Creating Spaces to Foster Creativity and Innovation

Practical Tips

Put things on (lockable) wheels
The ideal space can be easily modified and rearranged to accommodate different types of activity. Putting tables and other furniture on wheels gives you the freedom to continually experiment, innovate, and change. If wheels aren’t practical, try folding tables or lightweight furniture that is easy to move. Avoid built-in elements that don’t allow for change.

Use open and/or visible storage
Supplies should be organized in easy-to-reach, open storage so visitors can access whatever they need without assistance or permission. (It’s also important for staff and volunteers to know what’s available.) Invest in lots of stackable storage bins—and a label maker—and open shelving units for storage.

Invest in a wide range of tools and materials
Basic materials like tape, cardboard, LEGO, and wooden blocks are invaluable. Providing familiar materials that children know and understand ensures they can find an entry point to the activity. Think also about mixing in less familiar items like parts of machines you’ve taken apart, custom 3D-printed elements, or even hardware or office supplies which might be new to kids. Adding in the unfamiliar introduces visitors to new materials, broadening their knowledge and expertise while also re-contextualizing the familiar. This combination of the known and the new can lead to innovative and sometimes surprising solutions.

Ensure easy access to information
Inventors can’t always predict what kind of information they will need or want when they’re inventing. The same can be said about our museum visitors! But there are things we can do provide “just-in-time” information and help them access what they need when they need it. Simple labels and signs can provide content that is regularly asked about, while a library of books and up-to-date magazines can provide more in-depth opportunities for exploration. Consider arming staff with tablets or smart phones so that they can look up quick information, apps, and videos when appropriate.
Provide opportunities for “creative collisions” and “alone time”
An innovative space should allow for both individual and group work. Activities can be designed to support collaboration by allowing 360-degree access to the work area so that many children can work at once, or using large-scale materials that are easier to manipulate when you collaborate. At least a small area of the space should offer quieter experiences where children can explore independently. Try to avoid this area just becoming a library. While reading might happen here, quiet spots should offer meaningful opportunities for children to create and innovate.

Include elements of inspiration
Inventors often talk about their workspaces as being inspiring, not just work-wise but aesthetically as well. Try piping in music, hanging art, or displaying children’s creations in the space. Including plants and animals can also be inspiring—even if they aren’t directly related to the content or activities happening in the space.