

The Language of SPACES: Mighty Writers El Futuro

by Devan Blackwell

Spatial ambience is where visible and non-visible concepts meet—what can be seen and what can be felt. The physical design (color, wall decor and lighting) of a space can be inviting, stimulating or off-putting. Similarly, a space can make one feel engaged, supported or anxious, depending on the tone set by human interactions. Together, these concepts of spatial ambience affect various aspects of an individual physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially, and the experience an individual has in a space.

I believe in the power of afterschool programming to transform, even save lives. Young people with nothing to do during out-of-school hours miss out on essential opportunities for their positive growth and development. During my time in the field (which began over a decade ago), I have seen first-hand how quality OST programming can make significant investments in the lives of youth. These programs and the learning experiences they offer can be the lifeline young people need during the hours when they are most vulnerable or unsupervised.

The design of spaces designated for quality OST programming—whether they be in traditional brick and mortar school buildings, community centers, or some other setting—involves many essential components. Elements of positive spatial ambience are integral to this design and can be achieved in a variety of ways. Mighty Writers El

Futuro, situated in a bustling urban marketplace in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, takes a culture-centered approach to this.

Mighty Writers El Futuro

Gosia Sanchez, the Program Manager at Mighty Writers El Futuro remembered the former retail space standing vacant for quite a while. Looking in the front window, Gosia recalled seeing dead bugs and dust. She said that the space “just came alive” when El Futuro moved in. “I think we have



repurposed it in a very creative way, which ... is striking because you don't expect a writing center for children in the middle of a vegetable market."

Madeline Karp, the Program Director, adds: "What we've tried to do is repurpose it as much as possible to use as creative space. Instead of (for example) hanging a row of sweatshirts from the wall, we'll instead hang students' artwork."

Many of the students at Mighty Writers El Futuro are either recent immigrants (of parents primarily from Mexico) or first generation Americans. The space is culturally aligned with Mexico—the flowers in the windows and bright colors on the walls are reminiscent of Mexican neighborhoods. Literature is printed in both English and Spanish.

Madeline explains: "We try to surround the kids with things that promote their identity as an American, and as a Latino. If you look around you'll see that we have pictures of Cesar Chavez and posters of Mexico. That familiarity creates a sense of this as a communal space. We also try to address the students' interest in American culture. You'll see (pictures of) Batman, Superman, and other superheroes."

In addition to those cultural references, other intentional design choices have been made so that students develop academically and socially. As one first walks in, there's a bookshelf turned on its side with games, puzzles and books that immediately engage students. The classrooms are also designed to encourage students to interact—chairs at tables are arranged so that they always face one another, and "conversation pieces" are intentionally placed throughout the space to promote wonder and discussion.

Gosia reflects: "Madeline and I have been working extensively to create more of an open, less cluttered space. There's space for the kids to play and engage in "child's work"; space where they can write and read. It's a very open space, it encourages a sense of freedom rather than confinement."

Summary



The design of OST spaces can enhance youth engagement, and make young people want to spend time in them. Might Writers El Futuro is such a space—one where culture and personal experience are intentional in its design. Outcomes of the positive spatial ambiance there can be best measured in the young people who rarely want to leave when it's time to go home; likely because they consider El Futuro as a *home away from home*.

For more information, contact devandirect@gmail.com. You can also learn more about Might Writers El Futuro by going to <http://www.mightywriters.org/>.