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'It's a great place to find where you belong': creating, curating and valuing place and space in open youth work

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ABSTRACT

Open youth work is a practice of informal education that operates in a variety of spaces, from youth clubs and community centres to street corners. This article highlights the distinctive spatiality of these settings, their valuable contribution to young people's lives, and how they are actively created and curated by those involved. Rooted in the perspectives of young people and youth workers who took part in a three-year qualitative study in eight youth work settings in England, it proposes that open youth work can provide a relational, educational, and potentially liberatory 'third place' beyond home, school and work. The research found that youth work provides young people with spatially and temporally fluid places for belonging, association, and understanding and acting on the unequal contexts in which they live. We argue for more critical reflection on the distinctively *spatial* aspects of youth work, including more engagement between youth work and the geographies of childhood and youth. As well as having implications for youth work practice and training, this engagement could support the (re-)imagining of a wide range of 'third places' of refuge and critical democracy for children and young people, in a context of oppression and inequalities.

Introduction

> … the youth club is like your own little space to do whatever. Whereas school or education is just what someone else wants you to do. Even though you've chosen the subject, you still have to follow a certain kind of route. Whereas Opal, you get to do it your own way … (Aurora, young person, Opal Youth Club)

In this article, we engage with the lived realities of young people and youth workers to discuss the spatiality of youth work in the context of growing inequalities. Throughout our qualitative study in eight organisations in England – including groups in shared community buildings, street-based youth work, and purpose-built youth centres both old and new – space emerged as a prominent thread as young people and youth workers discussed the value of youth work. Crucially, this value was often expressed (as by Aurora, above) in terms of their distinctiveness from other spaces that young people inhabit, particularly school and college.

This article contributes to interdisciplinary research at the intersection of geography and youth work (e.g. Cartwright 2012; Dickens 2017; Djohari, Brown, and Stolk 2018a; Mills and Waite 2022; Tiffany 2007), extending these discussions by foregrounding young people's and youth workers' understandings and experiences across a range of open youth work spaces. We propose that youth work offers a form of 'third place' (Oldenburg 1989) beyond school or home, a place of

association and conversation. This relies on the relational and open spatial–temporal nature of informal education (R. Davies 2012), which enables young people and youth workers to collaborate as creators and curators of youth work spaces.

We agree with Kraftl, Horton, and Tucker (2012) and Tiffany (2007) that there is significant potential for mutual learning between youth work and geography. Although not trained as geographers ourselves, we have been interested in spatiality during our time as youth workers and researchers. This interest grew as space (while not an intended focus of our study) emerged as a prominent theme, experienced not only materially but also as a feeling, a memory, a sense of belonging offering a lifeline for some young people. Its value was shaped by the location and design of the places where it took place, as well as by the temporal and less tangible and liminal aspects of these spaces.

Experiences of space shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the world was increasingly encountered through the lens of a screen, and the lack of private space inside the home and recreational spaces outside the home were exposed. Against this backdrop emerged a stark image of inequality as the digital exclusion already experienced by children and young people was exacerbated (Million 2021). Even in wealthy countries, many young people had little or no access to basic computer equipment nor sufficient data capacity to support online schooling (Bowyer, Grant, and Nielson 2021). Increasing numbers of children and young people were living in poverty with poorer life chances around mental health, education, and food insecurity (Pickett et al. 2021).

This context, deepened by the subsequent global 'cost of living crisis', highlights the value of youth work spaces for support, freedom, self-expression, and community. Our argument builds on literature on youth work geographies and on 'third place' (Oldenburg 1989), which we discuss in the next section, before introducing our study and its methodology. We then engage with young people's and youth workers' perspectives from the study to argue that youth work spaces are relational, open, and informal 'third places' beyond home and school that are actively shaped by their inhabitants.

Conceptualising youth work space

We start this section by situating our study in relation to scholarship on the geographies of youth work. We then suggest that youth work can be understood as a 'third place' of conviviality and conversation (Oldenburg 1989) within a context of inequalities. Thirdly, we engage with understandings of spatiality that support the liberatory potential of youth work.

Geographies of youth work

This article aims to contribute to what might be termed 'geographies of youth work' – research that brings geographical imagination into dialogue with thinking and practice in youth work (Dickens 2017). Often interdisciplinary, this body of scholarship emphasises the fundamental importance and role of space in youth work's emphasis on informal education, open-ended engagement, relationships, and flexibility (Mills and Kraftl 2014; Mills and Waite 2022; Plows 2012; Djohari, Brown and Stolk 2018a).

The importance of spatiality in youth work is reflected in the widespread use of the term 'youth work spaces' to refer to youth work as it is encountered by young people. This wording foregrounds the importance and diversity of spatiality in this practice. It also troubles the connotations implied when youth work is designated as a service, provision, or intervention, and 'designates the more active processes of engagement and relationality' that are present beyond specific buildings or localities (McShane 2018, 19).

A key theme within geographies of youth work is how youth work space is shaped and influenced by changing policy imperatives. Policy in recent decades (particularly in England) has prioritised time-limited, target-focused and building-based projects over long-term and street

based ('detached') youth work (R. Davies 2012; Tiffany 2007). Space is an arena of politics and contestation, and there are debates over whether provision even *is* youth work in compulsory venues, such as prisons or schools (Barton and Barton 2007). Yet Cartwright (2012) shares powerful vignettes to consider how practitioners navigate place and space in schools-based youth work, including by working beyond the school gates (such as a project investigating a local arms fair, where students and youth workers met in a café that was a hub of local activism).

There are clear geographical inequalities in the availability of youth work. Within an English context, rural youth services have been cut faster than urban ones (NYA 2021a); some London boroughs fund no open access youth services while others spend £6 million annually (Berry 2021); and there are twice as many youth services in rich areas as in poor ones (NYA 2021b). This has left millions of young people lacking spaces beyond home or school; in this context, we suggest that the concept of 'third place' offers a generative framing.

Youth work as third place

In Oldenburg's (1989) conceptualisation, the first place is home, the second place is work (which we extend to school or college for young people), and the 'third place' is somewhere people intentionally gather for 'lively conversation' and the 'joy of association' (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, 269). Oldenburg argues that third places such as cafés and bars are essential for social participation and grassroots democracy, particularly in the 1980s context of an increasing emphasis on private space, intensified work and education, and commercialised leisure. This threat to accessible community spaces has continuing salience today, particularly for young people who lack access to expensive 'enrichment' activities (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014).[1]

This emphasis on relational and associational space beyond school and work echoes long-standing histories of youth work as informal education (Smith 1980; B. Davies 2021). Yet the concept of 'third place' has rarely been discussed in relation to youth work (although see Tanaka 2021; Jaakkola 2018). Our study focuses on *open youth work* – a term that denotes youth work that is open in terms of participation and outcome, where young people can choose whether and when to get involved, taking part in activities or simply spending time in that space, alone or with others (B. Davies 2021). 'Open youth work' and 'third place' share an emphasis on open, convivial, associational and conversational space, and thus constitute a challenge to neoliberal discourses of constant productivity and self-improvement.

While Oldenburg does not discuss youth provision (and indeed focuses predominantly on adult white male experience), we argue that the loss of 'third place' is especially salient for young people from marginalised groups. At school, young people are compelled to be in spaces of 'productive' activity, where their learning is managed and 'policed' (Cartwright 2012), often perpetuating educational systems of institutional racism (Brown 2013; Ortega-Williams and Harden 2022). So-called public space is increasingly designed to prevent non-commercialised 'hanging out', and inflected with gendered, classed, adultist norms, and cis-heteronormative whiteness (Kidman et al. 2021; Massey 2005; Vasudevan 2022). While young people creatively navigate hostile and exclusionary spaces (Brown 2013; Kidman et al. 2021; Vasudevan 2022), youth work, by contrast, can provide a welcoming 'third place' that is young people's by right.

Fine et al. (2000) build on Oldenburg's third place to discuss the importance of 'free' spaces outside of home, school, and work for political education and resistance, including recuperative spaces for breathing, relaxing, and sitting. This resonates with Denmead's (2021) discussion of the value to young people of spaces that may seem (to adults) to be loud, aimless, or chaotic. Fine et al. (2000) remind us that free spaces are not always restorative, but also suffocate or silence; they can both challenge *and* reinforce inequalities, and this is the case in youth work too (Baldridge 2020). This resonates with feminist scholarship in youth work, which highlights young men's occupation of youth club pool tables and central spaces, while young women may be directed towards stereotypical 'hair and nails' activities, or spatially marginalised towards dance studios (Batsleer 2013).

Relatedly, Brown (2013) reflects on her radical engagement with Black young women through 'Save our lives hear our truths', celebrating Black girls as knowledge producers, and engaging with the complexities and challenges of creating alternative spaces within racist, patriarchal societies.

Thinking of open youth work as 'third place' evokes both the notion of special places and the importance of the mundane and everyday (Doherty and De St Croix 2021). The shrinking of youth work over the last decade is felt deeply, where young people can no longer take their youth club for granted. This poignantly highlights a profound shift in the lives and expectations of young people who might ordinarily have assumed regular access to youth clubs and youth workers, to a reality where youth work spaces need also to exist in the imagination.

Radically imagining space for social change

By conceptualising youth work as 'third place' we aim to emphasise the vital need for associational and relational spaces in a context of inequality. Yet, while youth work can provide spaces for liberation, it can also be a site of containment, deficit perspectives, and racist discourses (Baldridge 2020). Here, we argue that more engagement with geographical ideas on space can support the liberatory potential of youth work.

Informed by contemporary currents of thought in geography, we understand space not as merely as 'place' – a location where things happen, whether a youth club, street corner, or online – but rather as an arena for the fluid and relational exercise of agency (Massey 2005; Horton and Kraftl 2006). Space is actively shaped by children and young people in relation with others, even while their spatial agency is limited by structural inequalities (Djohari, Pyndiah, and Arnone 2018b; Kidman et al. 2021; Santos, Anderson, and Hutchinson 2018). In this context, Horton and Kraftl (2006, 88) argue for space to be understood as more of a verb than a noun, foregrounding how children contribute to geographies that are always in flux:

> … children (and adults) are constantly creating, or co-creating their geographies. Spaces are never finished, never containers waiting to be filled, never discrete blocks, segments or 'fields'. There are all sorts of complex, contingent and on-going connections that always make spaces (an) under-construction.

Massey (2005) conceptualises space as complex, fluid, and containing multiple trajectories. Building on these understandings, youth work space is not reduceable to a building or street corner; rather, it is formed by complex and fluid interactions between lives, bodies, objects, and relationships. Youth workers and young people clearly recognise and experience the fundamental relationality of youth work space, even when this creates challenging situations as young people experiment with a greater agency than they are free to express elsewhere (Plows 2012).

However, more limiting understandings of youth space are increasingly influential. Positive youth development – while admirable in its refusal to see young people in deficit terms – is grounded in the neoliberal logic of self-improvement, in which young people are given 'tools' to 'escape' limiting life circumstances (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). This is reflected in dominant approaches to impact measurement, where young people's outcomes are expressed as 'social value' or 'return on investment' (De St Croix, McGimpsey, and Owens 2020). This logic relies on foreclosed visions of time and space. Time is divisible into 'before' and 'after', the 'intervention' treated as a fixed period 'dosage'. Engagement in a space is monitored as 'footfall' and interventions are standardised to maintain 'fidelity' to measurement.

In contrast, a more open spatiality and temporality – a radical open-endedness of how and when people engage, interact, and change (or stay the same) – is fundamental to open youth work. Space is both a sphere of possibility and a product of interrelations, from global structural forces to everyday interactions (Massey 2005; Horton and Kraftl 2006). This understanding foregrounds the political potential of relational space:

> We cannot 'become', in other words, without others. And it is a space that provides the necessary condition for that possibility. (Massey 2005, 56)

In this article, we argue that conceptualising youth work as a 'third place' beyond home and school is useful in understanding and articulating its value. Further, we suggest that this conceptualisation can be nuanced by engaging with geographical ideas of space as a fluid, open and relational sphere of possibility that enables young people's becoming. By engaging with young people's and youth workers' perspectives on youth work with a focus on place and space, we argue that youth work is an open and relational 'third place' that is actively created and curated by skilled youth workers, in collaboration with young people.

Methodology

Our study took place from 2018 to 2021 in eight open youth work settings in England, purposively selected to represent a range of region, approach, and organisation type (see Table 1). It involved 87 interviews and focus groups with 58 young people, 59 youth workers, and 26 policy actors (the latter not included in this article), some of which included participatory elements,[2] and 73 sessions of participant observation. The study investigated how impact measurement and evaluation are experienced and perceived in youth work, which included thinking about how young people and others understand the value of youth work (de St Croix and Doherty 2022). While spatial aspects were not a planned focus of the study, space became an integral element in our methodology and emerging findings.

The informality of youth work means that consent must be negotiated over time and with sensitivity to young people's changing feelings and spatial practices (Hill 2017). Thus, we took a flexible, relational, and responsive approach to interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, including through attention to the spaces and times young people felt comfortable to participate. For example, three young women opted to take part in a focus group outdoors, leaning against a sun-warmed concrete wall behind their youth club. A young couple chose to be interviewed on a sofa, as lively youth club activity continued around us. Others preferred a side room or office for privacy and quiet. Young people showed us around their clubs and neighbourhoods:

> There was a very relaxed atmosphere and the young people took me on a tour of the centre – they were clearly very proud of it … Young people were open but checking me out and observing me a bit. I stood back and waited for natural conversation spaces. Young people relaxed with me and asked questions about the research and some of the forms … . These young people love this club and strongly value the youth workers. (Fieldnote, Riverpath)

Ethical issues are particularly salient in research involving young people. We provided information sheets with full details on the study as well as more accessible 'information postcards' for young

Table 1. Participating organisations.

Organisation pseudonym	Location	Approaches, spaces*	Organisation type
Dove Street Youth Project	North West; urban	Detached (street-based); girls' and boys' drop-ins in a borrowed church building; local sports hall	Charity
Fairlight Youth Club	London; urban	New purpose-built youth centre in block of mixed ownership flats	Local authority
Journeys	London / England-wide	Trans youth group borrowing other organisations' spaces; shared voluntary sector office and meeting rooms.	Charity, social enterprise
Melham Youth Service	London; urban	Detached (street-based), mobile (youth bus) and outreach (outside schools)	Local authority
Opal Youth Club	London; urban	Purpose-built youth club	Charity
Riverpath	South West; rural, coastal, and urban	Purpose-built youth clubs	Charity, social enterprise
Seaside Youth Centre	South East; coastal	Purpose-built older youth club; online youth club during lockdown	Charity
The Vaults	North East; urban	Youth club in multi-use community centre; outreach	Charity

* These are the approaches and spaces that were the focus of the research. Many of the organisations engaged in additional types of provision (e.g. mentoring, schools work, sports).

people and parents/guardians. Names and organisations were anonymised to maintain confidentiality. The final months of the research took place during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown. Although technology allowed some practice (and elements of the research) to continue, some young people found it difficult to access online youth work or take part in research (see Arya and Henn 2021).

As experienced and professionally qualified youth workers, we valued the opportunity for deep re-immersion in practice and drew consciously on critical anti-oppressive youth work in our engagement with participants and organisations – for example, aiming to be attentive to how structural issues and inequalities shape and play out in practice (Batsleer and Duggan 2020). We experienced the open, relational approach to spatiality and temporality in youth work, in contrast to our university workplaces:

> The culture of informality, improvisation and responsiveness is striking, and I feel my shoulders relax. Youth workers are surely as busy as academics, but the pace is slower and they always make time to chat. This research requires 'being there' in an unhurried way – hanging out, being flexible, tuning in to when might be the right moment to suggest a focus group, feeling when it might be best to withdraw. (Fieldnote, Fairlight)

We adapted to what Horton and Kraftl (2006) call a 'methodological slowness', where 'time "slips by" unnoticed amid the interesting company afforded by third place association' (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, 276). We experienced this slowness, observing how young people, youth workers, and neighbours wandered in and out of offices and buildings, greeting us or simply including us in their conversations; and we aimed to inhabit this slower pace by quieting our busy minds and simply being there.

We began our data analysis by engaging in collaborative thematic inductive coding on a selection of paper transcripts (Gewirtz 2001), where 'youth work spaces' emerged as a prominent theme. Discussing this theme both in advance of and during our detailed coding of all fieldnotes and transcripts (using NVivo software), we noted that youth work space was frequently contrasted with home and school (Oldenburg 1989) and discussed as fundamentally relational and temporal (Massey 2005). Thus, our engagement with theory on the spatialities of youth work responded inductively to young people's and youth workers' experiences of youth work spaces.

Findings and analysis

We now take a short tour of eight youth work settings to explore how space is experienced and navigated. We begin by discussing how youth work is curated as a 'third place' of association beyond home and school, across five differing settings. We then focus on two organisations to discuss how youth work spaces are situated in and against a wider unequal context. Finally, we follow one youth club as it moved online during lockdown, reflecting on how young people value and (re)create youth work spaces.

Curating youth work as third place

While informal *learning* can happen 'naturally' in everyday life, informal *education* is the deliberate creation of spaces and conditions for informal learning (B. Davies 2021; Mills and Kraftl 2014). This could be seen quite literally at The Vaults, an organisation in the North East of England, where we visited a multi-use community building in a park in the heart of a housing estate. As they did not have their own purpose-built youth club, the workers created the youth work space before each session:

> The team sat together to plan the session. It was an open space with three large rooms. The main space was directly at the entrance to the centre and the youth workers discussed how it would be 'zoned' with tables offering different activities throughout the evening. The other spaces were for gaming and a large hall for chill out and fitness activity. The session was planned in a very cooperative way, clearly a natural and regular

routine; over an hour was allowed for this, including set up and turning it into a youth friendly space. (Field-note, The Vaults)

There were large glass doors at the main entrance and the sense of anticipation was palpable as young people gathered outside, peering in and sometimes knocking on the door during the prep-aration. The youth workers were unphased by this and calmly moved chairs and tables, setting up equipment and activities as the crowd outside gradually grew. This intentional and convivial cura-tion of the space was an embedded aspect of practice here, where the *feeling* of a 'third place' was created as much by atmosphere and ambience as it was by physical facilities. The creation of a youth work space in this multi-use centre reflected youth work principles, providing young people with a place at the heart of their wider community while offering 'an ethos which for them is welcoming, comfortable and fun' (B. Davies 2021, 5).

Over 100 miles away in an inner-city neighbourhood in North-West England, Dove Street Youth Project used a detached youth work approach:

> We go into the communities, and then we actively look for where young people are to engage in conversation with them. So that can be anywhere – on the streets, in parks, McDonalds […] just building relationships with them, long term relationships … (Corey, youth worker, Dove Street)

At both The Vaults and Dove Street, youth workers intentionally created 'third place' outside home and school, in liminal spaces not bounded by buildings; they seemed to be carrying youth work space with them, almost as a way of being. These spaces were characterised by informality and lively enjoyment:

> … we were so loud and rowdy it's unbelievable. We just messed about. And I feel like [youth workers] should know how to communicate, that's all I'm saying, you can't be judgmental […] cos if you look down on anyone then, that individual, you never know they could, not comparing them with me, but that's their only way of support and advice, you just never know. And like here, they don't do that at all. (Halima, young person, Dove Street)

Halima valued the non-judgemental support she received within an informal context, a combi-nation that forms a vital aspect of youth work, where relationships with others are centrally impor-tant. At Opal Youth Club, a designated youth space inside a community centre in inner-city London, young people emphasised the value of associating with peers from different estates and schools:

> I guess it's like a bridge, between all the different ages […] in youth club it's like from 11 to 19-year-olds all in one space. Like socialising, which you wouldn't normally have at school. So it's like something different […] when you're with younger people they always remind you of school and how you were and how it's different now and stuff like that. (Aurora, young person, Opal)

Using the metaphor of the 'bridge', Aurora evokes a more autonomous experience of their present and past, expressing a sort of joy at the freedom of association afforded by being in youth work spaces with other young people, not bounded by a classroom. Young people spoke of safety, socia-bility, trust, fun, relaxation, anticipation, acceptance, and freedom:

> It's the freedom for young people to grow […] in their own direction. Cos it's not like I'm telling you to go this way, it's 'what do you wanna do and how can I help you to do it?' Whereas school is like 'here is a, b and c'. (Jamir, young person, Opal)

Journeys ran youth clubs for trans young people, borrowing community buildings and meeting rooms where youth work space was actively created through routines such as opening and closing circles, delicious snacks, and a careful blend of unstructured time and informal activities:

> … you talk to your mates, you do some workshops, come back now and again and hang around. […] every-one's nice to you […] you just have fun and do what you do there. (Jade, young person, Journeys)

One of the aspects young people valued most at Journeys was being in a space where they did not need to explain themselves or justify their identities, and where everyone is trans, including workers:

> when you're from a marginalised group and you don't have enough space in the world as is, you can go to a space where that's all of who you're with, and that time doing activities like climbing or archery or raft build-ing, and swimming specifically, where you couldn't do that in the rest of your life. Like, it does change your life, it does save your life. (Ira, manager, Journeys)

The notion of a 'typical' youth work space is hard to pin down, given the breadth of practice and the variety of places (or locations) where youth work happens. Yet experiences of space were consistent across settings and geographies, where youth workers and young people collaborated to curate a fundamentally relational and social 'third place'. This was particularly important for young people with challenging lives, as discussed by Tracey, who attended Riverpath, an organisation with youth clubs in towns and villages in South West England:

> It's sort of like an escape from everyday life, because you've the monotony, school, and being at home, but it's somewhere extra that you can go and meet up with people or talk about things that you won't want to talk about with people from school. If you have an issue you can, you have somewhere to go, and talk about it, just this extra little space away from everyday life. (Tracey, young person, Riverpath)

The metaphor of 'escape' evokes youth work as a space of refuge, recuperation, sociality, and self-expression (Tanaka 2021; Fine et al. 2000; Djohari, Brown, and Stolk 2018a). Tracey's reflection on youth work as 'escape' from school and home signals an awareness of how tough everyday life can be and the need for a safe environment away from prejudice:

> It's like creating like a safe and comfortable environment for them to come to and feel like they are kind of free from prejudice or any negative forces outside, like in the wider society, and just have that space for themselves that they can use to the best of their ability. (Tracey, young person, Riverpath)

The 'safe' environment valued by young people does not denote a sanitised version of 'safe spaces' but rather a place where it is safe *because* of its potential for both refuge and liberation (Djohari, Pyndiah, and Arnone 2018b; Vasudevan 2022), as we now discuss.

Third places in an unequal context

At Fairlight, a purpose-built youth club on a social housing estate in London, a youth worker focus group discussion resonated with Oldenburg's (1989) argument three decades earlier about the loss of third places:

> the youth clubs were intricate to communities […]. There were even adult social clubs. We knew how impor-tant that was, people used to go to the pub, sit down and the community aspect was all there. Now all of that has gone, we're at home a lot more, we're not mixing with each other.[3] So I just don't think people necessarily even truly understand [youth work]. They think it's table tennis and a bit of pool, you know, somewhere they might all meet up and then go home again, but I don't think they really understand just how deep are the empathy levels, the therapeutic work that goes on as well as the social and emotional. (Joseph, youth worker, Fairlight)

These experienced youth workers evoked the 'deep' value of spaces that enable association and 'thrive on emotional expressiveness' (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, 278), especially in disadvan-taged areas:

> Centres like this are a place where different types of people come, and those things don't exist if you don't actually create them. So you end up with estates that are kind of left behind, where all it is, is an estate and betting shop. It hasn't got any facilities in it, it's just got a load of housing and nothing else, like maybe a corner shop. (Adam, youth worker, Fairlight)

Adam named class inequalities as the root of these issues, which led to Joseph reflecting:

[… class] is a big factor. I mean actually it's not something I think about day to day when I come out, you know, 'gosh, we don't have as much money as the people on the other side of the railway tracks'. […. if you] live in a more prestigious area then you have more financial money to actually go and experience different things. You know, you might do horse riding or have various things after school. (Joseph, youth worker, Fairlight)

Joseph went on to reflect that working class, ethnically diverse estates need youth clubs as places to meet people from different backgrounds and be stimulated outside of the 'normal day-to-day'. Situated in such an estate, Fairlight took a distinctly open approach to space and time, with no specific session times or monitored entry. The manager left the doors unlocked while he came upstairs for his interview, despite no other staff being present, reflecting a culture of trust nurtured over many years:

it's the dynamics, you know, and we are where we are now. Where I can leave the door open and people can walk in and listen to music and make themselves a cup of tea and just get on with it. And I know that they're not going to nick anything or do anything inappropriate. (Luke, Manager, Fairlight)

This engendered a deep sense of ownership and belonging, a real 'third place' that young people could access freely. This is not to romanticise the space; indeed, its positioning was problematic, being relocated directly below flats after the old club was sold off during neighbourhood regeneration. This brought its predominantly Black members into unwanted conflict with the police:

we get police reports every day, and then the police come and intimidate young people […] it just makes it uncomfortable for people to come. If police are here every day I'm not coming, I don't need the grief, you know? I can just go somewhere else, fuck that. I would rather sit in McDonalds all day than come to Fairlight to get harassed by the police. (Jasmine, young person, Fairlight)

Youth work cannot erase oppressive wider environments simply by providing a space; it also needs to engage young people and youth workers in reflection and action on inequalities:

… the problem with just open access is then it becomes, it just becomes an escape. And actually what we need to do is we need to create open access as a foundation for social change. And take the values that we build in this youth centre beyond here, so that young people can take them out into the world. (Luke, Manager, Fairlight)

The idea of 'escape' is problematised by Luke because it does not embody social change. In contrast, 'escape' was used positively by Tracey, in the previous section, and by Tolu, a young person who attends an arts focused youth club in Melham, a different London borough that had also retained its youth service:

… it like takes me away from my reality. It's like almost like an escape mechanism of my everyday life. (Tolu, young person, Melham)

We suggest that 'escape' is understood and experienced by Tolu as a kind of freedom or liberation. Tolu and her friend Shereen went on to discuss their feelings about the club and their hopes for being better understood in their community and society more generally. They were aware of how racially minoritised young people were portrayed negatively and inaccurately, as economically unproductive and criminally engaged:

when there was an art takeover in Melham […] we were able to showcase our work. So, we could show the community another perspective of young people, and not just the stereotypes society puts on us. (Tolu, young person, Melham)

I feel like they just think that we're hooligans and that we don't, we're like up to nothing, and we're always trying to, I don't know like, do bad, bad things, especially the minority groups. […] they just stereotype them. And they don't want to listen to other people's point of view. (Shereen, young person, Melham)

In this context of damaging stereotypes, young people articulately illustrate the breadth of what youth work means to them; a 'third place' to spend time in association with diverse others (Oldenburg 1989), and a 'free space' (Fine et al. 2000) to both escape *and challenge* the reality of suffocating

stereotypes, oppression and social control (Baldridge 2020; Brown 2013; Ortega-Williams and Harden 2022). This liberatory orientation both requires and enables young people to shape youth work space, actively and creatively, as we now discuss further.

Creating and making space

In this final section, we discuss spatial continuity and change before and during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, focusing on Seaside Youth Centre, a large purpose-built youth club in a coastal town. Our focus here is not on lockdown or online youth work *per se*; rather, we seek to emphasise how 'third place' is actively and fluidly recreated over time and changing circumstances. Before lockdown, this informal and associational space was not simply 'provided' but was claimed by young people:

> I go to see what's happening in the table tennis room. Six young women and a youth worker relax on the sofas, chatting, mugs of tea in hands, pizza on the floor between them. It looks cosy. In this large room in a sprawling club, young people found a space. Workers aren't always running activities or looking after equipment – they can spend time, eating together, chatting about whatever comes up. (Fieldnote, Seaside)

Alongside a dynamic and agentic use of space and time, activities such as music, arts and crafts were highly valued:

> I've never seen a badge machine in my life, before I came to Seaside.[…] I've never had a chance to make one of them bracelets with the little tubes on, I've seen them everywhere but I've never been able to make one. […] I took it home and it didn't cost anything, and it never costs anything […] most kids can't afford as well, like their parents can't afford all these fancy art supplies […] I didn't have anything to make my mum a birthday present, for example, and then I made her loads of different badges. It was all for free, but it was, she liked it […] Seaside made me happy, and Seaside made my mum happy. (Hamilia, young person, Seaside)

Hamilia signals how youth work can extend into the home, with craft activities becoming vital opportunities to show love for family members in the context of poverty. Her repeated use of the word 'happy' was poignant, given many of the club members' experience of mental health issues. Across the study, material spaces and equipment were harnessed dynamically for conversation, meaningful activity, and mutual support. Yet what happens when physical spaces become unavailable?

Within a week of the UK's first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Spring 2020, Seaside Youth Club moved online. This brought contradictions and challenges – some struggled to access online youth club due to intermittent internet, insufficient storage on their phones to install the app, or no private space at home. It also enabled heightened reflection about what was valued about the physical youth club, including liminal spaces such as the steps outside, where young people mingled, smoked, and chatted:

> Delilah   I miss the Seaside steps.
> Joe   I miss them. I want them back! […]
> Delilah: The steps are better than the actual building. […] That's where the conversations happen.
> Joe: That's where the juicy stuff just happens.
> Delilah: Exactly, we bring chairs out there sometimes. We used to have, because we had the area outside at the back and there was this massive sofa, we'd all just sit there and chill. Especially in the summer, bring that back, get the back door back open …

Responding to young people's memories with characteristic inventiveness, youth workers first created online breakout rooms for music, arts, and debates, and then – by popular demand – added a 'Seaside steps' room for unstructured 'hanging out'. Young people responded creatively too, playing with the affordances of online space, while recreating aspects of the youth club in their home lives:

> … my whole room is basically Seaside Youth Club at this point […] it's really colourful and there's loads of characters, loads of art around. […] There's no wall that isn't covered by something cool, and that's the same

with Seaside. [...] we've got the walls that you can just stick your art on, you can just BluTak pictures and stuff onto there and nobody's gonna care. (Delilah, young person, Seaside)

The characteristic 'messiness' of the youth club was fondly remembered, in stark contrast to a newly built London youth centre they had visited earlier that year:

> It was an insanely different atmosphere, and the majority of us said Seaside's better because of the fact that we, we're more accepting I guess, and we've got more character in our building [...] It was so bland, it felt like a secondary school [...] I didn't like it, I was like OK, where's the culture? [...] we want a Seaside aesthetic, we ain't about these white walls and this black flooring, not about it, and we ain't about the secondary school carpet either, no, we have that at college, no. (Delilah, young person, Seaside)

Aesthetic preferences aside, Delilah emphasised the value of a space that not only looks but *feels* different from school and college. Youth work as third place is malleable and messy: homely but not home, educational but not school. This spatial liminality and flexibility enabled the blurring of spaces as young people sought to create a youth club aesthetic in their bedroom, or attended online youth club while playing Animal Crossing[4] or cooking and looking after young siblings in the family kitchen. The temporary move online highlighted the enduring importance of physical places while enabling a flexible creation of less tangible space that nevertheless 'feels like' youth work in its open, relational temporality.

Discussion and conclusion

> It's a great place to find where you belong. (Isaac, young person, Seaside)

Youth work spaces enable young people to encounter and engage with diverse others while finding their own place to belong. Building on scholarship at the intersections of geography and youth work, this article emphasises the importance for young people of 'third places' of association and conversation that are distinct from home, school, college, or work (Oldenburg 1989). Here, young people can converse, find support, learn, take part in activities, or simply pass time in an atmosphere of conviviality.

Our study found that the value and process of youth work are underpinned by a distinctive spatiality that is characterised by *relationality, openness*, *informality*, and *curation*. Youth work spaces are *relational*: they both enable and are constituted by fluid associations between diverse young people and with youth workers. They are *open*: young people attend freely and flexibly, at times and in ways of their own choosing. They are *informal*: they look, sound, and feel distinctly more relaxed than formal educational spaces, yet they are also distinct from 'home' space. Relationships, openness, and informality are widely discussed in youth work practice and research, yet their spatial dimensions can be somewhat taken-for-granted. Places do not simply 'become' youth work spaces; rather, they are deliberately *curated* by skilled youth workers, in collaboration with young people.

'Third places' beyond home and school are potentially beneficial to *all* young people, and particularly those who are materially and societally disadvantaged due to classism, racism, ablism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other dimensions of inequality and marginalisation, including those who live in urban and rural geographies of disadvantage. Yet, youth work is too often viewed as an 'added extra', disproportionately cut during times of austerity (Berry 2021). Working class young people, especially those marginalised by multiple intersecting inequalities, are not viewed in policy as being entitled to spaces where they are not criminalised, targeted, tracked, labelled, or treated as future human capital. In this context, we argue that all young people should have the right to diverse 'third places' beyond home and school.[5]

Finally, we want to consider how thinking about youth work might contribute to geographical conceptions of place and space. For the purposes of this paper, if *places* are the diverse locations and venues where youth work can occur (buildings, outside, or online), then *spaces* are the ways these places are created, experienced, and contested, constituted by myriad relationships and multiple

materials, experiential and intangible elements. Our research demonstrates that both place and space matter. For example, Fairlight Youth Club's move to a block of flats in the context of gentrification resulted in surveillance and policing, as discussed briefly above. Yet Fairlight as a youth work *space* was recreated in the new *place*, enabled by continuity in aspects such as its young people, youth workers, routines, equipment, facilities, and collaborative artworks. In other words, youth workers and young people created a space that was distinctively Fairlight in the new venue; however, they were allowed limited agency over the location, and this was problematic.

Yet while it can be useful to distinguish between place and space in this way, we are interested in how youth work entangles these concepts; while this could be seen as a lack of conceptual clarity, we suggest that it reflects the ways in which place and space really are entangled in everyday experience. When Isaac says, 'It's a great place to find where you belong', he is presumably not speaking only of Seaside's building and location, but of a relational, peopled, atmospheric space. The Vaults was created anew for each youth work session, and Journeys did not have access to a permanent venue; yet each organisation's practice was spatially distinctive, recognisable through (for example) people, relationships, equipment, and refreshments. And at Dove Street and Melham, youth work space wascreated by detached youth workers in a variety of places, often improvised 'on the hoof'. Our research demonstrates that youth work is a spatially sophisticated process undertaken by skilled and reflective youth workers, who collaborate with young people through informal, messy, unpredictable, and often playful use of place and space.

We suggest that youth workers and geographers might collaborate in scholarship and practice, based on our shared interests in grassroots democracy, liberation, and understandings of space and place as fundamentally open and fundamentally uncertain:

> … precisely because of the elements of chaos, openness and uncertainty which they both embody, space, and … place, are potentially creative crucibles for the democratic sphere. The challenge is having the confidence to treat them in this way. For instituting democratic public spaces … necessitates operating with a concept of spatiality which keeps always under scrutiny the play of the social relations which construct them. (Massey 2005, 153)

While youth work is not inherently liberatory, it has a radically democratising potential: offering spaces for belonging and conviviality, and an environment to enable critical engagement and creative action (Baldridge 2020). Its radical potential depends on relational spatiality and temporal openness, in which encounters with others enable practices of grassroots democracy. Yet whilst youth work spaces could be seen (in Massey's terms) as 'potentially creative crucibles for the democratic sphere', there is more to think about in relation to issues of power and exclusion in 'third places', both in and beyond youth work.

We have argued that a more nuanced understanding of the spatial dimensions of open youth work can support its development, enabling greater recognition of its value to young people. Youth work enables young people's creative, informal and flexible engagement with, and curation of, space. This connects with scholarship in young people's geographies that emphasises young people's ability to shape their worlds in the context of oppression and inequality (Dickens 2017; Mills and Kraftl 2014; Vasudevan 2022). Our argument echoes long-standing youth work traditions of engaging with young people as creators not consumers (Smith 1980). We hope that the young people's and youth workers' voices in this article contribute to wider understandings of open youth work as a deliberate and dynamic (re)creation of improvised, organic space that is deeply valued by young people, and that deserves to be more widely recognised.

Notes

1. For clarity: in this article we are discussing third *place* (Oldenburg 1989), and not the similarly named but different concept of third *space* (developed by Homi Bhabha and Ed Soja).
2. The participatory elements included photo elicitation, music elicitation, peer interviewing, and a film (the latter formed part of dissemination rather than data collection). However, the participatory data collection

methods were less prominent than planned due to barriers related to the pandemic and are hence not discussed in detail here.

3. This discussion took place in 2019, before the Covid pandemic, when being 'at home a lot more' took on a greater resonance.
4. A child-friendly video game popular with teenagers.
5. This is supported by the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates a universal right to play and leisure up to the age of 18.

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Data availability statement

A dataset associated with this study is available at UK Data Service Reshare; see https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855316/.

Ethical approval

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