

TEEN TAKEOVER

BALANCING RULES AND JOYFUL CHAOS
FOR TEENS IN RURAL ART MUSEUMS

MoNA
Museum of Northwest Art

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UNIVERSITY *of*
WASHINGTON

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Created as a Museology Master's thesis by
Gina Barnhill and Wren Thompson

WHERE WE MADE THIS



THE MUSEUM OF NORTHWEST ART...

...was founded in 1981 by Art Hupy. The museum has a **staff of 13**, and **countless volunteers** throughout the year.

The building where the museum resides is 12,000 square feet, and has **two floors of exhibits** and permanent collections on display. There are typically **3-4 exhibits on display** at once, highlighting artists from the Northwest, including Alaska, British Columbia, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

Programming at MoNA is mainly **geared toward children under 5 years of age**, or teachers who are looking for resources. In 2022, a **Teen Art Club program** was started to encourage more participation outside of school related trips. Recruitment has been a bumpy road, but the addition of guest artists and **less structured programs** have been helpful.

LA CONNER, WA IS...

...a **small, rural community** that houses countless galleries, museums, and shops that sell art from locals.

As of 2023, the city has a **population of 986 residents** within an area of 0.51 square miles. Of the 986, 804 residents are adults, leaving **only 182 children under the age of 18**.

The majority of residents are White (74%), and the next largest racial identity is Indigenous people, making up 10.88% of the residents. The Swinomish reservation is situated across the Swinomish channel, on land assigned to them after the Point Elliot Treaty in 1855.

182
**LA CONNER'S
ESTIMATED POPULATION
OF CHILDREN**

TEENS AND MUSEUMS || WHAT'S MISSING?

Art museums can feel like alienating places for teens. Strict expectations, unfamiliar contexts, and high levels of monitoring while touring a gallery can leave them feeling further separated from the art rather than connected to it.

Teens are often left with the options to either visit in high-structure contexts (school field trips, rigorously-planned programs) or simply not visit at all.

In **rural contexts**, the option of not visiting at all is magnified. Travel times are longer for teens to reach the art museum, and when there are a myriad of free, low-structure activities to do outside of art museum contexts, there are few reasons for teens to visit.

If your rural art museum wants to build a teen audience, there are two elements to consider:

- Creating a **sense of belonging** for the teens who may visit
- Building programs that are **teen-oriented both in content and structure** to cultivate that sense of belonging

Each of these elements is a considerable challenge, but this activity guide will provide you with the information and ideas to get you started.



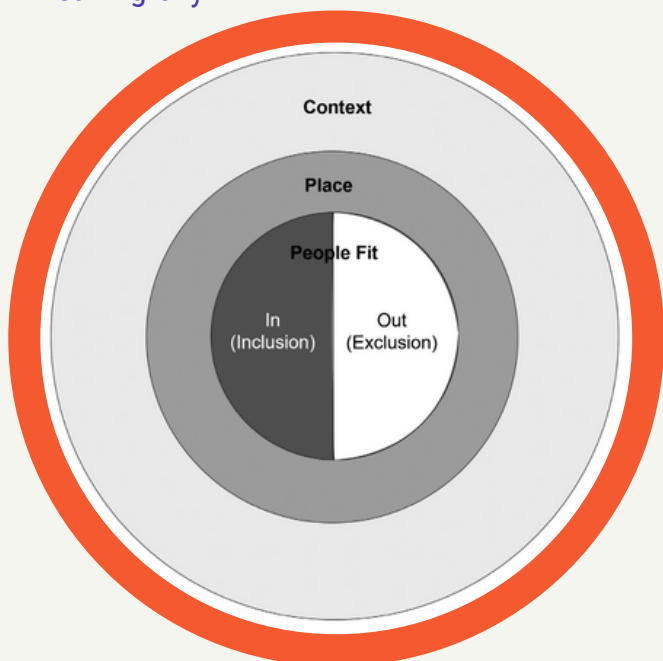
BELONGING IN MUSEUMS

Creating a sense of belonging:

A sense of belonging—the sense that they already have a place within the museum that does not need to be earned or carved out—can position art museums as a third place for local teens.

One of the simpler ways to frame belonging is found in Price and Applebaum’s 2022 paper assessing belonging in museums. The diagram below frames belonging as made up by three spheres of experience: people-fit (whether someone feels included or excluded by an experience), place (the physical surroundings of the experience), and context (both social community context and the reason for the visit itself).

While each of these elements affects teens’ perceptions of their relationship to a museum, there are few ways that a teen-centered program can alter these elements meaningfully.



People-fit: Every program hopes to welcome its participants and cultivate a sense of inclusion. Many of the ways we can positively affect this are by **honoring what teens themselves desire in a program**. Respecting who teens are, what they bring to the program, and creating a space for them to explore their own ideas and identities can all contribute to this element.

Place: In small museums who hope to invite broad local audiences, there is often **little we can do for the physical space**. In this activity guide we will briefly address the concept of teen-owned spaces, but largely we accept the physical location as it is.

Context: While the most vague sphere, experience context is an element we will explore in this guide. Stretching **the “why” for teens’ explorations and existence in art gallery spaces** can work to create **less restrictive contexts with lower stakes for teens**, and carve out a sense of ownership and belonging.

DESIGNING PROGRAMS FOR TEENS

Teen audiences tell us what they want. Through suggestion boxes, interviews, summits, and more, they have made their desires known!

In 2018, the Museum Teen Summit developed a list of 10 characteristics that make a successful teen program. Some of the most relevant characteristics for our goals are:

“Let us put our own opinions into our work. It doesn’t matter what the product is or how the result looks. Let us be creative and feel fully engaged. By allowing us to begin projects on our own, or to solve problems with a fresh perspective, we’ll gain a sense of ownership.”

“Make art. ...Hands-on activities, such as making art, can help us learn through our own experience instead. Also, it’s more fun!”

“Provide opportunities to learn from each other. It’s not always about learning from adults or professionals. Based on our observations, teens are more comfortable when they learn from their peers.”

“Trust young people to make decisions. We’re not asking to be treated like grown-ups; we aren’t grown-ups. We’re capable of making decisions, and we’re open to advice and guidance from adults. We merely ask that you acknowledge, respect and trust our judgment.”

“Create spaces for us to grow. Museums should be more than just places where we learn about art. They should also be places where we develop our own ideas and thoughts through quality teen programs.”

We focus on creating opportunities for teens to work together to make art that **expresses their interests and opinions in a free-form environment.**

We rely on **facilitators’ abilities to trust their teen audiences** to learn from each other and make decisions in order to grow in both their artistic abilities and social world.

SETTING THE SCENE

Teens in the program were most comfortable in a dedicated community art space, home to MoNA's Teen Art Club. The space was out of sight, somewhere they regularly visited as an exclusively teen group, and had doors that can close to moderate the sound.

Elements of this place-fit and context shift can be used to cultivate belonging for teens.



PLACE

Familiar context

Your museum may be one of the first museums teens have visited.

Galleries' white space with implied distance can be alienating. To combat this, create a more familiar space.

Chairs, a table to allow for **messy art**, or even a space with **community-made art** can all make a more familiar place for teens to exist in your museum.

A space of their own

Existing as a teen in an art museum can often involve stares or other uncomfortable social interactions. Providing them with a chance to either **physically or temporally (after hours) separate** from other visitors gave our teens a chance create freely.

CONTEXT

Galleries as a casual space

Visits, not lessons. Teens in our program visited museums **as school trips or not at all**. To break the association with homework and "getting it right," re-frame how teens can exist in gallery spaces. Use your galleries as a **place to joke and simply exist**, more akin to a living room than a classroom.

Encouraging humor

Teens often view art museums as places with art they are supposed to "get" and revere—not spaces welcoming their humor or criticism. Creating an environment where teens can joke about the art and compare it to familiar content in their lives can make them feel a sense of belonging.

ACTIVITIES

MEMES & MUSIC

Topics that seem silly or mundane can be the key to getting teens to interact and have fun. We want to disrupt the perception that museums are solemn places where teens don't belong!

TUNES CHOICE

Small as it seems, playing music throughout a program can help teens relax in a museum context. Most helpful of all is handing over music choice to the teens!

Try it:

- Decide ahead of time what your ground rules will be for content. Relay these—and your reasoning for them—to the teens before they start adding songs.
- Create a Spotify or YouTube jukebox for teens to add their music to while they create.
- Don't be afraid to dance with them! An adult joining in relieves some pressure, and can create genuine connection.

MAKE THEIR SPACE

The act of making a mark, allowing a teen to say, “I was here, I made this, I belong here,” can make a huge difference in the way they interact with the museum in the future.

Try it:

- If you have a dedicated space for programming, consider working with your museum to let the teens **collaborate on a mural** idea for one of the walls.
- Give parameters for size, subject or materials, but stay open minded and **give them agency**.
- Provide suggested themes. Elements of art, local stories, memes they enjoy, provide broad themes that they can bring their personality to the space.

Running teen programs with **two facilitators** can allow for a greater range of flexibility and agency for your teen participants, while also keeping content respectful of other museum visitors!

ACTIVITY EXAMPLE

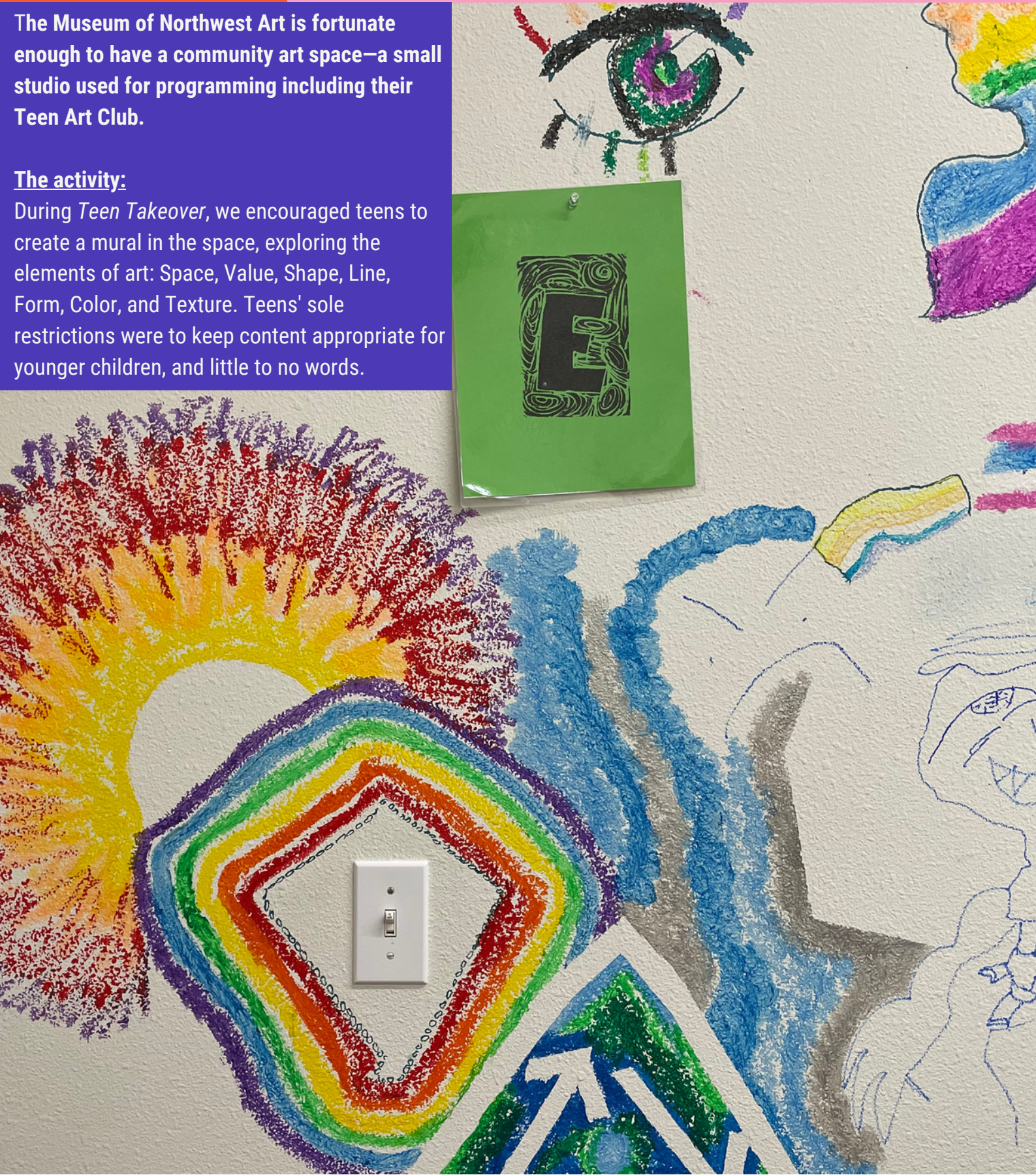
MAKE THEIR SPACE

A case study in teens creating and shaping their own space

The Museum of Northwest Art is fortunate enough to have a community art space—a small studio used for programming including their Teen Art Club.

The activity:

During *Teen Takeover*, we encouraged teens to create a mural in the space, exploring the elements of art: Space, Value, Shape, Line, Form, Color, and Texture. Teens' sole restrictions were to keep content appropriate for younger children, and little to no words.



ACTIVITIES

GAMES & GALLERIES

Part of changing teens' senses of belonging in galleries is lowering the stakes of a visiting a gallery! Changing from learning goals to laughter and exploration can ease teens' anxiety in the space.

GALLERY GAMES

Bringing games (and pens) into the gallery may seem like a jarring idea—and that's the point! By bringing a familiar and low-stakes activity into an alienating space, we open up teens' concepts of how they can belong in a gallery.

Try it:

- Bring simple materials (easels and large notepads are easy to access and move around as needed) into the gallery to play hangman, pictionary, etc.
- Adopt teens' suggestions for other games or challenges! They will be more invested in their own suggestions, and can build greater trust with the space.

UNGUIDED EXPLORATION

Not every teen has been to a museum before, and those that have may associate it with homework and lesson plans. Allowing teens to explore and surface their own references and questions at their own pace creates a space of curiosity instead of obligation.

Try it:

- When transitioning into the gallery for games, allow your teens to spread out into the space **at their leisure**.
- Your role here is as an **interpreter when requested**, but mostly as a presence to let them **feel less out-of-place in this context**. Ask questions about the art, compare it to familiar media, but resist the urge to push for their understanding of the pieces.

Reminding teens that the game is not to see who can scream the loudest may be required, but is indicative of something going well!

RECRUITMENT LESSONS

So how can we recruit as many teens as possible in a small rural community? We need to get creative. Your audience is split between family obligations, sports, and friends!

School partnerships

Leveraging **relationships with schools** will help immensely. Teacher contact information may be readily available at your museum, or a quick search on the school website should have an email or phone number to try.

Sending program information via an **easy-to-read flyer or brochure** will give the teachers something they can print and/or distribute to parents.

Consider teen + parent needs

Providing snacks, drinks, and art supplies eliminate multiple barriers. Caregivers worry about plenty—feeding their child, making sure they are with trustworthy adults, having time during the day to drive them around, and supporting their socializing. Addressing some of these when you're planning can win adults over and encourage their teens to attend!

Try out **different days of the week** for a program, **different hours** for parents working 9-5, or **looking at transit schedules** for kids who may not have a ride from an adult.

"My mom asked if I wanted to go to the Teen Art Club thing and I was like, 'Eh. Sure. I don't have anything else going on today. All my friends are busy.'"

Social media and websites

Social media is an easy way to pass information along, and doesn't require reaching out to people directly. Consider what websites or apps teens or their parents use. **Instagram, Facebook, and community websites** can reach a lot of people in a short amount of time.

Loud teens are recruitment!

Weekends are when teens occasionally get to choose what they do—often spur-of-the-moment. For this reason, RSVPs can be very hard to rely on. The solution: drop-in programs near your museum doors.

"Rowdy" teens that usually get dirty looks in museums are great recruitment! Hearing laughter and music the museum draws teens and families in. For caregivers, a **trusted environment with similar-aged participants** is on-the-spot recruitment. For teens, a **space within the museum where they are free to laugh or get loud** can feel like a safe place.

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