinking what makes a space queer in the first place. Binnie (1997) argues that space is not naturally or authentically straight but rather actively produced and heterosexualized through social practice — which implies the inverse is equally possible, that spaces can be produced as queer through sustained use, culture, and habit without explicit intent. Lefebvre’s (1996) concept of appropriation supports this, where groups insert themselves into urban space and claim it through sustained inhabitation rather than formal designation, reshaping

its character through presence and practice alone. Reed (1996) offers a useful term for exactly this dynamic, queer space as *imminent*, not formally designated but in the process of taking place through accumulated community and sustained presence. No single sign makes a space queer, Reed argues, but the accumulation of many individuals' habits and inhabitation marks it as such. Oswin (2008), drawing on Probyn (1996), puts it more directly: queer spaces are "delineated through coincidence and not through exclusion" (p. 97). This study's understanding of queerness draws on Halperin's (1995, as cited in Fountain, 2025) definition: queer as whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant — an identity without an essence, and therefore not reducible to explicit LGBTQ+ designation. It is this understanding that makes the unlabeled queer safety of the makerspace legible as queer space at all. In this study, queer space is understood not as a formally designated LGBTQ+ venue, but as a space in which queer people experience sustained safety, visibility, and belonging through everyday participation.

Taken together, this body of work points toward a clear convergence of gaps in the literature. Third-place theory tells us that these spaces matter but does not account for makerspaces as a form. Social infrastructure theory tells us that physical space determines whether bonds form but has not examined craft-based making as a specific mechanism. The makerspace literature has documented civic functions in urban contexts but largely ignored the rural, the craft based, and the queer. The inclusion literature has mapped barriers and design responses without yet theorizing the full spectrum from structural to cultural to programmatic intervention. And the queer placemaking literature has documented decline and creative response without yet asking whether the informal, non-labeled queer safety of the workshop or ceramics studio is a new and durable form of queer third space. This study sits at the intersection of all of these conversations and, through six spaces in the Finger Lakes, attempts to move each of them forward.

Methods and Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, site-based design to examine six makerspaces in the Finger Lakes region of New York as contemporary third places and sites of community formation. The research is grounded in place-based inquiry, interpretive qualitative methods, and feminist and queer methodological traditions, with an emphasis on context, lived experience, and reflexivity.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with organizers and community leaders at each site, supplemented by on-site observation during each visit. Analysis followed the six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), which supports inductive meaning-making and treats researcher engagement with the data as an integral part of the analytic process. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen because it does not treat the researcher as a neutral observer. Instead, it recognizes that the researcher's identity, experience, and theoretical commitments actively shape how data are read and interpreted. As a queer ceramicist who has participated in several of the spaces studied here, my positionality is not incidental to this research, but a part of what made certain patterns visible in the six phases of analysis, from initial familiarization through to the final interpretive narrative.

Interviews were conducted with organizers, founders, and community leaders at each of the six spaces. Participants included Jackie at Soil Factory, Kyle at West End Ceramics, Zoe at ARQ Barn, Suz at Hammerstone School, Julia at the Ithaca Clay School, and Josh at the Tompkins County Public Library Makerspace. All six participants consented to be identified by name in this study; the project was described to all participants as celebratory in orientation, concerned with understanding and amplifying what these spaces do rather than auditing or evaluating them.

Interviews were semi-structured, following a 26-question guide organized around six thematic domains (see Appendix A): background and origin story; community and belonging;

space, design, and inclusion; identity and representation; making and meaning; and broader context and future vision. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to follow unexpected directions while maintaining enough consistency across sites to support meaningful comparison. The range of topics allowed for a more exploratory study to see what themes emerged from sites, that varied in business typology, governance and mission. Interviews ranged in length from approximately forty-five minutes to over ninety minutes and were conducted on-site at each space. All interviews were audio recorded with participant permission and transcribed.

Site visits also included tours and informal observation of each space's physical environment: layout, building typology, sensory atmosphere, and the ways people moved through and used the space during open hours. Photographs were taken with permission at the sites and informed the space profile descriptions, ranging from inside the space, the outside of the building, and the general area and land use that is surrounding the site.

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen for its compatibility with the study's interpretive and feminist methodological commitments: it supports inductive meaning-making, integrates researcher positionality as a resource, and accommodates the complexity of spatial, social, and identity-based dynamics that this study engages. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. It is distinguished from other forms of thematic analysis by its emphasis on the researcher's active role in constructing themes rather than neutrally extracting them from the data. This approach is particularly suited to research that engages questions of identity, place, and belonging, where the researcher's own experience and perspective are relevant to what is seen and heard in the data.

Analysis proceeded through six phases. The first phase involved familiarization: transcripts were read and reread, early impressions were noted in analytic memos, and initial observations about recurring language, spatial description, and patterns of belonging were recorded. The second phase involved generating initial codes with a line-by-line engagement with the transcripts to identify meaningful units across domains including spatial affordances, rituals of belonging, community norms and governance, queer visibility, material practices, barriers to access, and emotional tone.

In the third phase, initial thematic clusters were developed from the codes and created groupings that pointed toward patterns recurring across multiple spaces and multiple participants. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining these clusters for coherence and distinctiveness, especially looking at the relationships between them. The fifth phase involved defining and naming each theme. The sixth and final phase involved producing the interpretive narrative that connects the themes to each other, to the literature, and to the planning implications that follow from them. The themes reported here are inductive, since they emerged from the data through the exploratory format of the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the Cornell University Institutional Review Board and is classified as Exempt under federal guidelines. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were advised that they could decline any question or withdraw at any time. As noted above, all participants chose to be identified by name. Data were stored securely in accordance with Cornell IRB requirements throughout the research process.

Site Selection

Six “makerspaces” were selected for this study, the Soil Factory, West End Ceramics, ARQ Barn, Hammerstone School, Ithaca Clay School, and the Tompkins County Public Library

Makerspace. All six are located in the Finger Lakes region of New York, with five in or near Ithaca and one, ARQ Barn, in Mecklenburg, approximately twenty miles to the west.

Sites were selected to capture meaningful variation in typology, governance, mission, cost structure, and community composition. The six spaces represent a range that includes a publicly funded institution and a zero cost collective; a brand-new studio and a space with over a decade of history; a rural residential artist community and a downtown urban workshop; a space with an explicitly political identity and spaces whose politics are embedded in culture rather than mission statement. This variation is central to the study’s comparative logic and the cross-site findings emerge across spaces that differ in almost every other way, except loosely meeting the criteria of a “makerspace”.

Space Profiles

Soil Factory — Ithaca, NY

Member of the Collective: Jackie



Soil Factory occupies a repurposed industrial site on the edge of downtown Ithaca, where the line between inside and outside is blurred. An open garage door serves as the primary threshold, when it is up, it invites people to gather inside and out. Inside, a single large room resists partitioning, furnished with workbenches, communal tables, a “living room,” a kitchen

corner, zones for different kinds of making that flow into one another without walls to divide them. The creative zones include a sewing corner equipped with machines and tools to use, a ceramic section full of clay, glazes and kins, and an open space used for dance parties, potlucks, and while I visited the space, a pop-up art gallery. Outside, a rewilded landscape of soil beds, composting systems, and gathering areas extends the space into the environment around it.

Soil Factory was founded by a collective of six friends that formed the first board, whose vision for the space is rooted in collective ownership and ecological imagination. The landlord, John, who runs the mechanic shop next door allowed at first an experimental art display, organized by the six friends and then continued to allow the space to grow into an art, science, and sustainability centered community space. It is, by design, entirely free to use, the most structurally radical inclusion model among the six spaces in this study, and one Jackie describes as an ideological choice rather than a pragmatic one. Programming ranges from making and craft to gardening, political education, and community care. Governance is similarly flat, a “contributionist” economy in which everyone who participates is considered a stakeholder, with no formal hierarchy between organizers and members. The space operates under a 49-person capacity constraint that shapes its programming and stands as an early example of the planning friction that runs through this study. What Soil Factory offers, above all else, is permission to show up without credentials, without money, and without a plan.

Soil Factory's financial model is as unconventional as its governance. For its first four years, rent was covered through Cornell faculty research grants with community engagement requirements, a creative alignment of institutional funding with grassroots space. When that funding ended, the community response was immediate: a sustaining membership program launched, a summer solstice fundraiser generated community investment, and a Warhol Foundation grant began covering artist residency and operational costs. Jackie describes the

model frankly, the space nearly closed, and its survival required the community to recognize that keeping it open was their collective responsibility. The result is a funding structure that is genuinely participatory, precarious, and intentional all at once.

West End Ceramics — Ithaca, NY

Organizer: Kyle



West End Ceramics sits at the western edge of Ithaca’s urban core, in an adaptive industrial space whose waterfront windows and generous light contrast to the peripheral nature and location of the space. Kyle opened it recently, making it the newest space in this study and the one most visibly in the process of becoming, a community still in its early formation, what Kyle describes as showing only its first “glimmers.” The studio offers classes and open studio hours, with wheels arranged in a circular layout that faces makers toward one another rather than toward walls, a spatial decision Kyle made deliberately after years of thinking about how ceramics studios either enable or foreclose social interaction.

The founding story is personal, Kyle received something essential from a ceramic studio at seventeen — emotional support from a trusted adult at a moment when he needed it — and has built West End with the explicit intention of replicating that experience for others. Ceramics, he knows, is one of the most expensive creative hobbies there are, and the cost barrier is real;

scholarship conversations are underway, and the self-critical honesty with which Kyle discusses race and class as structural problems, not programming challenges, sets West End apart in this study. The space is still finding its footing financially, navigating tariffs on materials, and the particular difficulty of opening a new community space in a neighborhood whose gentrification boundary shapes who feels comfortable approaching the door.

West End is the most straightforwardly entrepreneurial space in the study, sustained entirely through class fees and memberships with no grant funding or outside financial backing. Kyle built a business plan with support from the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce's free small business advising program, ran the numbers, and opened, only to see his projections immediately upended by tariff increases on ceramics materials that followed Liberation Day. The saving grace, he notes, has been that signups have run double his projections. Whether the space will reach long-term solvency depends entirely on whether that growth continues. Scholarship conversations are underway but not yet formalized, and Kyle is frank about the tension between the community mission and the financial reality of running a new space in its first years.

ARQ Barn — Trumansburg, NY

Owner and Organizer: Zoe



ARQ Barn, Artist Resource Quarters, occupies a collection of agricultural buildings on a rural property outside Trumansburg, New York, ranging from 80 to 120 years old and in various states of ongoing repair. It is simultaneously a working makerspace, a residential artist community, and a living piece of family history. Zoe's parents met at a space like this, her father built ARQ Barn over decades, and she and her sister Alex inherited it, along with its community, its debt, its infrastructure backlog, and its mission, when he died unexpectedly several years ago. The transition was abrupt, and the grief was public; the open hospice period, when the community came through in waves to say goodbye, is remembered by Zoe as one of the clearest expressions of what the space had become.

ARQ Barn currently houses approximately nineteen tenants in a combination of studio and residential spaces, staying consistently below market rate as its primary mechanism of inclusion. It is located in what Zoe calls a "centrally dislocated" geography, close enough to Ithaca and Trumansburg to draw from their cultural ecosystems, far enough from both to require a car, to feel rural, and to operate outside the funding boundaries that Tompkins County arts organizations can access. The space's name itself carries history, it was formerly called Carmen Road Artist Quarters, CRAQ, when community misperception about the name prompted local officials to pressure the property to shut down entirely. Zoe describes intense discussions with people who believed, based on the name, that the space was producing illicit substances rather than art. The arc in ARQ, Zoe notes, suggests a rainbow, a movement forward, a shift. Language, she says, has power.

ARQ Barn has never received outside funding of any kind. Everything has been sustained through tenant rent, studio and residential, kept deliberately below market rate as both a financial model and an inclusion mechanism. Zoe notes that most makerspaces she is aware of have some form of outside financial backing; ARQ Barn has none and has survived entirely on the margin

between what tenants can afford and what the property requires to operate. There is no scholarship program, but the below-market rate is itself the scholarship — Zoe describes the space as staying a couple hundred dollars below comparable offerings in the region as a structural commitment to accessibility rather than a programmatic one.

Hammerstone School — Ithaca/Trumansburg, NY

Organizer: Suz Newman (Board Member and TA); Founder: Maria



Hammerstone School is a women, gender minority, and sexual minority centered carpentry and construction workshop with a clear founding story. Maria, its founder, spent years in the trades, including a decade as a carpenter during which there was, for a stretch of six months, one other woman on any job site. She started Hammerstone in 2013 in response to a specific, visible gap, the absence of women in the built trades, and the absence of welcoming spaces for women and gender minorities who wanted to learn. The first class was built around a friend's tiny house project. That structure still exists and transcended beyond the traditional passing down of trade or carpentry knowledge from father to son.

Hammerstone now operates across two locations, a rural Trumansburg site with an orchard, animals, and a particular social density for members that forms through location

isolation, and a downtown Ithaca location that opened access to people without cars and drew a wider regional and national audience. Of the six spaces in this study, Hammerstone is the most explicitly political in its public identity, flying rainbow flags at the entrance, pronouns on name tags from the first moment of every class, solidarity programming for immigrants, refugees, and gender minorities, and a sliding scale fee structure that treats economic access as a design requirement rather than an afterthought. Suz, who took their first class two days after the 2016 election and has been involved ever since, describes it simply as one of the spaces where they feel most comfortable in their queerness.

Hammerstone's business typology has shifted from a for-profit to a non-profit. Suz describes the chicken-and-egg reality of nonprofit grant funding — you need an active donor base to qualify for grants, and building that donor base takes time and community investment that the organization is still developing. Several grant applications have been met with encouragement to reapply the following year. The sliding scale fee structure means that not all classes generate the same revenue, which makes the donor and grant development work more urgent. Hammerstone is in the process of building the infrastructure that will make it sustainable, but is not there yet.

Ithaca Clay School — Ithaca, NY

Organizer: Julia



The Ithaca Clay School was founded ten years ago by Julia, a self-taught ceramicist and former public school teacher who watched Cornell University's community ceramics studio close in 2011 and decided, after a year of waiting for someone else to replace it, that the replacement was hers to build. It took eighteen months to find the right space, since ceramics demands industrial-scale infrastructure, from kiln ventilation to the ability to receive pallets of clay and she landed in the South Hill Business District, an older industrial building that houses roughly four hundred workers across a range of creative and technical enterprises. That building scale community is not incidental to the Clay School's character; the ceramic artist down the hall who handles firing for home studio potters, the proximity of Longview retirement community next door, the informal network of makers who cross paths in shared corridors, all of it shapes what the Clay School is.

The school has grown from ten members at opening to approximately eighty-five today. It offers classes, open studio membership, and a scholarship program explicitly directed toward people from marginalized communities, which is a mechanism Julia describes as one of the most concrete things she can do to address a demographic homogeneity she names honestly. The space runs on relatively affordable rent for the area that Julia knows is existentially precarious, as one significant rent increase could close the school. She has pivoted the operation five times since opening, most dramatically during the pandemic, and describes her philosophy simply, that clay is universal and timeless, and leadership means being willing to change every system around it while protecting the thing itself.

The Clay School operates as a straightforward small business, sustained entirely through class fees and open studio memberships. Julia has considered nonprofit status as a future option that would unlock grant funding but has not made that transition.

Tompkins County Public Library Makerspace — Ithaca, NY

Organizer: Josh



The Tompkins County Public Library Makerspace sits on Green Street in downtown Ithaca, inside the county’s main public library branch. It is the only space in this study that is publicly funded, institutionally housed, free at the point of use, and accessible by public transit, a combination that makes it, structurally, the closest approximation to Oldenburg’s true third place among the six, being accessible and affordable to all. Josh, a library assistant who has worked at the library for seventeen years and has been in the makerspace since it opened roughly seven or eight years ago, describes it as a place with “no obstacles,” a phrase that carries weight when held against the access barriers present in every other space in this study, whether it is financial or physical.

The makerspace emerged from a two-year campaign led by then director Susan Curry, who had been following the Denver Public Library’s model and recognized the makerspace as part of how libraries adapt to changing communities. It is equipped with 3D printers, laser cutters, embroidery and sewing machines, a cricket cutter, and design software, with one-on-one training available. Programming reaches teens, LGBTQ+ community members, immigrants and refugees, retirees, and small business owners, encapsulating a breadth of community service that

reflects the library's public mandate. The space's institutional home is also its primary constraint, being housed in a county building with strict rules about modification, the makerspace has found even basic expansions, like a ventilation system for the laser cutter, would require significant time, money, and bureaucratic navigation. The freedom that public funding provides comes paired with the rigidity that public governance imposes, a tradeoff that runs through this study's planning implications.

The Library makerspace operates on a different financial framework from the other five spaces. As a county-funded public institution, it does not depend on class fees, memberships, grants, or donor development to keep its doors open. This structural difference is the source of its greatest strength, free, transit-accessible, and institutionally stable, and sometimes a large constraint, since expanding programming or equipment requires navigating county approval processes rather than simply deciding to grow.

Thematic Analysis

Six makerspaces in the Finger Lakes region, a free urban ecology lab, two ceramics studios, a feminist carpentry school, a rural artist residency, and a public library makerspace, all differ from one another in almost every measurable way of cost, scale, governance, physical form, age, and stated mission. See Appendix B for a full chart of the spaces across the explored themes. Across all six, six themes emerged consistently from conversations with the organizers and community leaders who built and sustain them, a belonging activated through shared making rather than shared identity; the medium of craft as a social leveler that bypasses class and credential; the irreplaceability of physical presence in community formation; inclusion as a spectrum of interventions rather than a single policy; physical space as a constitutive force in community life; and queer belonging. Together, these findings suggest that makerspaces in this region are doing something that planning scholarship has not yet fully named, functioning as a

new form of third place, built not around consumption or shared identity but around the act of making something alongside other people.

Belonging Through Doing

The most consistent finding across all six spaces is that belonging is activated through participation rather than identity. What matters is not who someone is, but whether they are willing to show up and make something alongside others.

Soil Factory's Jackie articulates this most directly. There is, she says, "no prescription" for how to be in the space: "You can just show up whatever way you are." The absence of a social script is the point. No qualifying metrics, no demonstrable expertise, no legible identity category grants or denies entry. What the space asks of people is simply presence and willingness. Jackie describes belonging as something modeled organically through observed behavior rather than transmitted through rules. Members learn how to be there by watching people be there, and the primary thing observed is that no particular way of being is required.

ARQ Barn's Zoe takes this further in her description of how new tenants are selected. The interview process, she explains, is oriented entirely toward the person rather than their artists' portfolio, "It is entirely irrelevant if we are the audience for your art." What matters is whether this person will be a good community member, whether they will contribute to the social fabric of the space, whether they will show up. Skill, reputation, and artistic achievement are explicitly set aside. This is perhaps the most radical anti-gatekeeping position in the study, and it articulates what all six spaces practice in different forms. The idea that belonging is earned through presence and participation rather than demonstrated through credentials or identity.

This has theoretical consequences, especially how Oldenburg's third place is defined partly by its leveling function, which is the sense that everyone is equal within the space regardless of their status outside it. But the six spaces in this study go further than Oldenburg's

formulation, by not simply treating people equally once they arrive; they structure the conditions of arrival around activity rather than identity.

The Clay School's Julia describes this through the medium itself. When you sit down at a wheel, she observes, "you don't have to talk about your kids, your work, your family, whatever. You could literally just talk about clay and create a whole relationship around what you're doing." The shared activity provides a social script that bypasses the usual identity sorting small talk — the conversational rituals through which people signal class, life-stage, education, and status. Clay, or carpentry, or needle felting, or laser cutting, substitutes a different common ground and provide the immediate shared challenge of making something you do not yet know how to make. That common ground is available to anyone willing to sit down at the wheel.

The Library's Josh describes the result: "Everybody in here has a shared common interest in creative expression, so it's very organic." He has watched dozens of friendships form over the years, almost always initiated not by formal introduction but by curiosity about what someone else is making. "Somebody will see somebody doing something and be like, oh my God, that's so cool, did you make that yourself? How did you do that?" The handmade object opens inquiry. It gives people a reason to turn toward each other that has nothing to do with their identities and everything to do with what their hands are doing. This is belonging through doing and the primary mechanism through which community forms in these spaces.

Making as Social Leveler

Belonging through doing is not, by itself, a leveling force. What makes it leveling in these spaces is specific to the nature of craft, where the materials are difficult, the learning is public, and none, regardless of background, credential, or life experience, is exempt from the humility that making something challenging in front of other people requires.

Kyle at West End Ceramics describes the kiln as the great equalizer. No matter how skilled a maker is, the kiln produces results that nobody fully controls. A term coined through ceramic spaces as putting pieces in the hands of the “kiln gods” is the best way to describe the lack of control art has when using volatile medium’s, resulting in an “act of god” mentality. The shared shock of opening a kiln to see if the pieces came out perfectly, if some cracked, if the glazes did something unexpected, creates a collective emotional experience that cuts across whatever differences exist among the people who put their work in. “Their desires,” Kyle says of his students, “are always secondary to the technical properties of the material.” The clay does not care about your status and neither does the kiln.

Hammerstone’s Suz describes a different mechanism of making, which is the deliberate pairing of people within the structure of a class. They offered a specific sweet example, “a 20 something non-binary person partnered with a 70-year-old nurse,” and notes simply: “they wouldn’t work together otherwise, and they get to know each other.” The structure of the class does what informal social settings rarely do, it removes the choice to stay within your comfort zone. You are assigned a partner, you are given a task that neither of you can complete alone, and the relationship that forms is a product of the shared work rather than any preexisting affinity. This is, of all the spaces in the study, the most engineered form of social leveling, where Hammerstone does not wait for people to find each other across difference; it puts them together and gives them something to build.

Soil Factory’s flat hierarchy takes yet another form. Jackie describes a “contributionist economy” in which skill-sharing is lateral rather than hierarchical. She explained “I don’t know the most in the room,” but no one does. The space operates on the assumption that everyone present has something to offer and something to learn, and that the usual distinctions between teacher and student, expert and novice, are neither stable nor particularly useful. What replaces

those distinctions is a web of mutual resourcefulness, people turning to each other with problems, offering what they have, finding solutions in the collective.

ARQ Barn's Zoe provides the most tactile illustration of this through a single story. Her partner needed to open a device that had triangle headed screws, which is an unusual bit that most toolkits do not include. They texted the communal group chat, where a tenant in the knife shop replied that he did not have a triangle bit, but he did have an angle grinder for sharpening blades and a square screwdriver. "Let's just make a triangle," he said. Zoe's reflection on the moment is simple: "Oh right, you can do that. You can ask for help and somebody who understands the tools they have can come up with a solution." This is social leveling where the daily experience of living in a community where everyone has different skills and the right response to a problem is to ask rather than to struggle alone.

Julia at the Clay School offers the deepest theoretical grounding for what all of these descriptions are circling. She describes the experience of working at a wheel, where "something about you has to be stripped away. You allow yourself to sit down and mess up in front of somebody else, that is part of where community starts." The public unknowing is the equalizer of the space. Whatever status you carry into the room, your job, your education, your social position, sits outside the moment when the clay collapses on the wheel for the third time in front of a stranger who is struggling just as much as you are. That shared struggle is not incidental to the community these spaces produce, but foundational in building connections with strangers.

Richard Sennett argued in *The Craftsman* that the ancient ideal of craftsmanship was always "joined skill in community" — the workshop, not the lone genius, as the original site of making (Sennett, 2008, p. 51). The six spaces in this study confirm that argument in contemporary form. The social leveling they produce is not a side effect of craft practice, it is craft practice.

The Irreplaceability of Physical Co-Presence

Every organizer in this study, asked about what makes their space work, were all in agreement that in person, co-presence was critical in their community building and overall institutional success. Jackie at Soil Factory, when asked what physical presence contributes to belonging, answers with a single word “Everything.” Kyle at West End Ceramics compares making together in person to making alone or online, “You can’t make friends that way,” he says of the alternatives. Julia at the Clay School traces it back further, to something she describes as evolutionary, “We sat around fires and figured out how to provide for our own needs and feed ourselves. Isolation is not intuitive to us.” She draws on developmental psychology to make the same point from another angle, explaining “The first thing toddlers do is parallel play. They don’t really play with each other for the first couple of years of their life, but they play beside each other.” Side-by-side making is not a social innovation; it is, in Julia’s framing, one of the most primal things human beings do, and the makerspace is the playground to practice social interaction.

Josh at the Library offers a more immediate version of this observation. The social hub of the Library makerspace, he notes, is not the most impressive piece of equipment, but the table where people do needle felting and other forms of passive, hands-occupied making. Josh explained, “Somebody might be listening to a podcast or music while they’re doing that, and then they just start riffing off each other.” The occupation of the hands lowers the social stakes of the room. You just have to be there, doing something, and the conversation finds you. Josh also explained the intentionality of that table, where the previous design of the room contained individual pods for privacy, when they were not ever in use, they were removed and replaced by a large table that forced the people sitting there to face each other.

Hammerstone is the only space in the study that has begun to experiment with virtual programming, making it a useful test case for this argument. Suz notes that the organization has recently started offering some classes in hybrid format or in-person and virtual simultaneously and is watching to see whether the virtual participants develop the same sense of connection as those in the room. “Maybe we’ll be able to open to more people in that way,” they say, “but maybe it won’t vibe. I don’t know.” The uncertainty is the point. The hypothesis embedded in every other conversation, that physical presence is constitutive of the community, is being tested, at Hammerstone. This variability in presence makes sense for a school that aims to be inclusive but does raise questions of its success in the future without the same level of a community or classroom support.

What is already clear is that the communities these spaces have produced are inseparable from the physical experiences that generated them. Suz still has the Adirondack chair they built in their first class, reflecting “I look at it and say, I met Max when I made that chair. Max was really cool. You remember the people you made the thing with.” The object is a mnemonic for the relationship, which exists because two people were in the same room making the same thing. There is no digital substitute for that and the planners, funders, and policymakers who treat physical creative infrastructure as a luxury rather than a necessity are missing what these spaces make visible every day, that the room is the community, and the community is the room.

Inclusion as a Spectrum

All six spaces in this study practice inclusion, none in the same way, and the differences between their approaches reveal that inclusion is not a single intervention but a spectrum of overlapping mechanisms operating simultaneously at the structural, cultural, and programmatic levels.

At the structural end of the spectrum sits Soil Factory, whose zero-cost model is the most radical inclusion mechanism in the study. The programming and model are dependent on people in their community to care enough to keep it running and refuses to make belonging contingent on economic participation. The phrase “inconvenience is the cost of community” is exemplified here where members of the Soil Factory are the only contributors, not financially, but through time, energy, and donations of physical items. Next to it sits the Library, whose combination of zero cost, central downtown location, and transit accessibility makes it the only space in the study that has simultaneously removed the three most common access barriers of cost, car dependency, and geographic remoteness. Below market rent at ARQ Barn functions similarly, not as a program but as a continuous structural commitment that Zoe describes as the primary mechanism through which the space remains accessible.

At the cultural end of the spectrum, the tone set by staff and leadership, the norms around failure and fear, the informal rituals of welcome are the accessibility. Julia at the Clay School describes leading with generosity as a management philosophy, “If I were living out of scarcity... there could be 1000 rules on the wall and us kicking people out for things.” Instead, she filters every decision through the question of what protects the culture she is trying to build and emphasized “within the community, if there is potential for someone to not feel safe or respected, there’s a hard boundary.” Josh at the Library trains staff to greet every person who enters without pressuring them to engage, explaining “you greet them, you let them know, if you have any questions let me know, feel free to pop your head in, look through the cabinets.” Hammerstone names fears explicitly at the start of every class, normalizing that it is okay to be afraid of the table saw; it is okay to have kicked back on a saw once and want to talk about it. These cultural mechanisms are transmitted through practice, modeled by staff, and absorbed by community members who then extend them to newcomers.

At the programmatic end sit the most visible inclusion efforts, among these sites, including Hammerstone's solidarity classes for immigrants and refugees, its gender non-conforming programming, its sliding scale fees; the Clay School's scholarship program targeted toward marginalized identities; the Library's outreach to rehabilitation organizations and targeted LGBTQ+ programming around Pride. These are deliberate, named, repeatable interventions. They signal to specific communities that they are not just tolerated but actively sought. This type of visible programming that is not informal, but accessible to get information is an extremely important highlight on creating inclusion and openly stating that all groups are welcome and decreases barriers for people to actually enter these spaces.

These three levels are not alternatives to each other, but interdependent. Hammerstone's programmatic solidarity classes work because the cultural norm of naming fears and embracing vulnerability has already made the space safe for people who are not yet comfortable being visibly different in a room of strangers. The Clay School's scholarship works because Julia has built a culture in which economic diversity is not performative but genuine, modeled from the top down. Soil Factory's free model works because the cultural practices around it, like the reusable name tags that say you are remembered here or the handbook that is used in case of any community disagreement. The Soil Factory is also a model that is free on social hierarchies because no one person owns or controls the space.

Two of the most honest conversations about inclusion in this study are worth dwelling on. ARQ Barn's Zoe articulates the structural problem of diversity in small rural spaces, "If you are trying to have racial diversity in a small rural space that only has about 20 people, you will end up with tokenism, it's kind of the same thing you even get in Ithaca." She names the overburden placed on a small number of individuals who serve on six or seven nonprofit boards because every organization needs to demonstrate diversity. This is not a failure of commitment;

it is a structural problem that no programming can solve at the individual space level. West End's Kyle is similarly direct about race as a structural problem, describing the ceramics community has been racially homogeneous for historical reasons that predate his studio and will not be undone by scholarship conversations alone. Both of these moments represent a form of intellectual honesty about inclusion that is rare in organizational discourse.

Using Physical Space to Foster Community

The physical environments of these six spaces are not incidental to the communities they produce and create interesting case studies when compared to each other. The layout of the room, the location of the building, the threshold between inside and outside, the name on the door, all shape who feels welcome to enter, how people encounter one another once inside, and what kind of community is possible.

The most consistent spatial decision across the study is the rejection of wall facing layouts in favor of inward facing ones. Both Kyle at West End Ceramics and Julia at the Ithaca Clay School made the same deliberate choice of arranging wheels facing a central table, rather than lined up facing the walls. The wall facing layout, Kyle notes, “saves space but does not induce social interaction.” The inward facing layout sacrifices spatial efficiency for social encounter of seeing each other's work, responding to what they notice, offering help without having to cross a room. Julia describes the design logic through an analogy to kitchen workflow, where you arrange the space so that people move through it together, in each other's orbits, rather than in parallel isolation. Josh at the Library made a version of the same decision when he rearranged the tables himself, transforming a face-to-face staring arrangement into a gradient from communal to private that allows people to choose their level of social engagement without committing to either extreme.

Soil Factory's Jackie describes the single large open room as a deliberate philosophical stance of resistance to partitioning. Where other spaces divide function from function, Soil Factory keeps everything in one room so that the maximum number of accidental encounters is possible. The open garage door is the outward signal of this philosophy, when it is up, the space is visually and physically open to the street, readable as accessible before anyone has to make the decision to approach.

ARQ Barn's spatial logic operates at a different scale. The outdoor spaces, fire pits, trails, gardens, the presence of animals, are the primary community gathering areas, with no dedicated indoor common room to substitute for them. The loss of Zoe's father's daily lunch ritual, which had served as an informal anchor pulling everyone toward the kitchen at the same time, illustrates how dependent third place gathering is on human habit as much as physical infrastructure. The space provides the conditions; the ritual activates them. The case of food being within this ritual is purposeful, and speaks to sharing something, where cooking mimics making in a lot of these spaces.

The most politically charged spatial story is represented by ARQ Barn in the renaming from CRAQ to ARQ in 2020, directly in response to the 2017 eviction attempt that was driven partly by the association of the space's name with drug culture. Zoe's account of the decision is pragmatic, saying "We thought it was funny, but apparently there's a lot of people that don't have the same type of humor as my family. And maybe the joke has been worn thin." The arc in ARQ, suggesting a rainbow, a movement forward, a shift, was chosen with intention. "Language has power," Zoe says. The name of a building is part of its infrastructure and its societal perception. Renaming the space was important in creating credibility and representing the space.

Hammerstone's Suz offers insight to these spatial decisions, stating "The act of existing is protest." A workshop where women learn carpentry is, by virtue of its existence, a political

statement about who belongs in the built trades and who gets to learn how to build things. The space does not contain politics; it enacts them. This is the spatial argument that these rooms are not neutral containers for community. They are, by their design and their location and their name and their layout, arguments about what kind of community is possible and who is invited to be part of it.

Queer Belonging through Making

All six spaces in the Finger Lakes function as sites of queer belonging, and in some ways cultivate belonging within that distinction of their community. This pattern points toward a form of queer third space that the scholarship on queer placemaking has not yet fully theorized.

Stillwagon and Ghaziani (2019) describe the queer pop-up as a creative response to the decline of dedicated queer venues, an ephemeral event that temporarily transforms a non-queer space into a site of queer community. The pop-up model assumes that the queer quality of a space is an event, something that happens and then ends, leaving the space to revert to its default state. What the six spaces in this study suggest is something different, that queer safety can accumulate as a condition rather than an event, building up over time through culture, ownership, membership, and habit until the space is, in any meaningful sense, a queer space. Many queer communities are redefining what “safe space” means outside the context of nightlife or consumption, turning instead toward sober, creative, collaborative environments. Makerspaces offer avenues for informal support, visibility, and belonging that are not always recognized as such. Understanding how queer-friendly practices emerge, whether intentionally or organically, can inform broader strategies for inclusive placemaking and equitable community development. While these spaces often exist on the periphery, so often do traditional queer third spaces. Traditional queer spaces have long included art, theater, drag, performance, all using the body as a medium of creation. Maybe not, but the act of using your body to create, historically in the

form of theater or drag, feels like it mimics performance that is historically queer. Self-expression is a part of queer culture, and if these artists are queer and create art, these spaces could be seen as incubators for queer expression. As bell hooks argues, queerness is fundamentally about "the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (as cited in Fountain, 2025). Creation and invention are not incidental to queer life — they are survival strategies. This connection between making and queer identity has a material history. As Fountain (2025) documents, queer and trans people have long had to literally craft their own visibility — making and altering their own clothing, inventing body-modifying techniques, and using handmade objects as a form of survival and self-expression. The makerspace, in this sense, is not an unlikely site of queer culture but a continuation of it. Binnie (1997) and Oswin (2008) give this a theoretical name: queer space is produced through coincidence, through the accumulation of culture and habit and presence, not through labeling. These makerspaces have been producing queer space quietly, for years, without knowing that is what they were doing.

The mechanisms through which this happens differ across the six sites, producing a spectrum that runs from informal to programing. At ARQ Barn, queer safety is generational and inherited. Zoe's father modeled acceptance "in a different generational way"; the surrounding area has long standing queer residents whose presence shaped the community's character before Zoe and Alex took over; both sisters are themselves queer and connected to Ithaca's queer networks and to rural queer meetups. This "safety" of being queer is a quality of the place accumulated over decades, so embedded in the space's history that its origin is almost obscured. "It's not just something we have shifted in the last three years," Zoe says. "We have been considered a safe space for a long time."

At Soil Factory and West End Ceramics, queer friendliness is ambient — present in the culture of the space without being named or designed. Jackie describes a culture of non-prescription in which the absence of social requirements creates conditions that are welcoming to anyone who has ever felt excluded by the requirements of more conventional spaces. Kyle describes ceramics as a medium with a natural queer culture, something he inhabits rather than creates. In both cases, queerness is part of the texture of the space without being its explicit identity. Fountain (2025), drawing on craft scholar Jenni Sorkin, notes that clay is uniquely suited to rendering the body metaphorically — "key to rendering the body metaphorically, but also to create a morphology of form itself, that is revising and re-shaping form." Trans and non-binary practitioners have long found in ceramics an affinity between the physical process of working clay and the experience of transition — the molding, the pressure, the transformation through heat. That Kyle describes ceramics as having a natural queer culture, something he inhabits rather than creates, may be less intuition than history.

Hammerstone represents the most intentional version of queer inclusion in the study and is the only space that actively brands itself as queer-friendly. There are rainbow flags at the entrance, pronouns on name tags, a dedicated gender non-conforming class, and trans representation in promotional materials. But even here, Suz names something that exceeds the programming, explaining "There's an innate queerness when you have women doing carpentry. It's hard for it not to be a queer space." Most of the teachers, they note, are queer "just as part of the fabric." There is a social nonconformity in being a woman in male dominated fields, and while that doesn't mean the woman or person participating is queer, it does stand in defiance to the patriarchy in the same way that queerness does. Fountain (2025), drawing on art historian Rozsika Parker, argues that the separation between art and craft has always been a gendered one — craft was historically feminized and deemed passive, domestic, and unproductive precisely to

subordinate it within a hierarchy that privileged masculine forms of production. The art/craft binary, Fountain argues, "mirrors and reinforces a whole host of limiting binaries, including male/female, masculine/feminine, superior/inferior." A woman doing carpentry, a trade coded masculine, disrupts that binary in both directions at once, refusing the feminization of craft and the masculinization of the trades simultaneously. There is a social nonconformity in that refusal that does not require a queer identity to carry queer politics. As Fountain (2025) notes, both craft and queerness have historically occupied "marginal and subjugated positionalities in opposition to dominant hierarchies" — which may be precisely why, at Hammerstone, they so naturally find each other. The design and the culture reinforce each other, and the result is a space where queer belonging is both explicitly invited and organically present. Critically, Hammerstone learned through an early model in which queer and gender minority participants were channeled primarily toward the Pride class inadvertently segregated rather than integrated. The shift toward making gender-inclusive messaging visible across all classes and watching gender minority participants begin appearing in regular classes rather than only in designated ones, represents a maturation in how inclusion is practiced. Inclusion as mainstreaming rather than siloing. Another interesting dynamic about Hammerstone is the idea of fostering inclusion through exclusion. Suz describes that to create an inclusive environment for those that are usually excluded, Hammerstone must choose "to alienate those people, but then you're also choosing to bring in people who wouldn't otherwise feel comfortable." While the other spaces seem to approach inclusion as an umbrella that makes all welcome, Hammerstone takes a political stance of excluding those who already have resources and access to carpentry, mainly men. Suz also expressed that inclusion through exclusion has gone too far by making queer only classes instead of normalizing having queer folk in any class. This line is drawn mainly through who is excluded

and if they are in the minority of the people that can and have historically been allowed in a space.

The Ithaca Clay School and the Library represent a third position on the spectrum as spaces that are queer friendly in practice without yet having fully theorized how they got there. Julia has launched “Be Gay Do Crafts”, a monthly low-barrier drop-in social event built around accessible crafts, as an intentional step toward cultivating queer community, and she acknowledges honestly that she has never asked her most visibly queer members what made them feel comfortable in the space. Josh at the Library reports, that approximately half of the regular community identifies as queer, the highest proportion named in any space in the study and then says: “I don’t know what the magic is.” The honesty of that admission is its own form of evidence that the space has become, without intention, a place where queer people are not a minority.

What this spectrum suggests, is that queer safety in these spaces is produced by a sustained culture of nonprescription, the presence of openly queer people in positions of ownership and authority, a willingness to let community define itself rather than requiring it to perform a particular identity. Forstie (2020) has shown that LGBTQ+ community in small cities operates differently from the gayborhood model, through social networks, informal gathering, and spaces not explicitly labeled as queer. The six spaces in this study confirm that finding in a creative context and extend it to the makerspace. These makerspaces in the Finger Lakes, has become one of the primary sites where queer community forms in precisely this informal, non-labeled way.

The most concentrated evidence for this claim is a single moment at Hammerstone, described by Suz. In the gender affirming class, a young trans man who was just beginning his transition approached an older trans man and said, “Seeing you in this class has meant so much

to me. I would like to stay in touch so that we can talk about things.” Suz tears up recounting it. “This is what it’s all about,” they say. The space had not created this connection through design, but it created the conditions, the class structure, the cultural safety, the presence of multiple generations of trans people in the same room within which the connection became possible. That is what a queer third place does and in all of their different ways should be made able to continue doing.

Planning Implications

In Delray Beach, Florida, a coffee shop called Subculture has been fighting its city government over a parking lot. The space, which hosts community events, serves as an informal gathering hub, and functions, by any reasonable measure, as a third place, grew into something the city’s zoning code did not have a category for. What had been classified as a grab-and-go coffee shop, requiring fourteen parking spaces, was reclassified as a “community cultural gathering place similar to a recreation center,” immediately raising the parking requirement to fifty-five. The space did not change. The community it served did not change. What changed was the city’s recognition of what it had always been, and the result was not celebration but penalty.

I worked in municipal planning in South Florida, and I found cases like Subculture’s baffling from the inside. The regulations are not malicious, and they are not designed to harm community assets. They are designed for a world in which the categories are stable and the uses are legible, and they break down, sometimes absurdly, when something genuinely new appears. The makerspace, in its community-oriented, craft-based, queer-friendly, rural and small-city form, is something genuinely new and undefined. The six spaces in this study are navigating versions of the same problem Subculture is navigating, each in their own way, each with their own set of regulations, tax structures, funding categories, and institutional rules that were designed for something other than what these spaces are.

These planning implications make the case that the friction these spaces face is structural. Planners have both the tools and the obligation to address it, not by designing third places from the top down, which would almost certainly produce something less vital than what has emerged organically in the Finger Lakes, but by clearing the path and removing the obstacles that constrain community assets that are already doing essential work and supporting those that exist.

The Planner's Dilemma: Intervention and Authenticity

There is a genuine tension in planning's relationship to third places. The spaces in this study did not emerge from planning processes. They emerged from personal vision, community need, grief, political urgency, and the particular cultural character of a region with a long tradition of informal creative life. Soil Factory grew from a collective's ecological and artists imagination and a commitment to decommodified commons. ARQ Barn grew from a family's relationship to land and community over decades. Hammerstone grew from Maria's experience of isolation in the trades and a friend's tiny house project. The Clay School grew from Julia's response to a loss, the closure of Cornell's community studio, that the institution itself did not fill.

A community cultural center built by a municipality, however well-intentioned, is a different thing from a space that grew from genuine community need, shaped by the people who needed it. Planners who approach third places with the instinct to replicate or institutionalize what works risk producing the form without the substance.

The planner's role here is not creation but protection. It is, as Klinenberg (2018) argues, the work of building and maintaining the physical conditions within which community can form, not designing the community itself. In practical terms, this means decreasing forms of friction that are constraining spaces that are already working, and asking what regulatory, tax, and

funding tools might be used to reduce that friction without compromising the autonomy that makes these spaces what they are.

Frictions and Planning Challenges within the Surveyed Sites

The six spaces in this study face six distinct forms of planning and policy friction. Taken together, they constitute a single structural argument: the regulatory, tax, and funding systems that govern community spaces in the Finger Lakes region and across the United States were not designed with spaces like these in mind, and they are constraining community assets that perform essential public functions.

Zoning and use restrictions

Soil Factory operates under a 49-person capacity limit imposed by building code occupancy classification a hard ceiling on its programming that was not set in response to any particular problem the space had created, but simply reflects the way its use was classified when the space was established. West End Ceramics faces flood map and variance issues that prevent the outdoor kiln construction that would make certain kinds of programming possible. These are not exceptional cases; they are the ordinary experience of spaces that exist at the boundary of available use categories.

Operating support for community creative infrastructure.

The financial models of these six spaces are as varied as their physical forms. Soil Factory survives through a combination of institutional grant alignment, community fundraising, and a Warhol Foundation grant — a model that nearly collapsed when its Cornell funding ended and was saved only by community mobilization. ARQ Barn sustains itself entirely through below-market tenant rent, with no outside funding of any kind, a model that works only because Zoe and her sister absorb the labor of ownership without compensation. West End Ceramics operates as a small business dependent on class signups, navigating tariff pressures without a

financial safety net. Hammerstone is building the donor infrastructure that will eventually unlock grant funding, caught in the nonprofit catch-22 of needing donors to get grants and grants to attract donors. The Clay School runs on affordable rent and leadership flexibility, with nonprofit status held in reserve as a future option. The Library alone operates outside this precarity entirely, sustained by public funding that makes it the most accessible space in the study and the most constrained in its ability to grow. What these models share is the absence of a funding category designed for what they actually are — community creative spaces that provide public goods without public support. Planners and funders who want to sustain spaces like these need to reckon with that gap directly, whether through dedicated grant streams for hybrid community-creative spaces, assessment practices that recognize community function, or advocacy for the kind of flexible nonprofit classification that would allow spaces like the Clay School to access grant funding without sacrificing the operational agility that has kept them alive.

What these spaces need is not another competitive grant cycle but stable, flexible operating support that recognizes community creative spaces as infrastructure rather than programming. Planners can advocate for dedicated operating support streams at the county and state level, model these spaces in comprehensive plans as community assets worthy of direct public investment, and make the case to arts councils and community development funders that operating grants for hybrid creative spaces are as legitimate a public expenditure as a new park or a library branch.

Tax structure.

ARQ Barn's Zoe describes a \$17,000 property tax increase in the first year after inheriting the property from her father, the direct result of losing the enhanced STAR tax credit he had qualified for as a person over 65 and being taxed for the inheritance. Neither she nor her sister met the age threshold, and the tax system had no mechanism for recognizing that what they

inherited was not speculative property but a community asset that had been operating for decades in the public interest. The mechanism that sustained ARQ Barn's affordability through below-market rent is itself under threat from a tax structure that treats the property as equivalent to any other inherited real estate. Zoe describes still digging out of that hole years later.

Funding classification.

Hammerstone was denied an arts grant because the funding body determined it was not an art space. The space teaches Kumiko joinery, builds Adirondack chairs, constructs tiny houses, and produces hand crafted objects of considerable skill and beauty, but because its primary identity is educational and its mission is political, it did not fit the funder's category. This is not an unusual outcome for spaces that combine education, making, community service, and social mission in configurations that existing grant categories were not designed to accommodate. The result is that the most innovative and multifunctional community spaces are systematically disadvantaged in grant competitions relative to spaces that fit neatly into a single category.

Institutional bureaucracy.

The Library makerspace faces a different form of friction through the rules of its institutional host. Installing a ventilation system for the laser cutter required navigating county approval processes that Josh describes as a significant headache in time, money, and red tape. Adding a woodworking capability, something community members have requested, is described as logistically near impossible within the constraints of a county building. The public funding that makes the Library makerspace the most accessible space in the study comes paired with governance constraints that make it the most difficult to expand and adapt.

What Planners Can Do

The friction described above does not have a single solution. It requires action at multiple levels, municipal, county, state, and institutional, and it requires planners to advocate for changes that may sit outside their direct authority but within their legitimate sphere of influence. This study has revealed through their challenges, the following recommendations for planners.

Use classification reform and Zoning.

The most immediate planning tool available is the zoning code, and the most useful reform is the creation of use classifications that recognize community creative spaces as a distinct and protected category, not “small venue,” not “educational facility,” not “recreation center,” but something that captures what these spaces actually are, mixed-use community assets that combine making, learning, gathering, and social mission in configurations that existing categories cannot accommodate. A “community creative space” or “maker commons” classification could establish clear, reasonable standards for this use type, including parking requirements calibrated to actual demand rather than square footage, and protect existing spaces from the kind of reclassification that has threatened Subculture in Delray Beach. Planners cannot create this classification unilaterally; it requires direction from elected officials and a zoning amendment process. But planners can make the case, document the need, and draft the language. Oldenburg warned in 1996 that zoning prohibiting informal gathering uses virtually prevents third places from forming — the problem now is misclassification of spaces that have already organically emerged. There are also arguments that walkability and transit accessibility to these spaces would increase access and attendance of these spaces, where more people could then have the benefits of this social infrastructure. The allowance and encouragement of mixed-use zoning would also be helpful as many of these spaces exist on the prereferral due to the “industrial” nature of the crafts, that push their uses to the edges of cities in some cases.

Tax treatment for community-asset property.

The STAR tax credit loss at ARQ Barn illustrates a gap in New York State's property tax structure, where there is no mechanism for recognizing inherited property that functions as community infrastructure and is operated in the public interest at below market rates. A community land trust model, a charitable exemption for spaces that meet defined public benefit criteria, or a targeted tax abatement program for qualifying creative community spaces could address this gap. At the county level, planners and assessors can advocate for assessment practices that recognize the community function of these properties rather than treating them as equivalent to speculative real estate. This practice requires a tradeoff, however, where nonprofit property tax exemption, removes parcels from the tax roll, reducing municipal revenue that funds public services. This is where municipalities can be resistant to expanding tax exemptions, especially in places like the Finger lakes, where Cornell University and the nonprofit sector hold a significant amount of property that does not pay property tax. Full exemption from this tax may not be viable for these makerspaces but demonstrating a public benefit criteria like below market access, sliding scaling fees, or community programming, to get a reduction, may help with economic burdens of contributing to community spaces.

Grant category reform and hybrid funding models.

The “not an art space” rejection Hammerstone experienced is a symptom of a broader problem, where funding categories that reward specialization and punish innovation. Arts funders, community development funders, workforce development funders, and public health funders are all, in different ways, potential supporters of the spaces in this study, but the application processes of each tend to require that a space declare a primary identity that many of these spaces genuinely do not have. Planners working with community foundations, arts councils, and economic development agencies can advocate for funding structures that recognize

hybridity as an asset rather than a disqualifying ambiguity. At the municipal level, direct funding for community creative spaces, as a category of public good, like parks and libraries, is a legitimate budget argument that planners can advance.

The Authenticity Question

These recommendations raise the dilemma, can planner intervention support authentic community spaces without changing what makes them authentic? The honest answer is that it depends entirely on how intervention is designed and by whom. The risk is real. A grant program that requires quarterly reporting, a tax abatement that comes with programming requirements, a use classification that imposes operational standards, all of these can shift a space's orientation from community driven to compliance driven in ways that hollow out exactly what made the space work. David Sucher, a former Seattle planning commissioner whose *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village* (1995) catalogs small-scale interventions for strengthening neighborhoods, adds the caution that community is largely beyond the reach of government. The planner's role is not to create these spaces but to stop making it so hard for them to exist.

The safeguard is designing *with* rather than *for*. The organizers in this study, Jackie, Kyle, Zoe, Maria, Suz, Julia, Josh, are not waiting to be helped. They are navigating impossible constraints with extraordinary resourcefulness, and what they need from planners is not direction but relief. The best planning interventions for community creative spaces are the ones that remove obstacles without imposing new ones.

Nonprofits have a particular role to play here, as mission driven organizations that can pick up where government leaves off and that are structurally better suited to stewarding community spaces than either the market or the state. Hammerstone's recent transition to nonprofit status is a meaningful example, showing that it opens access to grant funding and institutional partnerships while preserving the organizational autonomy that has made the space

what it is. The Library demonstrates what is possible when public institutions commit to creative space as a public good. The question for planners is not whether to intervene, when the status quo is already an intervention, one that happens to favor parking lots over planter boxes, speculative property over community barns, tidy use categories over the messy, vital, unclassifiable spaces where people make things and find each other. The question is what kind of intervention will planners take, one that protects and sustains, or one that inadvertently finishes the work that rising rents and zoning codes have already started.

Conclusion

"There's no prescription," Jackie says of Soil Factory. "You can just show up whatever way you are." Suz, at Hammerstone, puts it differently, "The act of existing is protest." These two statements, from two very different spaces, describe the same thing, a form of belonging that does not require you to justify yourself before you can enter. This study set out to understand whether makerspaces in the Finger Lakes are producing that kind of belonging, and whether, for queer communities in particular, they are filling a gap left by the disappearance of spaces that once made it possible. The answer, across six spaces and six very different organizers, is yes.

This study is celebratory. These spaces are doing something remarkable and undertheorized, and this project exists to understand and amplify that, not to audit it. During a site visit, a member who had been listening to an interview stepped forward unprompted to say that as a queer person she felt genuinely included, that there were events specifically designed for people like her, and that she kept choosing this space over others to create. That moment, unplanned, unrequested, and offered freely, captures that the belonging these spaces describe is actually felt by the people inside them.

Across six diverse spaces, this study finds that makerspaces operate as contemporary third places through a distinct social mechanism. Shared making lowers social barriers by

shifting attention away from identity and toward activity, enabling interaction across lines of difference. Through repeated, co-present participation, these interactions accumulate into relationships, producing a sense of belonging that is not assigned but built over time. Within these conditions, queer safety emerges not through explicit designation, but through culture, presence, and sustained participation. In this way, makerspaces in the Finger Lakes can be understood as an emergent form of queer third space, functioning as partial replacements for the disappearing bars, cafés, and nightlife venues that have historically anchored queer community. However, their significance extends beyond this substitution. These spaces are not only filling a gap; they are reconfiguring what a third place can be. Rather than organizing around consumption or shared identity, they are structured around collective making, where belonging is generated through doing. If these makerspaces are right — if queer community can form around a kiln, a table saw, a needle felting table — then the question of where queer life goes next has a partial and hopeful answer. Not in a designed replacement, but in the accumulation of culture and habit and presence that Reed (1996) calls imminence: queer space taking place.

This reframing matters for planning because it positions makerspaces not as amenities or niche cultural sites, but as critical social infrastructure. As Klinenberg (2018) argues, social infrastructure shapes whether and how relationships form. The spaces examined in this study demonstrate that community is not simply a social outcome but a spatial and material one, dependent on the availability of environments that support repeated, informal, embodied interaction. In this sense, makerspaces are also acts of placemaking, not designed from above, but built and sustained by the communities that use them.

The challenge for planners is not to replicate or formalize these spaces, that would risk undermining the very conditions that make them work. It is to recognize them, protect them, and remove the barriers that existing zoning categories, tax structures, and funding frameworks place

in their path. The spaces themselves are already solving the harder problem. Planning's role is to help create tools that communities can use for place making and ensure the protection and liveliness of these places.

This study is limited by its focus on organizer perspectives and a single regional context. Member experiences, particularly those of queer members, remain the most meaningful gap. Future research should ask not whether organizers perceive their spaces as queer friendly, but whether queer people experience them that way and why. Whether similar dynamics emerge in other geographic and cultural contexts is an open and important question.

This study began with a simple question: where does queer community go when its spaces disappear? In the Finger Lakes, part of the answer is already here, in the studios and workshops and free urban ecology labs where people show up to make things and end up making community. These spaces are not gay bars or lesbian cafés, and they were not built to replace them. But through the nature of craft — its difficulty, its informality, its demand that you show up in a body and fail in front of other people — they have produced something that functions like queer third place anyway. As Suz says, “the act of existing is protest.” In these spaces, the act of making is how that existence finds its community.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide and Questions

Purpose:

These interviews aim to understand how community makerspaces in the Finger Lakes region foster belonging, creativity, and inclusion, particularly how they operate as “third places” where art, identity, and community intersect.

Section 1. Background and Context

1. Can you tell me a bit about who you are and your role in this space?
2. How do you describe this space — do you think of it as a “makerspace,” or is there another term you prefer?
3. How did this space come to be? What kind of community or need was it responding to?

Section 2. Community and Belonging

4. What does “community” mean to you in the context of this space?
5. How would you describe the kind of community that has formed here over time?
6. What makes this space feel different from home or work? Would you say it functions as a kind of “third place”?
7. How do people build relationships here — through making, conversation, collaboration, or shared routines?
8. What kinds of activities or practices bring people together most effectively?

Section 3. Space, Design, and Inclusion

9. How does the physical design or layout of the space shape social interaction and belonging?
10. How does the location of the space (urban, rural, or specific neighborhood context) influence who comes here and how the community functions?
11. In what ways do you try to make the space feel inclusive, welcoming, or safe for a wide range of people?
12. Are there particular values, rituals, or informal norms that help hold the community together?
13. How do you navigate conflict, boundaries, or differences within the community?

Section 4. Identity and Representation

14. How do identity, gender, sexuality, race, or class influence who feels at home in this space?
15. Do you see inclusion as something that happens naturally here, or do you engage in proactive efforts to support it?
16. Do you feel this space is queer-friendly? What makes you feel that way?

Section 5. Making and Meaning

17. What role does “making” (with clay, tools, soil, etc.) play in fostering connection or mutual care?
18. How does being physically present and working side by side affect people’s sense of belonging?
19. Do you think of this space as political or as having a social mission? If so, how does that show up in daily life here?
20. What challenges come with maintaining a community-based space, especially one that aims to be open and inclusive?

Section 6. Broader Context and Future Vision

21. How does this space relate to the broader local community? Do you see it as part of a neighborhood or regional network?
22. How does the rural or urban context shape what’s possible here?
23. What does sustainability or longevity look like for a space like this (for example, in terms of funding, structure, or community support)?
24. Can you describe a moment that, for you, really captured the spirit of this community?
25. Looking ahead, what do you hope spaces like this can offer people — socially, emotionally, or politically?

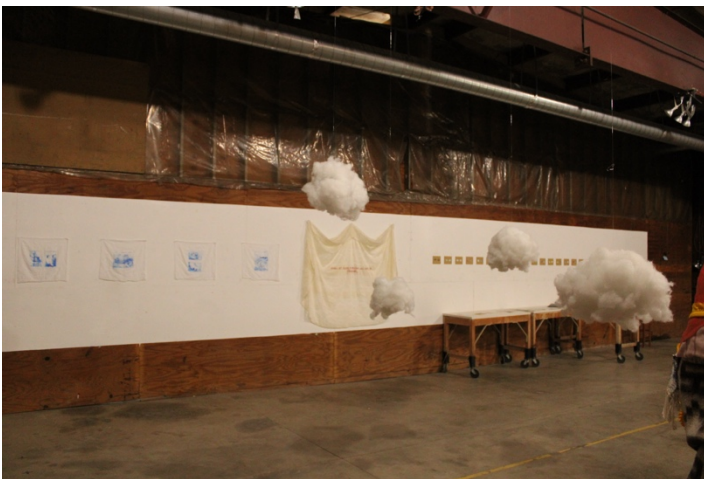
Consent Question

26. Would you like to be named in my capstone project report or any other research outputs?

Appendix B: Thematic Analysis Chart

Theme	Soil Factory (Jackie)	West End Ceramics (Kyle)	ARQ Barn (Zoe)	Hammerstone (Suz)	Ithaca Clay School (Julia)	TCL Makerspace (Josh)
Belonging & Welcome	Ownership model; no prescription for identity	Surrogate trusted adult; circular layout	Earned trust; hospice as communal grief; longevity	Election refuge; layered cohorts; queer sanctuary	Evolutionary necessity; Eddie & crisis stories	Sensed relief; workshop→home arc
Intentional Inclusion	Free; restorative justice handbook	Scholarship aspirational; honest on race	Below-market rent; anti-tokenism argument	Solidarity classes; sliding scale; media rep	Scholarship active; DEI consultant; Be Gay Do Crafts	Display work; targeted programming; political neutrality
Accessibility	Car dependency; free offsets all cost barriers	Cost barrier; \$40k ramp; gentrification boundary	Car required; families excluded; tax shock	Dual-site; transit access downtown; virtual emerging	Cost barrier; scholarship active; rent stability existential	Free + transit + downtown: access trifecta
Social Leveling	Flat hierarchy; no teachers; contributionist economy	Kiln humbles everyone regardless of skill	Class mix; tool-sharing; class complexity owned	Engineered pairing; vulnerable learning normed	Vulnerability strips pretense; clay as unifier	Passive making; peer help; broadest common denominator
Physical Space	Open room; zones; garage door as invitation	Circular layout; proximity as community design	Regional ecosystem; name as infrastructure	Rural bubble vs. urban porosity; space-as-protest	Nested building ecosystem; inward wheels; pivot capacity	Staff-redesigned layout; openness over pods; county constraints
Queer Friendliness	Ambient; non-prescription culture	Natural ceramics culture; ambient	Generational; embodied; inherited	Explicit + ambient: most designed in study	Transitional; Be Gay Do Crafts launching	≈50% queer regulars; Pride programming; emergent
Planning Friction	Capacity cap (49-person limit)	Flood map; variance issues	Eviction attempt; STAR tax; rename as survival	Grant classification rejection; manosphere backlash	Cornell studio closure; rent precarity; campus ad barriers	County bureaucracy; ventilation red tape; expansion near-impossible

Appendix C: The Soil Factory Photos



Appendix D: West End Ceramics Photos



Appendix E: ARQ Barn Photos



A photograph of a workshop or garage. In the foreground, a wooden workbench holds a partially assembled wooden box with blue tape, a yellow power drill, a bottle of orange glue, and other tools. In the background, a white garage door is open, revealing a white pickup truck and various items hanging on the wall.



Appendix G: Ithaca Clay School Photos



Appendix H: Tompkins County Library Makerspace Photos

