

ARTS

Sealed for 10 Years, an Excelsior Butcher Shop Becomes a Vibrant Teen Art Space

By [Nastia Voynovskaya](#)  Sep 9



With grit, determination and 50 volunteers, Youth Art Exchange created a vital space for diverse student artists. *(Nastia Voynovskaya)*

On an overcast August afternoon, [x]space is bustling with dozens of teenagers, parents and neighbors eager to see summertime work by Youth Art Exchange students. A group of girls hawk screen-printed, hand-dyed patches and tote bags with slogans like "Melt I.C.E.!" Succulents in handmade planters hang from wooden "living walls" built by students themselves. At one point, kids beeline to the music studio in the back, where videos they recorded and edited screen in surround sound and high definition.

The neon pink meat hooks hanging above the music studio are the only evidence that just a year ago, this vibrant Excelsior art space was a derelict butcher shop that had been abruptly sealed shut and left as-is for 10 years.



Students, parents and neighbors gather at Youth Art Exchange's [x]space for a teen art show. (*Nastia Voynovskaya*)

With sky-high real estate prices in San Francisco, the story of how the teen-focused art space came to be is an unlikely one. In 2018, a grant from San Francisco's Office of Economic and Workforce Development presented **Youth Art Exchange** an opportunity to find a brick-and-mortar location. Until that point, the small nonprofit had run its free after-school and summer arts programs out of various classrooms across the city.

"This is a safe space for people growing up in a city that's changing by the day."

—**Jorge Courtade**

Youth Art Exchange organizers knew full well that they didn't fit the profile of a typical commercial tenant. Property owners seemed confused when executive director Reed Davaz McGowan and deputy director Raffaella Falchi Macias told them that they weren't selling anything, and would pay rent through a combination

of several grants. Meanwhile, most landlords wanted a tenant willing to commit to a 10-year lease, while they were only looking to sign for one to three years.

Undeterred, Davaz McGowan and Falchi Macias spent six months hitting the streets and calling numbers on any "For Rent" sign they could find. Eventually, the business development group Excelsior Action Group introduced them to the three brothers who owned the Chuck's Market building. To Davaz McGowan and Falchi Macias' surprise, they decided to take a chance on Youth Art Exchange.

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The only catch? Their storefront on the corner of Mission Street and Geneva Avenue needed a ton of work. The first thing Falchi Macias and Davaz McGowan noticed was the smell.

"It was rotting flesh with a little side of fish," recalls Davaz McGowan, wrinkling her nose. "Imagine that mixed with 10 years of mildew and funk."



Printmaking students show off apparel with activist slogans at Youth Art Exchange's [x]space. (Nastia Voynovskaya)

With the help of 50 volunteers, the Youth Art Exchange team emptied ancient dish buckets, threw away rusty lobster cages, cleared out old deli fridges and chiseled tiles off the walls. The nonprofit ArtSpan, which came on as a co-tenant and keeps an artist studio in the space, activated its network of artists to help. Three months later, in June 2018, Youth Art Exchange's first classes at the new [x]space were in session.

With a faculty of practicing artists, including musicians, designers and photographers, [x]space offers a wide range of **curricula** to diverse cohorts of high school students, and all after-school classes and summer programs are free. (They also regularly offer free events and workshops to the public, like the upcoming **fundraiser and art market** on Oct. 10.) This past summer's intensive programs focused on printmaking, film and music production. Sessions kicking off this school year include the above-mentioned disciplines, plus architecture, photography, industrial and product design, fashion design and dance.

"We want to make the arts really accessible across economic boundaries," says Falchi Macias, explaining that Youth Art Exchange programming is designed to mirror intro-level college art studio classes.



Students dance to each other's music at Youth Art Exchange's Youth Digital Music Festival, which took place at [x]space in May. (Chantelle Schultz/Youth Art Exchange)

"Some youth come in and they have very limited skills, and we're bringing them to a high-beginning, lower-intermediate level as fast as we can," says music production instructor Alfie Macias, who is also a percussionist, DJ and the musical director of award-winning Brazilian dance ensemble **Sambaxé**. "And others are coming in with vocal training, instrument training, theory, so with them we're going straight into composition and showing them what's possible in a recording environment."

He adds that one of his main goals is to expose students to audio careers in the Bay Area, where the industry is geared towards audio-for-video and live sound engineering. Indeed, some Youth Art Exchange students are well on their way to professional music careers. At Youth Art Exchange's Youth Digital Music Festival this past May (where, full disclosure, I was a guest speaker), a 16-year-old rapper

named Fusion casually announced that he was stopping in to "do this little show" for his teachers before heading off for tour in Central America.



Music instructor Alfie Macias talks to a parent at [x]space. (*Nastia Voynovskaya*)

The students who use [x]space come from the Excelsior, Mission and Bayview neighborhoods, among others, and represent a wide variety of public schools. [x]space, located on a busy block with Chinese restaurants, liquor stores and a pupusería, sits in the heart of a diverse neighborhood that's predominantly Asian and Latinx. As San Francisco becomes increasingly more affluent, white and childless, [x]space serves as a crucial gathering space for teens of color whose families bear the brunt of current economic pressures.

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Indeed, San Francisco Supervisor Ahsha Safaí, whose office supported [x]space with funding and logistics, says that his constituency in the Excelsior has the highest concentration of children under 18 in San Francisco, along with Bayview-Hunters Point. "There are immigrant families and families of color living in my district, so having a place that's near their home that readily promotes the arts is extremely important, and opens up opportunities and experiences for our families and our youth," he says.

"I wish I could have had this kind of place when I was younger and in high school," says Jorge Courtade, Youth Art Exchange's program associate, who is also known as DJ **Juanny Depp** from the music collective Amor Digital. He was raised in Millbrae and some of his family, immigrants from Honduras, settled in the Excelsior. "Being a teenager is a strange time in anyone's life, especially when factors like institutional poverty and racism exist, so this is a safe space for people growing up in a city that's changing by the day."



Youth Art Exchange deputy director Raffaella Falchi Macias and Reed Davaz McGowan. (*Nastia Voynovskaya*)

Much of Youth Art Exchange programming is designed to give students a voice at a time when change in San Francisco is largely dictated by governmental and corporate forces, and it's easy for individuals to feel powerless. In recent years, architecture students designed parklets near City Hall. Printmaking students screen-printed public art for utility boxes on Ocean Avenue. And music students performed songs about gentrification in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole in a collaboration with SFJAZZ called Beats on the Corner.

A Bassist and Massage Therapist Relies on Her Hands to Survive the Bay Area Economy

"Since the Trump presidency specifically, we were feeling really scared and we didn't know what we could really do to make a difference," says Fiona Gray, a Youth Art Exchange alumni who graduated from Mission High School this year. "A lot of it is just getting out there and getting your message heard."

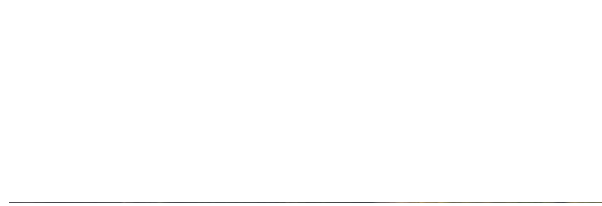
Davaz McGowan and Falchi Macias agree. "[Youth] often don't have agency, or are often thought of as 'they're too young and don't know anything yet, so we shouldn't listen to what they have to say,'" says Falchi Macias.

Although most of the Youth Art Exchange kids can't vote yet, the directors explain, the program's emphasis on civic engagement through art—getting their hands dirty setting up [x]space included—is one way they're making an impact on their community.

As Davaz McGowan says, "They actually get to make the San Francisco they want to have."



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Correction: This story originally referred to the organization that connected Youth Art Exchange to the owners of Chuck's Market as Excelsior Collaborative. The group was Excelsior Action Group.

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