

BEST PRACTICES



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SPARK

Spaces for Participation, Action, Resilience and Knowledge

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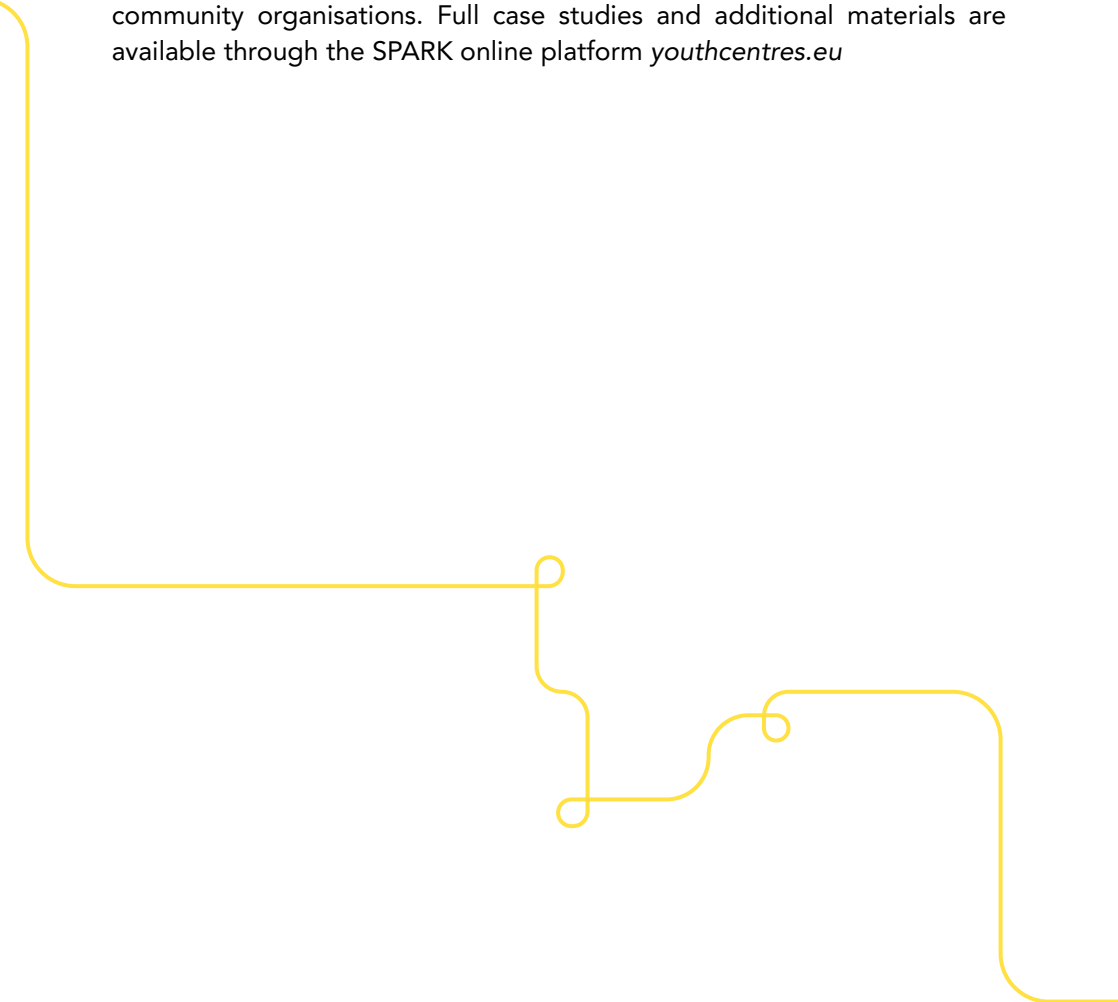


This BOOKLET presents a selection of case studies and participatory practices developed in Germany, Italy, and Romania. The examples illustrate how co-design methodologies can be applied in different youth and community contexts, highlighting transferable methods, challenges, and practical lessons for youth work.



The selected experiences demonstrate different approaches to participatory placemaking, including youth centres, schools, community projects, artistic interventions, and rural youth participation. Although developed in different contexts, the practices share common principles: experiential learning, collaboration, creativity, and tangible transformation of spaces.

The objective of this booklet is not to provide exhaustive documentation of each practice, but to highlight transferable methods and practical lessons that can inspire youth workers, educators, municipalities, and community organisations. Full case studies and additional materials are available through the SPARK online platform youthcentres.eu



1 PAINTING THE NEW YOUTH CENTRE (GERMANY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

During the first weeks after the opening of the “Jugendzentrum - Unterm Dach” in Berlin, the space still required basic interventions such as painting walls and arranging furniture. Since no stable youth group had yet been involved in the centre, the team initiated mobile youth work activities in the neighbourhood to build relationships and gradually engage young people. A small group of boys and girls aged 13–14 later became regular participants, making it possible to launch an initial co-design experience.



Methodology

The activity was based on simple and accessible actions: collective selection of colors, shared preparation of the space, collaborative painting sessions, shared meals, and spontaneous customisation of T-shirts. The process was intentionally low-threshold and did not require any specific technical skills. Participation was grounded in informal relationships, experiential learning, and direct involvement in the physical transformation of the space. Young people were not only consulted, but actively contributed to shaping the environment through concrete actions.



Lessons Learned

The experience showed that low-threshold and hands-on activities are effective tools for activating participation, building trust, and creating a sense of ownership. Informal and convivial environments helped strengthen relationships. The case also highlighted the importance of continuity and outreach work, especially in contexts where no established youth group already exists. Mobile youth work proved essential in the initial phase, while long-term engagement strategies were necessary to consolidate participation over time.



Relevance for SPARK

This practice represents an effective example of accessible and initial co-design, demonstrating how simple and practical interventions can activate participation and encourage young people to leave a visible mark on a space. The case highlights the importance of outreach work, gradual engagement, tangible transformation, experiential learning, and low-threshold participation methods in building participation processes from the ground up. For the SPARK Toolkit, it offers a transferable model for initiating participatory processes in contexts where youth involvement still needs to be progressively developed.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Painting the New Youth Centre	Berlin, Germany, Jugendzentrum Unterm Dach; initial phase of activation of the youth centre	Participatory regeneration of a permanent youth space through collaborative painting and shared setup	Low (low-tech, simple materials and educational facilitation)	Phase 1 → Activation and Context Analysis

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the value of low-threshold and hands-on activities in building trust, activating participation, and creating visible forms of ownership through the transformation of space. The experience also demonstrates the strategic role of mobile youth work and experiential learning in gradually engaging young people and creating the foundations for future co-design processes.

2 ZENTRALE – GROUND UP (GERMANY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

Zentrale – Ground Up focused on the participatory renovation of the central hub of Roter Baum Berlin, located in the Marzahn-Hellersdorf district. The space functions as a coordination centre where staff and young people develop activities, exchange ideas, and create youth-led initiatives. The renovation aimed to improve the accessibility, functionality, and inclusiveness of the environment, transforming it into a more welcoming and participatory space for both young people and the organisation itself.



Methodology

The project used the Planning for Real method, a participatory planning approach based on hands-on and collaborative processes. Young people, staff members, and international participants involved in a youth exchange contributed to the redesign of the space through discussions, feedback collection, and collective decision-making activities. A three-dimensional physical model played a central role in the process, helping participants express ideas, priorities, and spatial solutions in a concrete and accessible way. The methodology combined visual tools, post-its notes, collaborative discussions, and community sharing moments to support inclusive participation.



Lessons Learned

The experience demonstrated that tangible and visual tools can make co-design processes more accessible, even for participants without technical skills. The use of physical models helped transform abstract ideas into realistic and shared proposals, strengthening dialogue and collaboration. The project also highlighted the importance of time, facilitation skills, flexibility, and continuous communication throughout participatory processes. Managing expectations proved essential, as not all proposals could be implemented in practice.



Relevance for SPARK

Zentrale – Ground Up demonstrates how participatory regeneration can support collaboration, inclusion, and shared decision-making through practical and visual methods. In particular, the use of a three-dimensional model emerges as a highly transferable tool for supporting communication, creativity, spatial reflection, collaborative planning, and co-design processes. For the SPARK Toolkit, the case offers a practical example of how participatory design can contribute to the creation of more functional, inclusive, and youth-friendly environments.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Zentrale – Ground Up	Berlin, Germany, Roter Baum Berlin, Marzahn-Hellersdorf district; participatory renovation of the organisation's central hub	Participatory regeneration of an organisational and community space (youth hub and Youth Office)	Medium-high (facilitation tools, three-dimensional model, international coordination, and renovation interventions)	3. Co-design and ideation

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the effectiveness of the Planning for Real method, which uses tangible and visual tools to make co-design accessible and understandable even for participants without technical skills. The experience also demonstrates how participatory planning can strengthen collaboration, shared ownership, and collective decision-making while translating ideas into concrete spatial solutions.

3 TAG THE DECK – STYLE AHOI! (GERMANY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

The Mobile Youth Centre “Langer See”, developed by Roter Baum Berlin, uses a houseboat as a mobile youth space to reach young people in areas with limited permanent youth infrastructure. Within this initiative, Tag the Deck – Style Ahoi! involved young people in defining the visual identity of the boat through a participatory graffiti contest.



Methodology

The activity combined creative freedom with a clear technical framework. Young artists could participate individually or in groups and received defined intervention areas, technical drawings, templates, photographs and professional support. This allowed young people to experiment creatively while respecting the functional and safety requirements of the space.



Lessons Learned

- Young people actively contributed to the design and identity of the youth space.
- Graffiti and urban art proved effective tools for participation and ownership.
- Visual and technical design tools made the co-design process more accessible.
- A “clear framework + creative freedom” approach supported both creativity and feasible outcomes.
- Professional guidance helped transform young people’s ideas into realistic interventions.



Relevance for SPARK

The practice demonstrates that co-design can be applied not only to fixed spaces but also to mobile and unconventional youth environments. It provides SPARK with a transferable example of art-based participatory design, showing how young people can become active co-creators of spaces while working within realistic technical constraints.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Zentrale – Ground Up	Berlin, Germany – mobile youth work project developed along the Langer See by Roter Baum Berlin	Art-based and participatory co-design of a mobile youth space (houseboat) and definition of its visual identity	Medium-high (mobile infrastructure, professional design tools, art materials, and technical support)	3. Co-design and ideation

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the effectiveness of the principle “clear framework + creative freedom,” demonstrating how a structured framework and clearly defined technical constraints can foster, rather than limit, creativity and the quality of the outcome. The experience also demonstrates the transferability of art-based co-design applied to mobile contexts, underlining the value of urban art and professional design tools in promoting youth empowerment, ownership, and participatory placemaking.

4 ASK - ART SOCIAL KITCHEN (ITALY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

ASK - Art Social Kitchen is a community-based project developed in Recanati, Italy, by APS Fonti San Lorenzo. Conceived as an intergenerational and participatory space, the initiative involves people of different ages, with young people playing a central role as co-designers, decision-makers, and active contributors. The project combines conviviality, creativity, and social innovation, promoting the idea of space as a shared common good built collectively through participation and collaboration.



Methodology

The project was developed through a self-building approach focus-ed on the collaborative construction of modular furniture and shared community spaces. Young people, residents, architects specialised in self-building, a carpenter, and international participants worked together to design, prototype, and test tables and chairs adaptable to different uses. The process combined hands-on learning, experimentation, intercultural collaboration, and collective use of space. Participation was embedded not only in the design phase, but also in the everyday life of the environment, strengthening relationships, responsibility, and a sense of belonging.



Lessons Learned

The experience demonstrated how self-building activities can strengthen collaboration, ownership, and community activation. The transformation of the physical space became a tool for creating relationships, trust, and social inclusion. At the same time, the project highlighted that participatory regeneration requires time, experimentation, and the ability to overcome social and cultural barriers. The case also showed the importance of imagination and collective “dreaming” in sustaining long-term motivation and transformative processes.



Relevance for SPARK

ASK represents a strong example of community-based co-design and participatory regeneration. The project demonstrates how young people can actively shape both the physical and social meaning of a space through self-building, collaboration, and shared responsibility. For the SPARK Toolkit, the case highlights the importance of combining material transformation, creativity, inclusion, and community-building within participatory processes. It also offers a transferable example of how co-design can generate not only regenerated spaces, but also stronger relationships, active citizenship, and collective ownership.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
ASK – Art Social Kitchen	Recanati, Italy, community project promoted by APS Fonti San Lorenzo in a medium-sized urban context	Participatory regeneration of a community space through self-building, conviviality, and social innovation	Medium (technical skills, self-building materials, professional support, and community coordination)	4.Prototyping

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the value of community-based self-building as a co-design tool, in which the collaborative construction of furniture and shared spaces becomes a collective learning process fostering empowerment and community activation. The experience also demonstrates how the physical transformation of space can strengthen relationships, participation, and a sense of belonging while promoting participatory and sustainable regeneration practices.

5 BUILD THE FUTURE (ITALY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

Build The Future is an educational and participatory project developed in the province of Macerata, involving children and early adolescents at different stages of their school journey. The initiative combines education, participation, and active citizenship, supporting the development of personal and civic competences through transformative experiences connected to school and public spaces. The project progressively involves primary and lower secondary school students, promoting long-term educational continuity and youth empowerment from an early age.



Methodology

The project was structured through three interconnected phases: psychosocial workshops, participatory design, and implementation of transformations. Students first participated in activities aimed at strengthening emotional, relational, and social competences. They then identified needs and opportunities within school and urban environments, developing proposals for regeneration through co-design activities. Finally, the proposed interventions were implemented in collaboration with schools and local administrations, making young people's contributions visible and concrete. The process combined experiential learning, active participation, and practical transformation of spaces.



Lessons Learned

The experience demonstrated that combining education and participatory design can strengthen life skills, creativity, civic responsibility, and a sense of belonging. Young participants developed greater awareness of their ability to influence and improve the spaces around them. The project also highlighted the importance of continuity in participatory educational pathways and the need for collaboration between schools, local administrations, and communities to sustain the transformations achieved over time.



Relevance for SPARK

Build The Future represents a significant example of educational co-design, showing how participatory processes can begin from early childhood and become part of long-term learning pathways. The project demonstrates how non-formal education, active citizenship, and spatial regeneration can be integrated to support youth empowerment. For the SPARK Toolkit, the case offers a transferable model for involving young people in the transformation of school and public spaces while promoting more inclusive, meaningful, and youth-friendly environments.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Build The Future	Province of Macerata, Italy, educational project implemented in collaboration with schools and local administrations	Educational co-design and participatory regeneration of school and public spaces	Medium (educational facilitation, institutional coordination, materials for workshops and regeneration interventions)	4. Prototyping

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the effectiveness of educational co-design, in which participatory design and life skills development are integrated to promote empowerment and active citizenship from an early age. The experience also demonstrates the value of continuous and experiential learning pathways, in which the concrete transformation of spaces makes young people's contributions visible and strengthens their sense of belonging and responsibility toward the community.

6 YOUTH COUNCIL (ITALY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

The Youth Council is a permanent civic participation structure involving young people aged 13–16 in Macerata. Rather than being a temporary educational activity, it provides a formal space where young people can express their needs, develop proposals and engage directly with the local administration as consultees and co-designers.



Methodology

The Council can include up to 42 elected students from local schools. Its functioning is based on a structured democratic process including:

- promotion and awareness-raising in schools;
- self-candidacy and election of youth representatives;
- attention to gender balance;
- regular monthly meetings;
- structured dialogue with the municipal administration.

The approach combines democratic representation, continuity and institutional support, creating a stable infrastructure for youth participation.



Lessons Learned

- Creates a permanent space for youth participation and representation.
- Strengthens civic, social and democratic competences.
- Promotes dialogue between young people, schools and public institutions.
- Increases young people's sense of belonging and responsibility towards their community.
- Shows that participation requires concrete institutional follow-up to remain credible and meaningful.
- Economic and organisational constraints can limit the implementation of young people's proposals.



Relevance for SPARK

The Youth Council provides SPARK with a transferable example of institutional co-design and participatory governance. It demonstrates how stable and recognised participation structures can strengthen youth agency and integrate young people's perspectives into decisions concerning policies, communities and public spaces.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Build The Future	Macerata, Italy – institutional structure promoted by the Municipality in collaboration with schools and the Municipal Observatory	Participatory governance and institutional co-design of public policies and urban spaces	Medium (organizational structure, institutional support, educational coordination, and meeting spaces)	1. Activation and context analysis

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the value of permanent youth participation structures as tools for civic activation and needs analysis, capable of systematically integrating young people's perspectives into public decision-making processes. The experience also demonstrates how institutional co-design strengthens dialogue between young people and local administrations, promoting empowerment, active citizenship, and the development of more inclusive and sustainable policies and spaces.

7 RADIOTIN (ROMANIA)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

RadioTin is a youth-led online radio station created in Izvoarele, Romania, within a rural context where opportunities for youth expression are often limited. Initially developed by a small group of young people, the project gradually expanded to involve a wider youth community. Rather than functioning as a temporary activity, RadioTin became a participatory space for communication, creativity, and self-expression, where young people could discuss topics relevant to them, experiment with active roles, and develop their own public voice.



Methodology

The project developed progressively through different stages, beginning with inspiration from another local radio experience and the creation of a development plan supported through a European Solidarity Corps project. Young participants contributed to setting up the radio studio, organising schedules and playlists, developing a website, and producing regular podcasts and live broadcasts. Over time, the process evolved into a youth-led initiative, with some participants taking responsibility for coordination and management. The methodology combined co-design, experiential learning, technical experimentation, and gradual empowerment.



Lessons Learned

The experience demonstrated that youth-led media projects can strengthen empowerment, technical competences, responsibility, and social connection. The informal atmosphere and strong relationships within the group contributed significantly to the success of the initiative. At the same time, the project highlighted the importance of continuity, mentoring, and organisational support in maintaining participation over time. The case also showed that youth-led initiatives require a balance between spontaneity and structure, allowing creativity to develop while ensuring sustainability and coordination.



Relevance for SPARK

RadioTin is particularly relevant for SPARK because it expands the concept of co-design beyond physical spaces, showing how participatory processes can also involve communication tools and media infrastructures. The project demonstrates how young people can become active creators of participatory environments when provided with trust, support, and meaningful opportunities for expression. For the SPARK Toolkit, the case offers a transferable example of youth-led participation in rural contexts, highlighting the value of creativity, empowerment, and non-formal learning in building inclusive and meaningful spaces for young people.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
RadioTin	Izvoarele, Romania – rural context	Participatory media space and youth-led online radio	Medium (technical equipment, training, mentoring, and organisational support)	4. Prototyping

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights how co-design can extend beyond physical environments to include media infrastructures and digital participatory spaces managed by young people. The experience also demonstrates that youth-led processes can foster empowerment, skills development, and the creation of a public voice, while requiring continuity, mentoring, and organisational support to remain sustainable over time.

8 PARKS AND RECREATION (ROMANIA)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

Parks and Recreation is a youth participation project developed in Teișani, Romania, aimed at involving young people in the co-design of public leisure spaces within a rural context. Young participants acted as co-designers and consultants, contributing to the identification of community needs and the transformation of public spaces. The project promoted participatory placemaking as a tool for improving quality of life and strengthening the role of young people as active agents in local development.



Methodology

The project followed a structured participatory process combining research, collaboration with experts, and institutional dialogue. Activities included regular meetings with young participants, community needs analysis supported by an anthropologist, intensive design workshops and camps, consultations with local authorities, and the presentation of proposals to the local council. One of the proposed projects was later implemented, allowing young people to participate in all phases of the process, from analysis and ideation to the concrete realisation of a public space.



Lessons Learned

The experience demonstrated that young people can become active agents of territorial change when supported through mentoring, facilitation, and collaboration with experts and institutions. The project strengthened participants' confidence, sense of ownership, and active citizenship. At the same time, the case highlighted the importance of dialogue with local authorities to ensure sustainability and implementation. It also showed that participatory processes require mediation skills, long-term support, and the ability to navigate political and administrative challenges.



Relevance for SPARK

Parks and Recreation represents a strong example of youth-led placemaking in rural contexts, demonstrating how co-design can generate tangible transformations in public space while strengthening empowerment and community participation. The project shows that participatory design can be successfully applied even in contexts with limited resources when collaboration between young people, experts, and institutions is effectively supported. For the SPARK Toolkit, the case offers a transferable model of participatory regeneration based on inclusive design processes, territorial engagement, and youth agency.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Parks and Recreation	Teișani, Prahova County, Romania – rural context	Participatory placemaking project for the co-design of public leisure spaces	Medium–High (research, expert support, institutional collaboration, and infrastructural implementation)	3. Co-design and ideation

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case demonstrates the effectiveness of participatory placemaking as a tool for territorial development, involving young people in all phases of the process, from needs analysis to the concrete realisation of spaces. The experience also highlights how collaboration between young people, experts, and local authorities can strengthen ownership, support sustainability, and make co-design processes replicable even in rural contexts with limited resources.

9 BUILDING YOUTH SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES – BYSC-E (ROMANIA)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

BYSC-E, developed by Curba de Cultură in rural Romania, combines environmental education with youth participation. Working with local schools and international volunteers, young people were involved as co-designers in identifying environmental needs and developing practical solutions for their school communities.



Methodology

A concrete need was identified: the lack of recycling bins in classrooms. This became the starting point for a participatory process involving:

- identification of needs within the schools;
- design and preparation of recycling bins;
- hands-on construction with students;
- environmental awareness activities;
- visits to a local waste collection facility;
- community clean-up actions.

The approach combines learning by doing, real needs and tangible outcomes, supported by cooperation between schools, youth organisations and international volunteers.



Lessons Learned

- Recycling bins were introduced in classrooms of two major local schools.
- Hundreds of students participated in environmental awareness activities.
- Practical involvement increased ownership and responsibility.
- Visible, concrete results helped make environmental education more engaging.
- Strong cooperation with teachers and schools was essential.
- Long-term engagement requires continuity beyond one-off activities.



Relevance for SPARK

BYSC-E provides SPARK with a replicable example of needs-based and hands-on co-design. It demonstrates how young people can transform an identified community need into a concrete solution and how small, visible interventions can promote ownership, sustainability and active citizenship.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Parks and Recreation	Rural schools, Romania	Environmental co-design project in educational contexts	Low-Medium (simple materials, educational support, and international volunteering)	4. Prototyping

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case demonstrates how co-design can be effectively applied to environmental education, translating real needs into concrete and tangible solutions through a hands-on and participatory approach. The experience also highlights that simple, visible, and context-based interventions foster youth ownership, strengthen civic responsibility, and promote sustainable practices through collaboration between schools, local communities, and international networks.

10 DESIGNING THE GALAXY ROOM (GERMANY)



Context, Target Group, and General Approach

After two months of mobile youth work, Roter Baum involved a small group of girls in the transformation of a room inside the youth centre. The young participants proposed creating a Galaxy Room: a PlayStation room with a dark, cave-like atmosphere, LED lighting, constellations, and large floor cushions.

The project gave young people strong creative autonomy within a clearly defined space, while youth workers mainly acted as facilitators.



Methodology

The process resulted in a recognizable and youth-designed space with dark blue walls, painted constellations, LED lighting, and informal furniture.

The experience highlighted the value of creative autonomy, practical involvement, and flexible facilitation. At the same time, irregular participation made continuity difficult and showed that longer co-design processes need flexibility, patience, and good communication with participants.



Lessons Learned

The process resulted in a recognizable and youth-designed space with dark blue walls, painted constellations, LED lighting, and informal furniture.

The experience highlighted the value of creative autonomy, practical involvement, and flexible facilitation. At the same time, irregular participation made continuity difficult and showed that longer co-design processes need flexibility, patience, and good communication with participants.



Relevance for SPARK

The Galaxy Room demonstrates that youth-led co-design does not always follow a linear path. Projects may involve interruptions, changes in participation, and contributions from different groups over time. For SPARK, it provides a useful example of supported creative autonomy: youth workers create the conditions and provide practical support, while young people shape the identity and development of the space.

CASE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF SPACE/ PROJECT	LEVEL OF RESOURCES REQUIRED	MAIN PHASE OF THE SPARK METHOD
Parks and Recreation	Berlino, Germania – Jugendzentrum Untermythen; progettazione partecipata di una stanza tematica all'interno del centro giovanile	Co-design of a permanent youth space (astronomy-themed PlayStation room)	Medium (setup materials, paint, LED lighting, and furniture)	3. Co-design and ideation

Methodological Elements Emerging from the Analysis:

The case highlights the value of a youth-led approach, in which young people exercise full creative autonomy within a framework facilitated by youth workers, transforming ideas and digital inspirations into concrete spatial solutions. The experience also demonstrates that co-design is an evolutionary and non-linear process, requiring flexibility, openness to subsequent contributions, and the ability to adapt, fostering the progressive development of ownership and spatial identity.

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