

Open Works Baltimore, MD

“We’re here to make technology, tools, and the knowledge to use them accessible to all.”

- OpenWorks Mission.

Naturalistic Observation



Open Works Background

A focus on accessibility and integration.

Approx. 34,000 Sq. Ft.

Located in Greenmount West area in Baltimore, MD

Nearby tool library, artist studios, and schools

Street level windows offer glimpses of indoor activities

Refurbished parking garage turned auto body shop

Local, black-owned coffee shop in lobby

Public free wi-fi in parking lot

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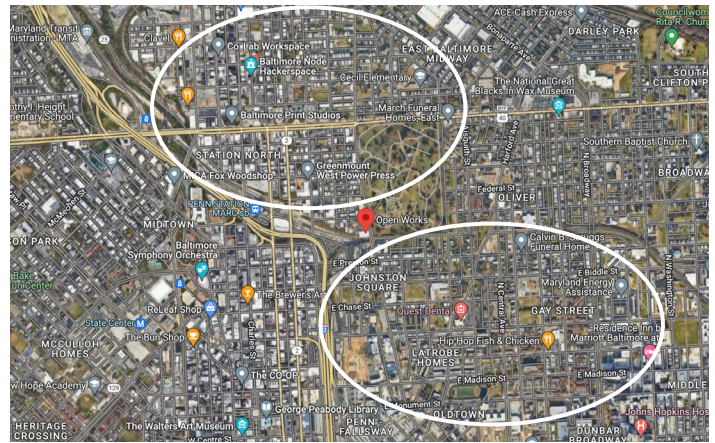


Image source: Google maps

Neighborhood Background

The area Open Works is located in is called the “Black Butterfly” (Brown, 2021) referring to Baltimore’s geography and socioeconomic situation of it’s inhabitants, located in the ‘wings’. The residents have been directly impacted by decades of disinvestment, segregation, and red-lining. This has caused hypersegregation of neighborhoods.

When I arrived at Baltimore Amtrak’s Penn Station, I decided to walk the 10 blocks to Openworks Facilities. Directly south of the station was a relatively populated neighborhood with food access and shops. As I walked further east, the urban area abruptly transitioned into abandoned lots and buildings. Completed in 2021, a low-income housing complex is located across the street from Openworks.



Education to Workforce Training

- Partnership with local high school: A group of 20 students come to work at OpenWorks for after-school training programs each semester.
- Hiring within the makerspace: Members skills are valued, given opportunities to teach classes.
- Autodesk certification for 3D modeling softwares in conjunction with 3D-printing, CNC, and laser-cutting.
- Industrial sewing certification for adults: 5 of 7 cohort members are now employed by local manufacturers. The certification includes 220 hours of instruction and visits to local factories to learn and interview for employment. The instructor is an esteemed community member and established industrial sewing instructor.



Connecting with the Community

The lobby of Open Works is accessible to the public. Community members can gather to meet for a coffee from Black Acres Roastery, located in the lobby. Additionally, conference rooms are available for anyone in the area to rent for meetings. This allows for members of the community to explore Open Works in a non-member capacity.



Inclusive Amenities

- Safety, security, signage
- Lactation room
- Gender neutral bathrooms
- Conference room access for non-member use

Keycard access to all areas, adequate signage and safety materials like fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and Covid sanitation stations, as well as lab etiquette signage, lactation room, employee break room, gender neutral bathrooms, and outgoing mail box for shipping product.



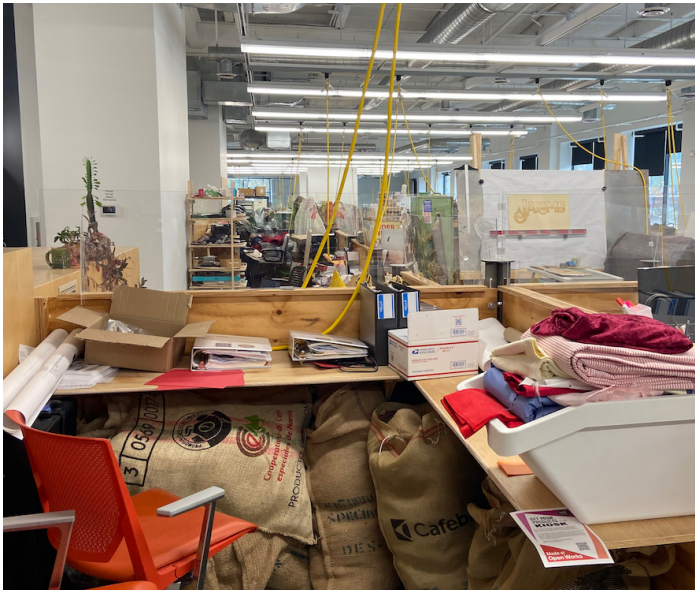
Baltimore Beat + OpenWorks Mutual Aid/Free Press Boxes

The Baltimore Sun closed in 2018 and reopened as the Baltimore Beat, a black-owned free paper. Mutual Aid boxes contain items like first aid, sanitary needs, and non-perishable food items.

All image source credit by the author.

Maker Studios

An open floor-plan, 110 micro-studios allows for collaboration amongst members.



Craft and Collaboration

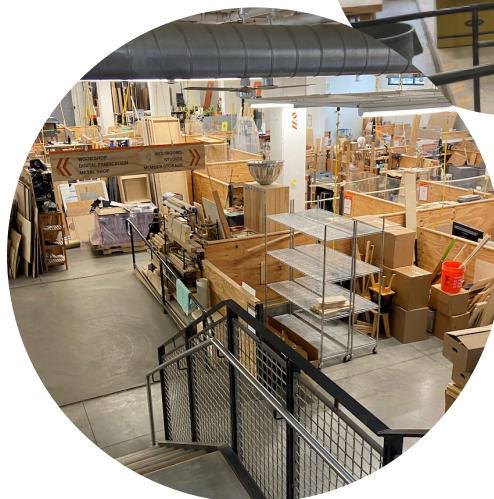
A Nigerian textile importer collaborates with handbag and belt maker in the studio. Niche small-business owners like Harbor Pipe Organs, hand-make pipe organ parts at Open Works.



Maker Facilities

Facilities:

- Conference rooms
- Computer labs
- Industrial sewing / cutting studio
- Digital embroidery / quilting studio
- 3D Printing lab
- Woodshops
- Metalshop
- Lasercutting and CNC labs
- Paintbooth with ventilation hood
- In-house manufacturing studio
- Storage garage



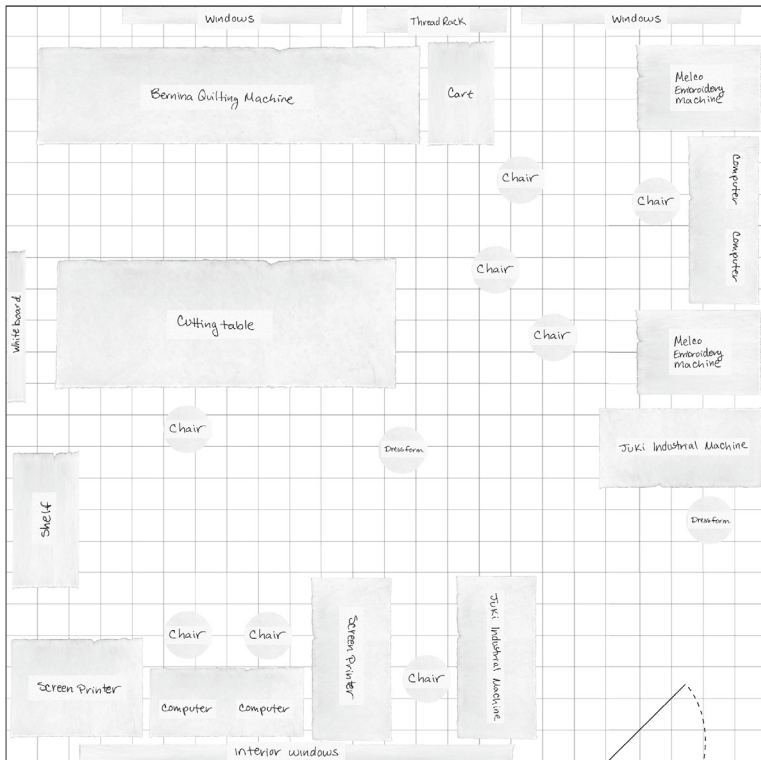
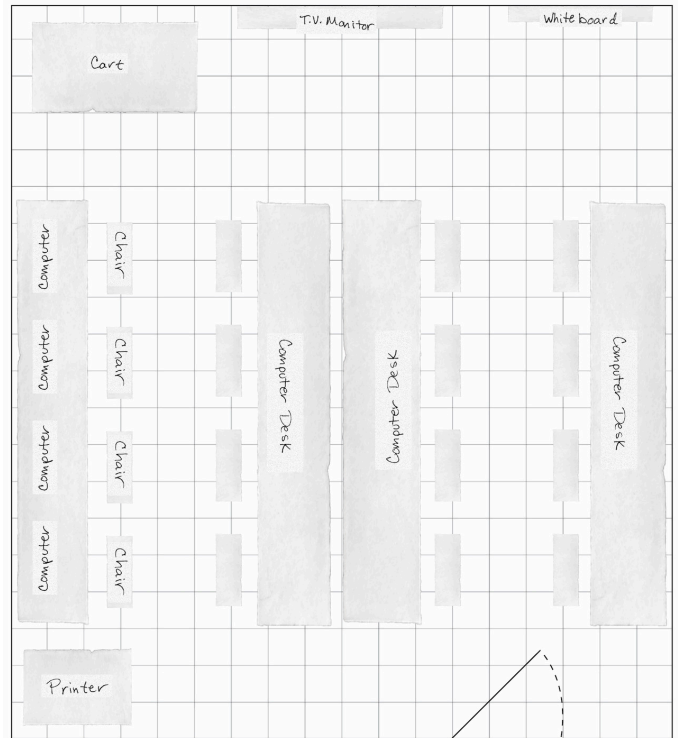
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Participatory Observation #1: Embroidery Safety 1

Observation notes:

- New computers donated to the two computer labs.
- There was no labeling of 'craft' when discussing embroidery and quilting equipment.
- Acknowledgment that learning this skill is complex, time-consuming labor requiring foundational skills, technical know-how and creative thinking.
- The female and LGBTQ members were very conversational, the one male member was more reserved.

“The embroidery courses are very popular because digital embroidery is really profitable. Regardless of gender, they know it’s a way to support their small business.”
- Admin



“Some people come in and don’t know how to use illustrator. They’re missing that foundational knowledge...This is really technical work but it’s not often seen that way. This embroidery class really should be a month long, but we do what we can in two 3-hour classes.”
- Instructor

All image source credit by the author.

Participatory Observation #2: Wood Safety 2

Peer mentoring -

At the end of the class, the instructor demoed additional woodworking equipment, and shared tips and tricks gained from their own experience.



Structured learning -

Wood safety 2 builds upon previous wood safety 1 course. Step-by-step guidance. First safety instructions and then demo, followed by student trials with 1:1 guidance by the instructor.



Trial & error -

Class taught with an emphasis on a 'test and learn' approach. instructor would admit to mistakes and explain the 'why', creating a safe place for fostering failure resiliency.



Adequate signage and infographics for materials and equipment.



Agency and Empowerment -

The female member was very confident in asking questions and would participate in the demo's without hesitation.

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