

Building a Community Reading Place

Why build a reading place?

- A community reading place provides an alternative to group programming and events, and allows strangers to choose to interact with each other through book clubs, or read on their own individually;
- Creating places where people can see, hear, and talk to one another helps to support the connection between the user of a space and the city, space and people that surround them. Passive interaction, such as sitting close to someone while they read a book, is another way to feel human connection to those we share our reading places with;¹
- Learning the story of others, reading in public helps us understand people from different backgrounds, empathizing with people different from ourselves can contribute to a more compassionate society;²
- Reading helps us understand different perspectives on the world. Community reading places can create spaces for dialogue about challenges we face and how we might address them;²
- A person's connection to place, including reading places, relies on unique experiences that support their growth as individuals and their connection to a greater system or cause;²
- A reading place supports reading, but it also reflects the uniqueness of the community it is situated within. It attracts and entices people to want to be a part of it. This sense of community can lead to improved life satisfaction and feelings of belonging - making for happier members of society!

Case Study - CUPS

CUPS Calgary Society is a not-for-profit organization in Downtown Calgary working with low income vulnerable individuals and families to build resilience. They saw the value in creating reading places that were fun and inspiring for children and families who visited their space. Grant Kennedy, CUPS Calgary Society, shares their reading place experience.

"In engaging with our clients, and doing focus groups and sitting down together as a team, [we discovered] we really wanted to have a physical space that mirrored what we were promoting in our parent capacity building programs. So how can we build a space that really promotes empathy, attachment, self nurturing, gentle touch, appropriate discipline, expressing feelings, and having appropriate expectations of yourself and your kids...

What started off as kind of a book shelf or nook idea, then evolved into, 'well, maybe we could do something in this quarter of the space and begin to have a bit more of a potential living room feel. So maybe at least our parent child interaction times could happen here in that nice, nurturing, safe, inviting space.' And then, as that evolved, luckily, we were able to get some generous funding to be able to overhaul the entire space. And so when that happened, it was great to get the chance to sit down with [Calgary Reads] and then a great designer and artist, Karen Scarlett, who was able to walk into space and allow us to share our ideas. And from there put together a fantastic proposal that really met our needs as to what the staff and clients wanted to see within the space."

1. Gehl, J., & Rogers, L. R. (2010). *Cities for People* (Illustrated ed.). Island Press.

2. Priske, Katie (2018). Research shows reading improves kids' emotional intelligence and increases empathy.

Building a Reading Place in your community



1. ASSESS YOUR ASSETS AND FIND A PLACE. Building a reading space in your community is a little different than building a reading space in a school or a business. First, you need to assess what resources you have to dedicate to a reading space. Are you already an organization with a funding base? Do you have space to build a reading space? Are you creating a brand new space in a separate building, or are you using part of an existing building with a different purpose? What type of funding do you have? Do you need to apply for a grant?

Building a community reading place can vary greatly, from incorporating the space in your own building, like CUPS Calgary Society, to creating a new building that is dedicated to reading like The Little Red Reading House. Depending on the route you choose, you may need to apply for zoning amendments, consider unique funding streams, and partner with corporate or other organizations. We've experienced and implemented reading places in all of these scenarios, and can help you create a roadmap to making your unique reading place.

2. PITCH THE IDEA. An additional step in building a reading place in your community is creating a funding pitch for local stakeholders, potential funders, and partners. Depending on your mission, there are a series of reasons why reading place placemaking would benefit your organization. Contact our skilled team of experts for help making your unique case for building a community reading place.

3. SCOUT AND BRAINSTORM. Once you have acquired a space and the funding you need, it's time to scout and brainstorm what kind of materials you'll need. There are a number of considerations that need to be taken into account when creating a community reading place. First, consider the unique needs of your users. In the example of CUPS, the team was highly considerate of design from a trauma perspective, ensuring clear sightlines, not having seating where you are exposed to someone sneaking up behind you, calm colours, natural elements. Other considerations may include accessibility, ease of cleaning surfaces, quality lighting, and visibility. The age of your users will also determine what type of reading space considerations you need. In general, a great reading space is a space of coziness, reading, curiosity, and connection. We can help you with this as you weigh all the things that go into a successful reading place.

4. GET SOME BOOKS. The most important component of a reading place is the books. Select a variety of books for the community to use. Readers are more likely to read the books that they own, so provide users of the space with books that they can take home with them if possible. There are a series of ways to retrieve books for your reading space that we can help you with.

5. ENSURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS. A reading place is characterized by 3 main ingredients: Books, Book lighting, and book shelving. There are a series of other building blocks that make up great reading places, including: reading seating, reading nooks, reading artifacts, decorative words and artwork, and themed curiosities to fully submerge a reader into a space. Find the design ingredients that you need, and those that will make the space connect with readers. We can help you to find unique reading place materials.

6. START BUILDING Now that you have the inspiration and direction from your reader, the books, and a place, and funding, it's time to start building your very own reading space! Create curiosities and nooks in a space that is perfect for the community to feel comfortable and safe in. Don't forget to have fun, and use the space with your community to make connections, and become a reading leader.

ONE LAST THING... Great reading places grow and change, just as communities do. Think about how the space is used differently over time. What's working? What isn't? Do the readers still relate to the atmosphere and artwork in the space? Is the furniture the right scale for the readers? Think about introducing programming into the space - start a book club, share stories and ideas from what you're reading, and adapt the space as it continues to grow and change.



Want to learn more about building a reading place? Contact the Little Red Reading House at hello@littleredreadinghouse for a free 30 minute consultation.