



# Talking Pancakes

A Youth in Action Exploration of For-Youth By-Youth  
Space in Esquimalt



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***The content for this report is based on the exploration led by Meg Petersen in the summer of 2014 and is authored by the Youth in Action Community Animator Jordan Perrault.***

***Produced February 2015 as part of the Youth in Action initiative in Esquimalt.***

## Executive Summary

Over the summer of 2014, several of the team members from the Youth in Action initiative took on different independent investigations.<sup>1</sup> In Esquimalt Meg took explored a potential youth space. She led consultations with her peers and examined existing services. She presented her findings in a painting.

Meg had an opportunity to explore designing a for-youth by-youth space. In the process of doing so she developed a vision of space where youth were actively involved in identify what they wanted, and also participating in its creation and on-going management.

The result of Meg's exploration was a resounding message to community: "let us be involved." They're message is:

- *We want to become independent – let us lead in:*
  - *Identifying projects that impact us and our community*
  - *Designing these projects*
  - *Managing the results*
  - *Setting community standards and rules*
  - *Resolving conflicts*
- *We acknowledge that it may be messy to enable projects "for-youth by-youth," but this is what gives us a sense of belonging and ownership and provides us a chance to grow.*
- *Let us learn to lead, support us by encouraging peer mentoring and give us roles.*

Those consulted in Meg's investigation laid out some ways this could happen: from a youth council to volunteers, dialogue between participants and staff, and ongoing support to them leading. For this to succeed it would have to be met with building capacity and creating a space for people to grow.

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<sup>1</sup> In Esquimalt two summer investigations took place. This one by Meg, and one by Eva which explored public art and the history of the trackside gallery.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2014 Meg set out on an independent project as part of the Youth in Action<sup>2</sup> initiative in Esquimalt. Her goal was to explore ideas for a youth-space created “for people to relax and have a good time.” This evolved into developing a youth imagined model of a for-youth by-youth space where young people are integral to its design and operation. Based on a series of consultations with her peer, Meg produced a painting of the ideal space. Using different symbols, the painting represents some of the ideas for a new youth space in Esquimalt.

This report is split into three parts. In the first part the Meg’s project is introduced. In the second part Meg’s final vision – a painting – is presented and some of the key symbols are explained. Lastly, Meg’s findings that are not captured in the painting are presented by Youth in Action’s community animator.

## Pancakes and Perspectives: Consultation over Food

The Youth in Action initiative supports young people age 15-24 in Esquimalt and Hillside-Quadra to take the lead in identifying and creating positive community change. The two teams led community encounters between the fall of 2013 and spring of 2014. The initiative paused for the summer; however, team members had the option of doing independent investigations. These built on themes that teams identified from the community. They also informed ideas the team developed when reconvening in fall.

Meg’s idea for her exploration came from the discovery that many youth in Esquimalt desire a supportive space where people can ask questions and get help with their problems. This was identified as strongest amongst those in later years of high school or shortly after graduating.

Meg’s approach was intentionally informal and employed a strategy of engaging youth through conversations over food. A majority of her information came from 2 “Flapjack Wednesdays” where she brought peers together to eat pancakes and discuss a selection of pre-defined questions. Answers were recorded on large pieces of paper with each of the participants writing their own thoughts. Supplementary information was gathered from informal conversations with youth in the community. She also conducted conversations with service providers as a means of getting to know existing spaces.

Several critical things came up through Meg’s exploration. As things unfolded she focused more on what kind of spaces broad sections of the youth population in Esquimalt would partake in, how it could be organized and managed with youth, and considerations for the support that young people are looking for. Her primary conclusion was that “you would make a better space if the space was made by people that were that age, the age that space is made for.”

Moving forward these findings will be incorporated into the broader Youth in Action initiative in Esquimalt. Meg’s hope is that these can be incorporated into youth spaces in the municipality in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A



**The Painting**

During Flapjack Wednesday’s Meg got to explore what people liked or didn’t like about existing youth spaces. They imagined a different space, one that brought elements of existing spaces together and put youth leadership at the centre. The painting represents some of the most critical findings Meg identified. Using a series of symbols she presents different ideas uncovered through her conversations.

For the participants consulted, the most important part of this space is its interactivity and participatory nature. It would be critical that youth are part of the planning and organizing process, identifying and leading activities that they would find interesting. It would contain a mix of structured and informal activities. At times it would be an open space to “just be” and relax, and at other times would host organized activities.

In this space, youth would have the opportunity to learn and develop themselves through support from staff and each other.

## **The Walls**

**The Hand Wall:** This idea is based on the need to create a sense of ownership and belonging. Paint is readily available so when a new person walks into the space they can put their handprint and name on the wall. The giant green hand is supposed to represent the Hulk (because the hulk is cool).

**The Writing on the Wall:** This wall represents youth identified supports. There is a diversity of responses – 43 in total – ranging from getting work to self growth, family issues to being empowered, and conflict resolution to self expression. Not all responses are represented on the wall.

**The Red wall:** When asked what colour the walls should be, Blood Red was a frontrunner, in part because of vampires. A consensus was made of any colour but yellow.

**The Box and Board on the Red Wall:** One of the most popular ideas from Flapjack Wednesdays was a question box. Each week a different theme would be posted on the board and youth would put their questions in the box. An expert would be brought in when needed to answer the questions – when a consultant was brought in it could be an event. The answers would be posted on the board and on the space's blog. This could also be a way of getting activity or event ideas and would promote ongoing dialogue and a sense of belonging.

The board would be used to organize the space with event listings, calls for volunteers, and information posted regularly. The youth consulted suggested that mandatory volunteer hours required for graduation could be an incentive to get people involved.

## **The Computer**

**Digital Space:** The computer represents the digital space. This includes a functioning website that is updated with a live calendar, pictures, and a blog. It is a means of bringing community together and promoting events. Wi Fi would also be a big attraction.

**Music:** The space should have music that people can select. There could be disagreement about what music to listen to and when, however having a cue in place could help resolve this. The key thing is that this is a space free of censorship. However, youth using the space should be involved in setting community standards so that people feel safe and are not offended.

## **The Couch & Sleeping on the Floor**

The couch symbolizes the need to have a comfortable space to relax and hang out. Having a place to hang out that is a break from home and the pressures of life is one critical function that would make this space successful and busy.

The person on the floor sleeping represents the definition of a safe space: the space would be a safe space if you could lie down, have a nap and nobody would do anything to you. This could be achieved by

actively getting youth involved in setting community standards, deciding how rules are enforced and resolving conflicts.

The Coat Rack: The top hat represents the idea of having tea parties where everyone dresses up. Other costume parties and Cosplay – where people dress up and act like their favorite fictional characters – could happen. People could bring their own or some costumes could be available.

### **The Bookshelf**

The Bookshelf represents things that would be available as well as activities. A good mix of organized and informal activities would be key.

Books: A resource library and book exchange (leave a book take a book). A book club would be one example of how this space could be used.

Board Games: Board Games could be available for anyone to use and board game nights could be arranged.

Tea: Free tea and coffee were suggested as a means of making the space feel accessible, and because people like free tea.

Pancake Mix and Maple Syrup: Pancake Mix represents both the consultation process for this painting (i.e. “Flapjack Wednesday’s”), as well as the importance of having free food in order to draw youth to the space. Making food can be an activity, but also a way to get people interested. One suggestion was to have a readily available supply of “60 pounds of bacon.” It is not clear if this person was joking.

Paint, Music and a Camera: the boxes on the bottom shelf represent activities that could take place in this space. Having these things readily available could be a draw for people.

## Reflections on Meg's Internship

Meg's exploration uncovered important considerations for what future youth spaces in Esquimalt could look like. In exploring ideas for a supportive youth space she focused a lot on the experience of being in existing youth spaces. At two separate consultations called "Flapjack Wednesdays" she led discussions on what would be in a for-youth by-youth space. Meg and the people she spoke with began to explore how to make this possible. These conversations showed ingenuity and problem solving, and strongly demonstrated the value of creating space for youth to lead and learn as they participate in their communities. Meg's findings include suggested activities, items to include in the space, ways to set it up and manage it, types of support, and how to involve youth in promotion and organization.

Meg presented her interpretation in her painting. Additionally, three things came forward from discussions:

- The need for informal but supportive spaces for youth to grow
- The importance of youth involvement in planning and managing any space
- The challenge of attracting a diversity of people to one service or space.

These are presented below from the perspective of the Community Animator and put in relation to the broader Youth in Action initiative.

### Youth Space in Esquimalt: Meg's Exploration & Youth in Action's Themes

Throughout Meg's exploration, and in a number of other community encounters, young people expressed that they were looking for a place to belong. In Meg's model this is somewhere that provides support and gives people the freedom to explore who they want to be. This builds on what was identified earlier in the year by the Youth in Action team. The team saw a need for a space that supported youth and fostered their leadership, initiative and growth – especially for youth in late high school years and those transitioning afterwards.

While many of the people involved in Youth in Action make use of existing spaces, participants have recognized opportunities for creating additional services. Particularly in the realm of life support. As well, the perception of spaces being uncomfortable and unsafe is a huge barrier for many. Ultimately, engaging youth in the creation of space could go a long way to meeting both these considerations.

### Creating Safe & Supportive Space

In consultations, the space identified would be safe and supportive. Participants expressed a need for a home away from home that was informal enough to relax, but structured enough to provide opportunities for fun and growth. Safety was critical. The perception of existing youth spaces is that they were unsafe, that "shady" stuff was happening, they seemed gross (because of spiders), and people were "lurking" outside. There was also a concern for some that leaving late at night was unsafe (something they wanted to address through buddy systems or a different bus service). Most expressed not going because they didn't know anyone (having familiar faces encouraged a sense of security).

Participants were most engaged in the discussions of what a supportive space meant. People took turns identifying places in their life that they would like support and identified challenges that all young people might face. These included social dramas and the challenges that come from relationships and making friends, to issues like financial planning, feeling controlled, being empowered, managing stress, and learning to communicate. All groups were interested in learning how to grow as people and saw a youth space as a unique and powerful place to do that.

Combining safety and support would come through youth engagement and leadership from staff. This is something that has come up repeatedly in Youth in Action activities.

### **For Youth by Youth: Get the People Involved**

As Meg concluded, “If you want a space for youth, you should have youth make that space.” Her facilitation was directed in a way that encouraged participants to think of themselves as integral to the creation of the space. As a result, people enthusiastically discussed how they would want to get involved, what activities they would want to lead or participate in and how they would use a space. When people could imagine it, they got excited about being involved. Not only did they see themselves as having a role in shaping the space, they also identified practical ways to run and manage it. They developed several ways of incorporating youth in planning and organization from conception to operations. In the broader Youth in Action context, this approach has encouraged engaged and committed volunteerism from young people.

First and foremost participants identified a desire amongst young people to get involved in things that were meaningful to them. Whether it be work, volunteering, or in what they did in free time, having the opportunity to participate and lead was identified as being important. They also named mandatory volunteer hours for graduation as an additional motivator for some. Four areas of youth engagement were discussed: rules and enforcement, supporting youth to lead, staffing, and running activities.

In order to keep the balance between safety and freedom, they presented the idea of establishing their own community standards. The goal was to make a space where people were responsible for themselves. In order to do that, they expressed the need to have people feel a sense of ownership and belonging. Instead of rules the space were operate off of standards set by the people using the space. While this could be contradictory – such as wanting to have no rules but have structure – they endeavored to have a space where problems were solved collectively.

For them, conflict resolution by group was essential, and having known processes in place would help keep everyone safe. Once something did get out of control it would be the responsibility of the staff to identify and manage the situation, however any disciplinary measure would be determined by group of peers (facilitated by a space staff member). There is a lot of cross over between what they identified and the practice of restorative justice in which the impact of the action is explored in a supportive environment. For them it would be a space of mutual respect; it’s not respect if it’s forced.

Making a space where people are responsible for themselves is not an easy thing. From the experience of Youth in Action, engaging and encouraging young people to lead requires building capacity and developing skills in youth and leaders. This demands patience and clear expectations and will take some

trial and error. Letting youth take the lead can mean creating a safe space for them to take risks and then support them to learn and build on their success or failures.

The youth consulted identified this as well, especially when discussing where they wanted support in their lives. The model they suggested was one of peer mentorship, where youth would have the chance to learn to lead. This knowledge would then be shared and passed on to others. It could be messy, but it is incredibly valuable. As well, participants identified the attachment that having this kind of opportunity would create, leading to higher participation rates.

In order to build this capacity, the space would have to include a practice of identifying opportunities and responding to conflict. This would have to be carried out by youth and adult staff. There was a need expressed by youth to have someone accessible to talk to, someone who could answer questions and “talk about life.” In Meg’s model there was one person who would be responsible for overseeing the space and providing info. Participants identified the need to have a consistent set of staff, including some of their peers. This, they felt, would build trust and stronger bonds.

In Meg’s model, the actual operations of the space would include activities, events, and organized groups (like a book club). These would be identified by people attending the space and would be aimed at attracting a diverse group of people. In discussion, participants identified the need for a sort of council that would be part of organizing events, setting direction, and initiating activities. The benefit of a council would be responsible to something bigger and could help encourage a broad spectrum of the population to participate (especially if members are supported by staff). Having clearly identified roles and expectations would be critical to success. Having a council and other volunteers organize activities would encourage people to engage their peers, increasing the number of people coming to the space. Organization would be open to everyone and would aim to bring people together around a common purpose. For those interested, but not sure how to proceed, the space would provide a chance for people to learn and try things out.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Meg’s exploration represents one end of the spectrum of youth engagement where youth are responsible for identifying what they want to see and then creating it. This is risky, especially when barriers of time and experience are added in. Adult support to youth leadership can result in the development of meaningful and well attended youth spaces. Ultimately a youth space is a community space, and creating it will have to involve that community. There is a strong desire amongst young people to have a space where they feel they belong that also allows them the freedom to explore who they are and grow. While several spaces similar to this exist, they could do more to engage youth and promote independent agency. This requires creating an opportunity to take supported risks. Creating the opportunity for young people to learn as they led has been incredibly valuable. It is also incredibly fun.

## **Appendix A: About Youth in Action**

The Youth in Action initiative is supported by the United Way Greater Victoria and Coast Capital Savings. It seeks to build capacity in young people age 15-24 by supporting them as they explore their neighborhoods. The initiative is active in Hillside-Quadra and Esquimalt and enables youth to create positive change for their neighborhoods. The youth team in Esquimalt started in 2013 facilitating a number of community engagement activities and events with community associations, service providers, government, residents and their peers. Based on information gathered in the community they have identified priority areas for investment. These will be implemented in March 2015 by the Greater Victoria United Way in partnership with neighborhood organizations. The teams are supported by a Community Animator who facilitates the process.