HUMAN-FIRST & FUTURE-READY

A Design Framework for Unlocking Human Potential

SMITHGROUP

WHY A CASE FOR HUMANITY

## Amid the noise about AI, what's truly at stake often gets lost: people.

The future of work isn't about technology- it's about humanity. With 167 million people in the U.S. workforce and birthrates declining, a critical question emerges: How will we grow the economy and drive innovation with fewer people? People's role in shaping progress has never been more critical. Holding onto human potential is now an economic imperative. In this future, spaces must remain designed for people, not machines.

The question isn't whether machines will replace humans, but how we ensure human potential thrives in a tech-driven world- rather than erode as we become more dependent upon AI to do the thinking. Ideas, creativity, divergent thinking, and ownership are becoming the ultimate differentiators.

Yet research shows that our innate creative capacity diminishes as we grow older. A landmark study from 1968 by Dr. George Land, commissioned by NASA, revealed that 98% of five-year-olds demonstrate "genius-level" creative thinking. By age 10, that number drops to 30%, by 15 to 12%, and in adults, only 2% remain. This natural decline underscores the urgency of designing environments that reignite curiosity and imagination- because in a world of algorithm, people must bring new ideas and innovate boldly – AI without original thought is not enough.

This is why we propose a framework for designing places as catalysts for humanity in the AI era- a guide to creating environments that unlock creativity, foster trust, and sustain

Creativity Scores At "Genius Level"

98%	30%	12%	2%
5 YEAR OLDS	10 YEAR OLDS	15 YEAR OLDS	ADULTS
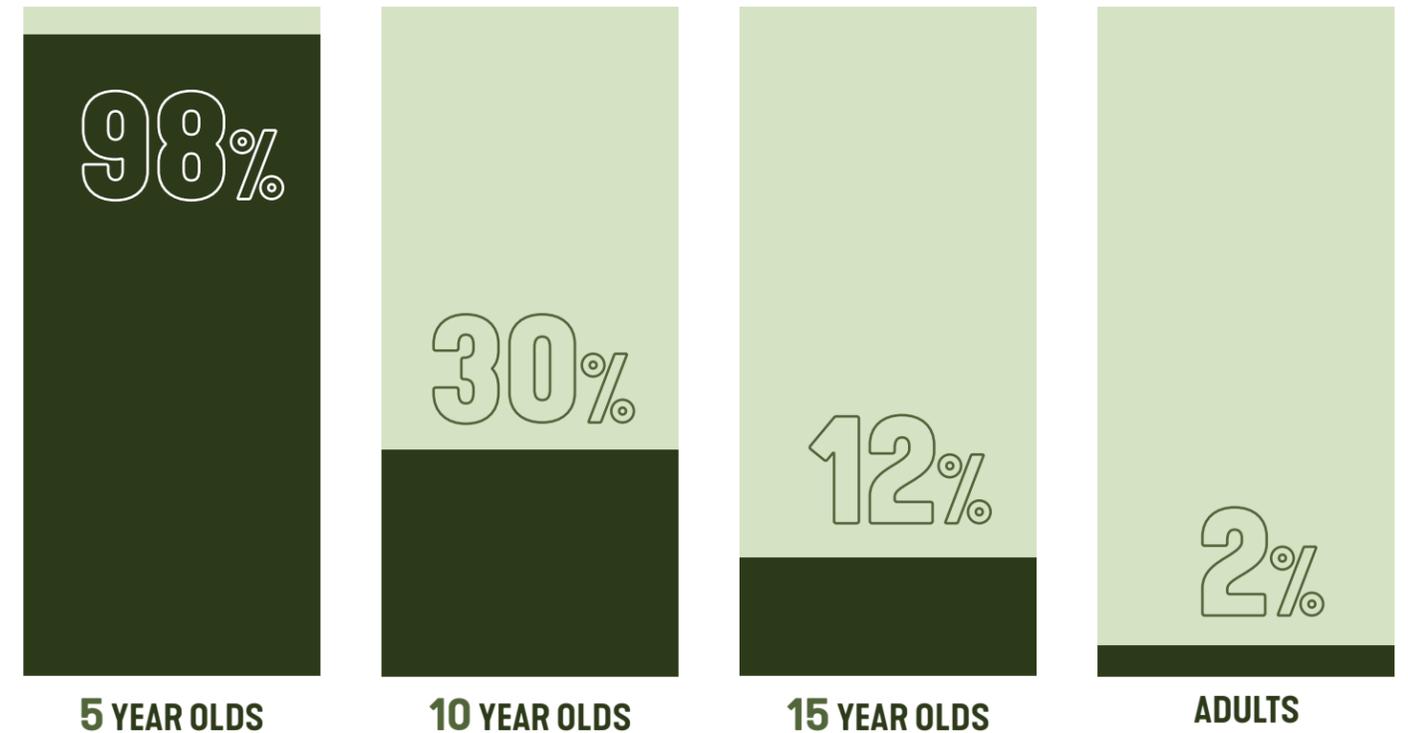
Source: Breakpoint And Beyond: Mastering The Future Today by George Land; A.T. Kearney Analysis

AS FUTURIST HART BROWN NOTED DURING A KEYNOTE AT SMITHGROUP'S CLIENT ADVISORY BOARD EVENT:

"Ideas are about to become a premium. If you can bring people into a space, create collaboration, and generate ideas, that's what will separate the winners. It's not going to be AI that separates the winners- it's the human experience."

resilience in humans. There isn't one element as the solution, but rather it's an interwoven matrix of perspectives- learning, variety, critical thinking, ownership, and moments of pause or exploration- that together form the tapestry of human experience. The SmithGroup framework offers a guide for projects of all types and scales, helping organizations create environments that unleash innovation, foster resilience, and transform fear into trust. In a world of algorithms, the spaces we design must amplify what makes us uniquely human.

DESIGNING FOR
POSSIBILITIES
NOT PRESCRIPTION

OUR FRAMEWORK RESTS ON TWO PRIMARY TENETS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE SUPPORTED BY THE THREADS:

In the AI era, thriving is not just about adopting and adapting to new technology: It's about elevating what makes us human.

1 Innovation, Critical Thinking, and Human Performance

(BEHAVIORAL AND NEURAL)

The first tenet focuses on unlocking cognitive and creative potential. Humans excel when environments stimulate curiosity and spark imagination. Spaces designed to infuse **delight**, **surprise**, and **curiosity** become catalysts for learning and ideation. These immersive experiences encourage exploration, foster flow states, and create conditions for breakthroughs. In this context, design transcends function- it becomes a **stage for creativity**, enabling people to stretch beyond routine and engage deeply with ideas.

2 Trust, Ownership, and Diversity in Perspectives

(BELONGING AND GROUP DYNAMICS)

The second tenet addresses the emotional and social dimensions of work. Innovation cannot thrive without trust and belonging. Spaces that encourage **ritual, grassroots engagement**, and **communal experiences** build this foundation. They create rhythms that anchor people, invite participation, and celebrate divergent thinking. These environments signal inclusion and empower individuals to contribute authentically, transforming **workplaces into communities** where collaboration feels natural and trust becomes the currency of progress.

HOW

INTERWEAVING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE TAPESTRY

BELONGING AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Ritual

Repeated patterns or behaviors: daily commutes, weekly gatherings, annual celebrations- anchors of shared experience.

Grassroots Engagement

Collective input, voice, and action: organic movements driven by shared purpose and experience, not hierarchy.
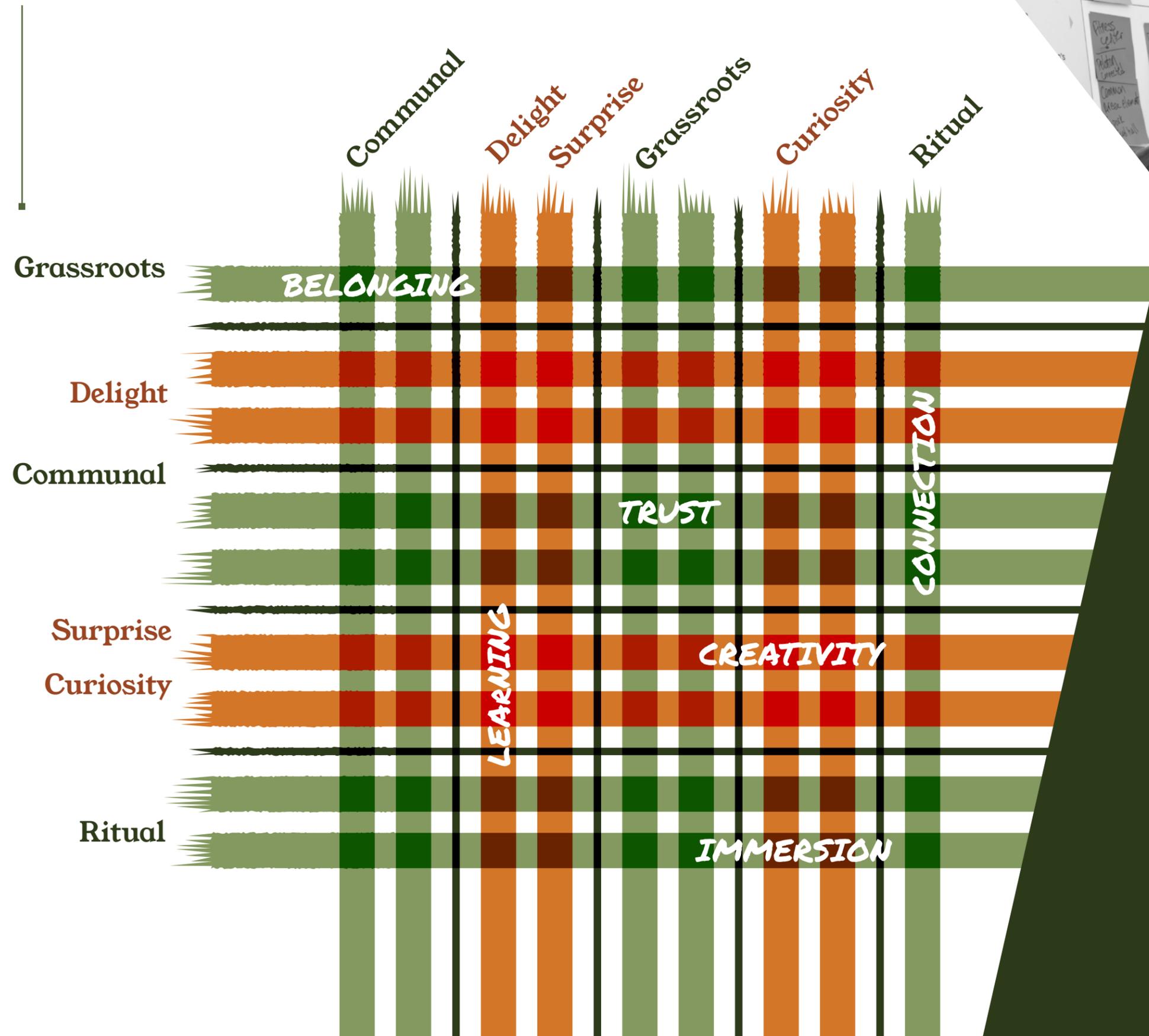
Communal Experience

Shared experiences, spaces and resources: open to all, fostering inclusivity and connection.

Good design alone cannot manufacture deeply human experiences like innovation, belonging, or trust.

These qualities cannot be forced, but they can be invited. Thoughtful design creates fertile ground for these moments- moments that might otherwise be missed in spaces lacking intentionality. Place can signal trust and spark creativity, but ultimately, people decide how to feel and act. The role of a place is to set the stage for possibility.

The SmithGroup framework translates human-centered tenets into tangible design elements- threads of unique texture and color that, when woven together, form a rich tapestry of experience. Each thread represents a dimension of human performance or social connection. By layering these elements, we amplify the potential for greater human achievement.

BEHAVIORAL AND NEURAL PERFORMANCE

Delight

Beauty that evokes joy: nature, art, music, animals or children – moments that make you smile.

Surprise

The unexpected and novel: seasonal changes, dynamic installations, evolving features.

Curiosity

Design that stops you in your tracks to pause and ask questions for moments of wonder: layered details, hidden elements, signals that there's more to discover.

THREADS TO WEAVE

WHEN THESE THREADS INTERSECT,
THE TRUE POWER OF A PLACE IS UNLOCKED.

Columns (top): Communal, Delight, Surprise, Grassroots, Curiosity, Ritual

Rows (left): Grassroots, Delight, Communal, Surprise, Curiosity, Ritual

Intersection labels: BELONGING, TRUST, CONNECTION, LEARNING, CREATIVITY, IMMERSION

The overlap creates a matrix of experiences—a cohesive approach that integrates cognitive stimulation with emotional connection.

These inter-weaving notions form a tapestry of human experience, ensuring that every space supports both the intellectual and relational dimensions of work. By designing places that spark creativity and nurture belonging, we transcend utility and transform environments into catalysts for experience as a strategic advantage in an AI-driven world.

WHAT

TRANSLATING HUMAN PERSPECTIVES INTO DESIGN

To bring this framework to life, we conducted a two-part workshop focused on generating ideas beyond conventional boundaries.

PARTICIPANTS EXPLORED TANGIBLE IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS THROUGH FOUR DISTINCT PROJECT TYPOLOGIES, EACH VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF FOUR HUMAN PERSPECTIVES:

Local Residents & Communities

End Users & Primary Users

Developers, Owners & Project Partners

Future Generations

The goal was to uncover design opportunities that honor humanity in an AI-driven era. What emerged were ideas and threads that can be woven into space solutions to create depth, texture, and meaning. When the SmithGroup framework of tenets was overlaid, these elements informed design decisions and sparked **conditions for human flourishing**.

When we weave threads like Delight & Surprise with Ritual & Communal, for example, the impact on human performance can be exponential. But these examples are not limited to those connections alone- they illustrate how multiple tenets can intersect to enable and advance intangible factors such as trust, connection, belonging, creativity, learning, and immersion. On the following pages are a few examples, organized by project type, drawn from the workshop exploration.
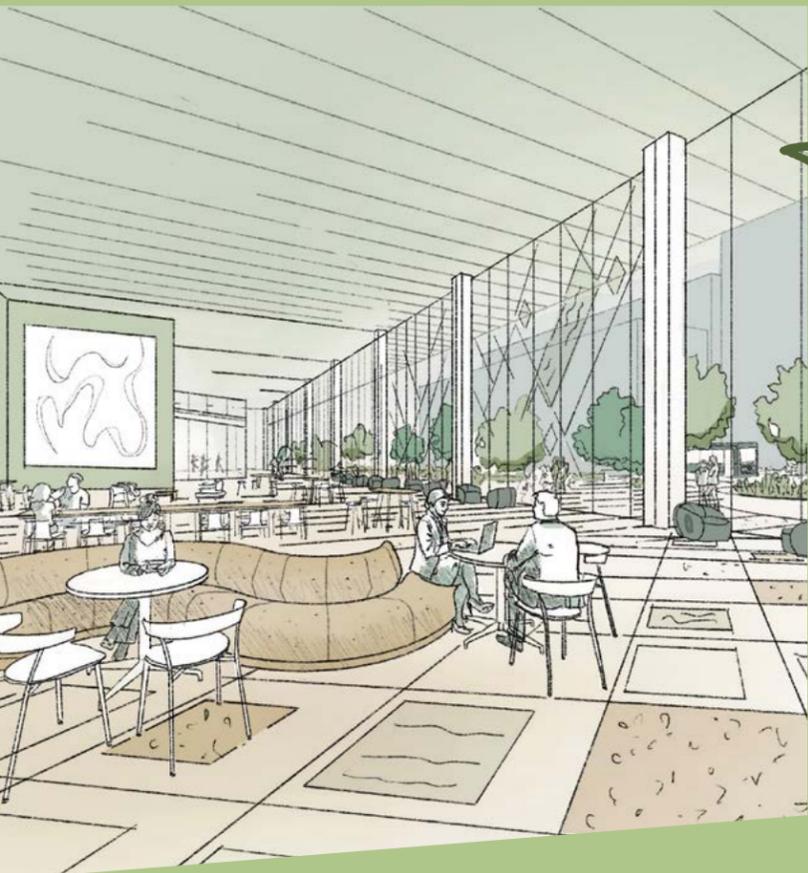
Reimagined Headquarters: Brand-Connected Placemaking

Integrate design elements that reinforce brand identity and trust- such as curated art from a local artist (Delight) that changes seasonally (Surprise), cultural programming, **art or dance classes** (Communal), and transit-friendly access (Ritual)- to create a sense of **belonging**, foster **trust** and **continuous learning** that help attract and retain top talent.

Mixed-Use Civic Center: Intentional Events & Bridging Divides

Implement programming that brings diverse neighbors together (Communal), turning civic centers into hubs for unity and shared experience (Grassroots) including seasonal events (Ritual), farmer's markets, and community celebrations (Delight). Digital living walls pose weekly questions to spark dialogue and shared purpose (Curiosity, Surprise, & Grassroots) that builds **trust** and sense of **belonging** through participation.

Mixed-Use Headquarters: Interactive & Immersive Experiences

Introduce features like interactive digital displays (Curiosity), music venues with water features (Delight), **interactive theatre, outdoor exercise classes**, and rooftop multi-functional spaces (Communal) to create **immersive** engagement beyond traditional office norms while **connecting** with the greater community.

Adaptive Re-Use Warehouse: Innovation Testbeds

Warehouses become living labs (Curiosity) for emerging technologies (Surprise) integrating AI-enabled personalization, and community-driven pilots (Grassroots) to test new ideas with the local residents and community partners (Communal) —to ensure that spaces evolve with society and inspire **creativity** of the next generation of **innovation** and innovators.

Illustrations by Alivia Stalnaker, Design Architect, SmithGroup

PERSISTENT THEMES ACROSS *PERSPECTIVES*

Across all typologies, certain ideas consistently surfaced, especially through the lens of local communities.

Spaces that blur public and private boundaries while maintaining security emerged as critical: event venues, food halls, playgrounds, and dog parks open for end users and the public. Community coworking space for collective learning and training were also seen as powerful connectors.

Beyond specific amenities, a deeper insight emerged: the importance of creating uncreated spaces- places intentionally left open-ended and adaptable so people can shape them over time. These environments set the stage for activation rather than prescribe it, allowing individuals and groups to imprint their identity and creativity. In a world of rapid change, spaces that have the opportunity to evolve with their users become living ecosystems rather than static artifacts.

For developers and owners, this means designing with flexibility and longevity in mind: optimizing sites for diverse uses, enabling 24-hour activation, and embedding sustainable systems. For future generations, it means balancing high-tech personalization with no-tech zones for human respite, reinforcing togetherness as well as solitude. Ultimately, design should not only anticipate needs but create room for imagination- spaces that empower people to co-author their experience and keep places relevant as society evolves.

REDISCOVERING *PLAY*

While exploring key concepts and identifying connections was an important outcome of the workshop, the true discovery lay in the experience itself- an experience that sparked delight, surprise, and authentic connection. Using colorful threads to interweave ideas across boards SmithGroup invited participants to approach design with the curiosity of kindergartners playing in a sandbox, a rare opportunity for seasoned professionals to let go of constraints and rediscover the joy of exploration. This tactile, non-digital process reminded everyone that creativity thrives in moments of openness and play. It demonstrated a profound truth: when we design places that encourage divergent thinking, play, and shared humanity, we create conditions for both cognitive stimulation and emotional resonance.

CONCLUSION

DESIGNING FOR WHAT MACHINES CANNOT

As AI accelerates, the spaces we design must amplify what makes us uniquely human.

Places that spark curiosity, foster trust, and invite co-creation will become the ultimate differentiators in a world of algorithms. The challenge- and opportunity- is clear: design not just for function, but for possibility. Create environments that leave room for imagination, for serendipity, for people to leave their mark. Build spaces that evolve with their users, that invite participation and celebrate what makes us human. Because when we design places as catalysts for humanity, we don't just shape buildings, we shape the future of human potential.

The call to action is simple yet profound: design boldly for what machines cannot- connection, creativity, and meaning. In doing so, we create not only places, but possibilities for generations to thrive.

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