

Designing places with people

Testing ideas for your community building





About this resource

This booklet is for those exploring remodelling and/or design interventions to a community building (community centre, place of worship, youth centre, school, library etc) whilst looking at ways to further connect with their wider community.

Through the resource, we will briefly explore the concept of prototyping and testing new uses and configurations of space in a building. We will look at a real-life example and present three scenarios that outline different situations and approaches to prototyping.

While your specific situation may vary from those portrayed, similar challenges, objectives and needs frequently arise within community building projects and the scenarios are intended as inspiration and a potential call to action.

When discussing prototyping, we mean trialling possible changes to what happens in a community building and / or the design of that building. These are temporary interventions that explore what these changes might mean in a lighter-touch way, before making any more significant or long-term decisions.

Some examples of prototyping physical changes to your building could be marking out possible walls or other interventions onto the floor of your building to see how they would affect movement, or testing different materials for flooring using temporary installations. You can also test different uses of a space, for example by organising an activity day with groups interested in hiring your space, or inviting a local business to run a month-long pop-up.



Many groups running community buildings can feel overwhelmed when considering how to develop their building and bring new people into it. Prototyping and testing activities and relationships can help you gain a clearer picture of what direction you want the building to take, without committing to too much immediately.

Trying out ideas can be a relatively low-cost way to explore potential working relationships with other partners, raise awareness locally of the space available, understand what is achievable and feels appropriate for your building, explore potential changes to your programme of work, and discover what physical and design changes may need to happen in the building to help achieve your objectives.

Activating agents of change

Trialling activities and changes in your building can be a way to connect with new people, who may be willing to offer commitment and investment in your building in various ways. Bringing fresh faces into a building can lead to a variety of opportunities:

Fresh perspectives

New people bring fresh ideas and perspectives. They might see alternative options and solutions and can contribute time and skills to help you explore them.

Creating connections and partners

Working together to test new ideas for your building can help nurture relationships with the wider community, strengthening your connection to local networks and revealing new ways for people and organisations to work together.



Unearthing stakeholders and champions

A broader range of local people and organisations using your space can raise awareness of your building as a community asset and help unearth local stakeholders and champions.

Long-term sustainability

New and greater numbers of people will be invested in the future of the building and can contribute to transforming the building and helping the space thrive in the long term.

Exploring uses of a space

Trialling activities can help you explore what actually works in your building, and what works less well. It can highlight both practical and ethical considerations that may not emerge through discussion alone.

The right activity for your community

Find out what demand or interest there is in the community for the activities you are trialling. You can measure this by how many turn up (providing you have promoted the event effectively) and by gathering feedback on which activities people enjoy.

The right activity for the space

Is this activity the right fit for your space? If not, might other activities work better, and what would they be? Can the space accommodate different activities at different times of the day or week? How might these activities sit alongside what is already there?

The right activity for your values

While you should not be afraid to try different activities and reach out to new user groups, make sure that the activities you introduce, and external partners or facilitators who may be running them, feel a good fit with your group's objectives and values.



Exploring the design of a space

Prototyping and testing ideas can be a useful way to find out what works and what doesn't in the design and layout of a space and can help inform anything from small alterations to fundamental changes to the structure of the building. Exploring options in a light-touch way can be invaluable when considering renovating or remodelling a building.

Consider interventions

If the activity doesn't work in your space but is a good fit in other ways, what changes to a room's layout or building's design might be possible to help transform the space into one where the activity would work?

Learning from challenges

Issues that arise when testing new activities in your space can be used to inform spatial interventions. Learning from what doesn't work is as valuable as learning from what does. Testing can help you design spaces that are either flexible for a range of uses or tailored to specific needs.

Temporary structures

You can make temporary changes to layout and create structures that change the way a space operates in the short term, with minimal costs and less need for permissions. These can give useful insight into what may work for long-term interventions.



Experimenting before committing

Testing and prototyping makes it possible to explore what works before committing to anything.

Community groups often have limited resources and running a trial can feel like a challenge in these circumstances. However, testing an activity or temporary change to a physical space is much easier to do and fund than a long-term or permanent project and, depending on the model, can sometimes fund itself. Additionally experimentation can be fun, allow you to take risks and may help see your community building in a new light in terms of what is possible.

A relatively small investment can have a big impact, helping you to explore options, gain clarity, and potentially check you are on the right path. Trialling activities can help you see what changes you might need to make to your space, programme or planning, as well as making sure that the activity or partnership is really for you.

Information gathered can help ensure that when more substantial changes are made, they are more likely to be a good fit for not just the present, but also the future.



Bow Church - their situation

St Mary's Church, Bow is a Grade II* listed building located in east London. The church's core team were keen to make new connections in their local area, and explore new uses for the church, while respecting the primary use of the building as a place of worship.

This was part of an ongoing process of renovation and community engagement, which had already resulted in some changes to the building and their vision of what the church could be. They were keen to build on their central location and return the church to its former role as a hub for their local community.

Aware of upcoming further renovation work, they were also keen to test their design ideas, and make sure that proposed changes to the building would facilitate their aims for the church going forward.

They were mindful that their core working group had limited time available, so they decided to launch a call-out for taster sessions, to connect with local groups who might be interested in running activities in their building.



What they did

Bow Church put a call-out to their community, inviting local groups to propose an activity that they would like to run in the church. The call-out was promoted through local networks as well as online through Twitter and Nextdoor. Responses were collected through SurveyMonkey making the process simple to manage.

Two groups, a karate group and salsa dancing class, were invited to run trial activities in the church for a fitness afternoon. The taster sessions had multiple benefits. They brought new people into the building, and enabled regular churchgoers to try new activities that might have felt more intimidating in other contexts.



For the Bow Church group, it gave the opportunity to test both the activities themselves and potential collaborations with external partners. For the groups running the activities, it offered the opportunity to test the space as a potential regular venue. The groups were keen to run ongoing classes in the church space, which could both bring extra income into the church, and extend the church's offer to the community.

The activity day also helped test design ideas being discussed at Bow Church to help them make their building more flexible and accessible to a broader range of users.

Objectives

What they hoped to do

Activating agents of change

1. Test whether there were local people keen to run regular activities at Bow Church.
2. Test how new partnerships might be mutually beneficial to church and activity leaders.

Explore uses for the space

1. Test the popularity of different activities within the local area.
2. Test whether different activities were compatible with the church building and church mission.

Explore design ideas

1. Test what changes might need to happen to the building's design and facilities as they worked towards redevelopment of their building (e.g. catering facilities, seating, toilet facilities).

Outcomes

What happened

Activating agents of change

1. The project enabled the church to make connections with two local activity leaders, who were keen to run future regular classes in the church.
2. The day brought new people into the church, and demonstrated the potential for new sources of regular income and the expansion of the church's offer to the community.

Explore uses for the space

1. The fitness day was well attended, with most attendees saying they would come to a similar activity again.
2. The activity day gave the opportunity to experience the church as a multi-use space, exploring whether exercise classes were a good fit for the building and the church community.

Explore design Ideas

1. The activity day backed up their intentions regarding the need to create accessible toilets, as well as the need to preserve and extend the flexibility of the space.

Three scenarios

These scenarios have been designed to help you explore how you would approach prototyping in three different situations. While they may be quite different from your situation, common themes should emerge and help you think about what kinds of prototyping might be relevant to you.

Setting the scene

You are a member of the parochial church council (PCC) at a small but active church in your rural community. Your church regularly hosts a number of its own events and hires out the church space to others. The wider team looking after the church would like to explore whether the installation of a kitchen and servery into the main church space would help improve the church's facilities both for their worshipping community and for those who hire the church for events.

While the wider group is sure that it would be useful and, in some ways, very practical to bring these facilities into the main space, there are concerns that this could compromise movement around the space and the sacred feel of the church.

The group is also not sure whether it would be best to have a fixed kitchen space, or movable elements that could be hidden away. They are also considering whether they want a cafe or a self-service kitchen area. As a team you would like to test these ideas before committing,



Setting objectives

Activate agents of change

Your church group needs to consider not only the physical elements of the kitchen, but also who will manage, use and benefit from its use. As changes will affect the people who organise and participate in the activities linked to the kitchen, how you test potential changes should help them contribute to decisions about future configurations of the space.

Explore uses of the space

Before placing a kitchen into the space, your group needs to have a very clear sense of what it will be used for. What level of activity must it cater for, and how many people will be using it at any given moment? Is it there so that people can make a cup of tea, or will you be teaching people to cook in it? Will it be a self-contained café facility managed by a dedicated group or organisation, or simply a resource for those using the space?

Explore design ideas

Any large physical intervention and any new functions added into a space will always have an impact on how the place looks, feels and functions. The kitchen space itself could be of many different sizes, shapes and uses, and your group would like to explore what feels appropriate for this particular context and need.

You could try: Month-long pop-up

In this case, you might invite a local catering company, that is used to outsourcing their services, to trial a kitchen space in the church. Working with a group for a month before committing to any long-term contracts or changes to your building could give you the opportunity to explore a number of different questions regarding what sort of kitchen, if any, might work best in your church, before making any long-term commitments.

You could approach a business able to bring most of their own equipment, making it possible to explore how this sort of change would impact on your space before making any big investments.

If the caterers were amenable, you might be able to experiment with storing the equipment when the café isn't open one week, and leaving the equipment out full time the next, in order to compare. Actually having a physical kitchen there will give a better sense of what having a kitchen in the space means better than any drawing or model.

This is a great way to understand what having others using your space full-time is like and what you expect from a potential partner before agreeing long-term contracts.

Practical tips:

Activate agents of change

Through inviting another organisation to run your kitchen space for a short period of time, you can test the boundaries of whether having a partner sharing the church works for the main organising group and the congregation. If the partnership goes well, you could consider inviting the caterers to run the space full-time after refurbishment works.

Explore uses of the space

By exploring one option, a café space run by an external partner, you can also extrapolate information on whether other options such as a self-run kitchen might be worth exploring or investing in. For example, if the kitchen works in the space, but negotiating the partnership proves more challenging, you can consider whether to trial another partnership or test your group running the kitchen.

Explore design ideas

There are a number of ways to gather information on how the kitchen would impact the church space. One example could be a simple discussion with your congregation about how they feel the trial impacted both the people flow and the feel of the church. You could run some parallel sessions with your congregation to further test the impact that the size of kitchen might have. For example you could use tape to mark different sizes of kitchen onto the floor, or add temporary panels, and ask the congregation to move through the church to test them.



Setting the scene

Place yourself in the position of a faith-based community organisation, which has recently bought a heritage building. You were previously a tenant in this building for many years.

You are keen to see this building thrive as a busy multi-use community hub. The building would create space for your own and other faith activities, for activities and services for local people, and also potentially offer room for local start-ups or social enterprises. For your organisation to be able to maintain this building as a community centre, it must also operate as a successful business.

Your group needs to find ways to rise to the responsibility of owning and managing your own building, which is a new challenge for you, and to realise the potential of your building as a resource for your local community. You need to test the way the rooms and various sub-spaces are currently laid out and designed, and whether they are likely to be suitable for your organisation's long-term aims.

Whilst you have productive ongoing relationships with a number of local organisations with whom you have previously run events, you must explore how you can work with other groups as partners and stakeholders within a building that you now own and manage.



Setting objectives

Activate agents of change

Your group needs to understand who might use your building in the future, considering both the people who might benefit from activities and services offered, and the groups and organisations who might like to run their own activities in the building. You will also need to scope out potential partnerships that can help your centre thrive. You need to find a way to start a dialogue with local people and organisations to explore these different potential future relationships.

Explore uses of the space

It is a big building with a number of different spaces, many of which are not currently being used. Your group needs to consider what activities feel both possible and appropriate for the different spaces, and how they might fit with your ethos and objectives for the community building.

Explore design ideas

While the building is generally in good condition, it is not fully accessible, and some spaces feel tired and not very welcoming. You need to examine what changes, large or small, might need to happen to the building's design and layout. Your group is aware that you will need to make some physical changes to the building and are keen to explore the scope and scale of what is required.

You could try: A competition

In a situation similar to this, you could try a competition for different local groups and businesses to run activities in your building as part of an activity fair. This can be a useful way to make new local connections, whilst gathering information about the building, what works well within it, and what may need to change.

The competition process can provide the opportunity to connect beyond the winners, with all entrants and a wider range of those interested in taking part.

This can be useful for generating interest and investment in the space and also means you can gather data from a broader range of potential stakeholders than if you went straight to trialling an activity with one or two local groups.

You could then use the data to inform your design project and decisions on the future of your building.

You could structure your competition in a number of stages:

1. Proposals

Local businesses and organisations can be invited to submit proposals for trialling activities that they could run in the space. Competitions and subsequent activities can be funded by charging a small entrance fee for applications. You could offer opportunities for participants to visit your building, in order to become more familiar with the space and how they could use it.

2. Activity Fair

Applicants could trial their ideas in an activity fair. Each can have a small area to run a stall or activity offering a taste of what they do and explore whether the building might work as a space for them in the longer term. This can also help inform what physical changes might be required to the building to accommodate activities that were difficult to run in the space as it is now.

3. Voting

Participants and attendees could vote on the winning activity. This could be through voting slips and a ballot box open throughout the day or by placing beans in jars. Getting the views of attendees offers you a way of gathering extra data on what activities there is a desire for in the local area. This could be used to inform the activity programme for the space beyond this specific trial. It could also be a way to choose a winner if relevant.

Practical tips:

Activate agents of change

Remember to make the best of any dialogue with all local groups that connect with you. Not all of them will be the best fit for this way of working together, but they may still have a useful perspective on your building, or become a powerful champion or stakeholder in future.

Explore uses of the space

Look at how to use the activity day to test a variety of different uses in your space. Gather data on what attracts the most interest from your community. Consider inviting different groups to try out different areas of the building, testing what would be practical in different spaces. They could then give valuable feedback about these spaces. Examine what sorts of things might work best in different parts of your building.

Explore design ideas

Gather feedback on how attendees found aspects of the building you are considering changing. For example: were there any problems with accessibility? What were people's perceptions of the less cared-for areas of the building? What would need to change to make some activities work better? Remember to take note of issues you may not have thought of.

Setting the scene

You are part of the management team of a community centre, and have been approached by a local organisation that is interested in running regular music activity sessions in the centre's main hall. The enquiring organisation would like to test whether the hall is an appropriate space for their activities, and whether there would be enough interest in the local area to make it financially viable for them to run their sessions there.

The organisation is willing to pay a good hire fee to the community centre, as they have already secured funding to run a 3-year programme of activities, but want to be sure that the community centre is the right venue for them.

Your community centre would like to work with this organisation, and in principle think the music activities would be a good fit with other things happening at the centre and would appeal to some of your user groups. The hire fee would also provide valuable income to the centre. You are not sure, however, whether your hall can accommodate this without having an impact on other activities and user groups in the building.

You would like to get a better sense of what it would be like in practice to host this programme of activities before you commit, and to explore whether it would require you to make any physical changes to the building, such as acoustic panelling, different flooring, or extra storage to accommodate it.



Setting objectives:

Activate agents of change

The group running the activities needs to test whether there is a local audience for the activities in question, and whether they think this is the right place to do them. Both your organisation and theirs would also like to explore how well you can work together before entering into a 3-year commitment.

Explore uses of the space

Your hall is a multi-purpose space and has not been designed with the requirements of music activities in mind. You need to test how well the room accommodates the noise and equipment required, and what impact the activities might have on other people in the building. How easy is it to set up and pack up the activity within that space? Is it realistic for the space to be shared with other uses and user groups?

Explore design ideas

You also need to look at what equipment would be taken away after every session, and what would need to be stored on the premises. Seeing the activities and equipment, and measuring them against the available activity and storage space, could help inform whether any changes might be needed to the space in order to accommodate the programme.

You could try: Activity Day

In a situation such as this you could invite the organisation to run a one-off musical activity day in your building. This could enable a low-commitment test of how such activities might work in your space, in terms of sound bleed, storage, and any other unforeseen challenges.

The day would also test local demand for such activities. The event can be open and local residents and relevant groups can be invited to attend and try the activities. Attendance can be measured, and you can gather feedback on whether attendees would be likely to attend these sorts of activities on a more regular basis.

The music organisation could be responsible for sourcing relevant equipment and take a lead on promoting the event, minimising the impact on your group whilst checking the idea's sustainability. They would also get the opportunity to test whether your space works for them and utilise the data regarding local interest, before signing up to a 3-year commitment.

Decisions could then be made on whether a long-term working relationship would be right for all parties. If everyone decides to go forward, informed decisions could be made regarding any possible changes which might need to be made to the space to better accommodate the activities (e.g. storage, sound-proofing), as well as further investment in terms of equipment or furnishings.

Practical tips:

Activate agents of change

Remember to work together with the group to record attendance numbers and gather feedback on the day, in order to measure interest in their activities and whether an ongoing relationship is likely to be a success.

Explore uses of the space

Speak with other users of the building after the event about whether noise or disruption was an issue.

Remember that what you learn from the day can be useful for considering other possible future activities in the space, as well as the current relationship with the music group.

Explore design ideas

Explore which, if any, areas have most sound bleed during the event, and consider whether better sound insulation could be added to these walls. Would any new walls or structural elements need to be added?

Take the time to explore how equipment works in the space and how much storage might need to be added if you went ahead with a longer-term partnership.



Build your team

Create a core team to work on the project. Projects are more likely to fail when only one person is truly invested.

Help enable this by...

Drawing on those with different skill sets within your organisation. Reach out across your organisation and assign tasks clearly.

Expect the unexpected

Create a clear and realistic timeline for your prototyping project, but remember to expect the unexpected and leave room where you can so delays to any aspect of the initiative don't derail your entire plan.

Help enable this by...

Building additional space into your project timeline where possible to allow for the unexpected.

Create a shared vision

Does your team have a shared vision? It helps to be clear on the direction you want to take and check in with all key team members about where they see the medium and long-term future of your project, especially in relation to the kinds of activities being trialled.

Help enable this by...

Meeting regularly and communicating clearly with each other. You could undertake a simple visioning workshop together, a task like creating collages together to express where you see the future of your building can help break down barriers to communication and begin to foster common ground. Don't be afraid to air disagreements but also be willing to build on shared ideas and to compromise.



Don't sell yourself short

New working relationships can also mean fresh sources of income. You may be renting out your space to new groups, and these groups may be running paid-for activities in your space. Make sure you don't undersell your assets and what your space is worth.

Help enable this by...

Doing some simple research on what similar-sized spaces cost to rent in your area. Have a look at both physical and online places where you intend to promote your building and its activities.

Promote your prototyping project

Have you let your wider community, beyond regular visitors and users of your space, know about the trial? Consider using local social media groups, physical flyers and posters, contacting local community groups, residents associations and business networks.

Help enable this by...

Connecting with local groups on social media, and remembering the flyers and posters take time to be designed and printed, so factor this in. Remember that flyers can also be emailed to your mailing list and any interested local organisations. Consider groups you may not have thought of. Do local estates have resident associations? Are there other local community projects or organisations that would be open to helping promote your project?



Choosing activities

Take time to consider what you want, and what you don't want in your building. Would any sort of activity be inappropriate for your group, project or building? Do you have any red lines about things you know would not be a good fit? Think about the kinds of activities that might work in your building both in terms of values and logistically.

Help enable this by...

Returning to your vision and considering which activities would best fit this. Communicating clearly within your team. Collecting feedback from all current and potential users and stakeholders.

If you are doing an activity day or short pop-up to begin with, you can use this opportunity to check the activities are appropriate ones for your aims as well as your space.

Remember relevant authorities

Whilst prototyping projects often requires fewer permissions, there may well still be organisations that need to be consulted. Make sure you look into this and relevant bodies, e.g. church diocese, local council are kept informed.

Help enable this by...

Remembering to keep relevant authorities informed, and building time for any relevant permissions into your timeline.



Acknowledgements

Photo credits

Front cover: Family Crafts at Bow Church, Bow Moves event, Empowering Design Practices research project
Inside front cover: Utopias chest at Utopias Fair in Somerset House, Prototyping Utopias research project

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Inside back cover: Quiet garden at St Peter's Hereford, Empowering Design Practices research project
Back cover: Sheffield University Live Project with Israac, Sheffield, Empowering Design Practices research project

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Empowering Design Practices is a research project exploring how community-led design can help empower those who look after historic places of worship to create more open, vibrant and sustainable places that respect and enhance their heritage. Working within this context, the project aims to develop insights and mechanisms (approaches, resources, training) to support community-led design and the development of places that connect and serve their communities.

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Empowering Design Practices
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