



**Munroe Center for the Arts:  
Summer Stage**  
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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## **History of Munroe Center for the Arts**

(excerpts from the Annual Town Reports, 1981-1994)

*As the year closed, the board decided that the Munroe School space would, in turn, house an Arts Center to be operated by Arts/Lexington, a non-profit corporation dedicated to supporting the studio and performing arts in town. - **1983***

*Lexington Friends of the Arts, Inc. began operating the Munroe Center for the Arts as a non-profit corporation October 1 in the former Munroe School at 1403 Massachusetts Avenue. The center is dedicated to engaging residents in the richness of the town's artistic resources. - **1994***

*Munroe sublets affordable studio space to artists and educators working in a variety of disciplines, from visual to literary arts. To encourage interaction between artists at Munroe and residents, each artist leasing space makes a commitment to a component of community service. - **1994***

*Revenues generated from studio rentals, memberships, donations and grants support educational programs, Munroe's primary mission. Two large classrooms are set aside for education in a variety of subjects and a summer arts camp for children. Some artist-tenants operate schools in their studios independent of Munroe's programs: The Dance Inn, Lexington School of Ballet, Lexington Music School and the Children's Corner. - **1994***

*The need to invest in a fire protection system at the Munroe School has triggered an examination of the long-term use of the building. The Board of Selectmen embraces the mission of the Munroe Center of the Arts and recognizes that the Center addresses needs not provided by school or recreational programs. The building, however, is in disrepair and continued ownership by the Town is in question. - **2007***

*The Selectmen are proceeding to formalize transfer for the former Munroe School building to an arts or educational entity in keeping with the sentiments of Town Meeting. When the Munroe School was closed in the early 1980s, Town Meeting recognized the importance of establishing an arts center. The Munroe Center serves the needs of Lexington youth unmet by other Town Programs. - **2009***

## Testimonials

*"I have been coming to the Munroe Center for the Arts for over two years... It has been one of the best experiences of my life. I have had amazing instructors and met wonderful people. It is such a great and caring community of people." (Maria Boucher)*

*"I now count people I met at Munroe among my dearest friends and I always look forward to entering the sun-filled brick building that has given me so much." (Liz Ocean)*

*"The expansion and improvement of the plant facilities will make things even better--more approachable and accessible to an even broader community. It's a pleasure to be a part of it." (Edith Engel)*

*"A true space for creativity that goes way beyond simply drawing a model." (Martha Gallagher)*

*"It is an exceptional school and I couldn't be more grateful to be a part of the community there." (Amaliia Berynychk)*

*"Munroe has been a truly enriching experience for our family, and an invaluable part of our son's creative journey." (Shannon Pierce)*

*"I deeply valued having a place to come to where I felt welcomed and inspired. Not only did the center provide the space to foster creativity, but also opened up opportunities for friendships to blossom. The Munroe Center is a pillar in Lexington's creative scene and a wonderful space to have available to the community." (Carolin Nothaft)*

*The Munroe Center for the Arts is a truly amazing resource in Lexington, Massachusetts. If you live in the area, I would highly recommend you support this wonderful organization." (Robert Cohen)*



**Munroe Center for the Arts: Summer Camp**  
Friday performance 2025

## Summer Stage - consistent with community desires as expressed in the LexNEXT Comprehensive Plan (2023)<sup>1</sup> planning process.



The Town of Lexington underwent a robust community engagement process as an important part of developing the town’s Comprehensive Plan. Many residents expressed an appreciation for existing social, civic, cultural, and recreational activities; many expressed a desire for additional ones. The following are representative excerpts from the Plan.

### Vision Statement:

“The Town of Lexington prides itself on being a vibrant community where residents place a high value on learning at all ages. Lexington’s historic buildings and landscapes, many open spaces and trails, excellent schools, high quality public facilities and services, and proximity to Boston make it an attractive place to live, work, and play. **Lexington is committed to maintaining and expanding social and civic connections for current residents, people that work in Lexington, future residents, and people visiting.** ....The Comprehensive Plan envisions a town that fosters a **sense of belonging for all... cultivates a wide range of exceptional recreational, cultural, educational, and social opportunities that support creativity and innovation.**”

*“We need more spaces for youth to gather.”*

- participants at LexNext public forum (Oct. 26, 2021)

*“We need for more community events and intergenerational opportunities.”*

- participants at Discover Day (Oct. 18, 2021)

*“We need more events where residents can gather and socialize.”*

- participants at LexNext public forum (Oct. 26, 2021)

*We need more art galleries, murals, musical/comedy/entertainment performances and events.”*

- participants at LexNext public forum (Oct. 26, 2021)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lexingtonma.gov/816/Lexington-Next---Comprehensive-Plan>

**GOAL 8: To improve and expand facilities for recreation and community gathering to support holistic wellbeing, a sense of belonging, enhanced community connections, fun, and to build community through social engagement. Provide opportunities for:**

- social interaction and ways to reduce loneliness and isolation
- cross-cultural exchange

**Objective 8.2. Maintain, expand, and promote opportunities for both formal and informal community gathering spaces.**

**8.3.2. Forge connections with local civic and cultural organizations to expand programming and cross-cultural exchanges.**

- Identify organizations involved in such programming, such as the LexFarm and **Munroe Center for the Arts**, identifying program expansion opportunities

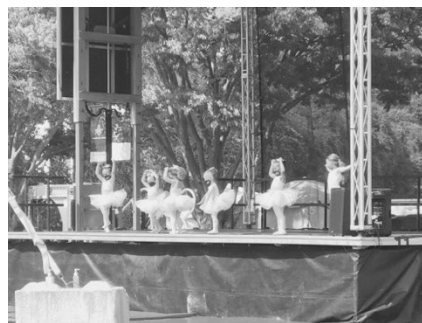
Goal #8 focuses on Lexington’s need to maintain its existing facilities while adding new facilities to accommodate the town’s shifting demographics and greater accessibility needs.

At the 2018 World Café Forums a large number of participants mentioned “social capital and sense of community” as being “valued.” Participants also noted: “Build community, connect people to the town, beyond just the schools.”

Participants in June 15, 2021 public forum noted a need to:

- “Increase cultural events, promoting a sharing of the heritages of different cultures.”
- “Create places for teens to gather, perform, and be heard.”

“Encourage people to get to know their neighbors, and to actively meet and get to know people of different backgrounds/skin color.” (participant in June 15, 2021 public forum)



## THE IMPORTANCE OF THIRD PLACES

The concept of “third places” was popularized by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*<sup>2</sup>. He described third places as the social environments that exist outside of home (the “first place”) and work (the “second place”).

They matter more than ever. We are living in a moment of:

- Hyper-individualization
- Digital mediation
- Political polarization
- Mobility and transience



*Cary Memorial Library*

Third places anchor people physically and socially. They create continuity in an era of fragmentation.

- Across the U.S., loneliness has been described as a public health crisis. Remote work, longer commutes, digital entertainment, and fragmented schedules mean fewer spontaneous interactions.
- As more people work from home, the workplace no longer serves as a reliable site of social interaction.
- Online spaces connect us broadly but thinly. Algorithms sort us into like-minded bubbles.
- Many traditional civic institutions – clubs, religious organizations, fraternal groups – have seen participation drop.
- Anxiety and depression rates have increased, especially among young people.
- Communities facing extreme weather, public health events, or economic shocks rely on existing social networks.
- As more time is spent in private or commercial environments, truly open, accessible gathering spaces are shrinking.
- For young Americans, many third places are now virtual – from Facebook and chat rooms to group texts.

As Oldenburg notes, **the most effective third places for building real community seem to be physical places** where people can easily and routinely connect with each other: downtowns, cafes, restaurants, churches, parks, recreation centers, hairdressers, etc.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Great\\_Good\\_Place\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Good_Place_(book))

# Why Third Places Are Important

## 1. They Build Social Connection

Third places create low-pressure environments where people can interact casually and repeatedly. These everyday encounters:

- Reduce social isolation
- Build trust among neighbors
- Create cross-generational relationships
- Strengthen local networks

Strong informal networks are the foundation of resilient communities.

## 2. They Support Civic Life

Democracy depends on conversation. Third places:

- Encourage informal debate and dialogue
- Allow ideas to circulate across different groups
- Provide space for organizing and collaboration

Many civic movements have started in places like cafes, libraries, parks, and community halls.

## 3. They Improve Mental Health

Regular, light social interaction:

- Reduces loneliness
- Increases sense of belonging
- Boosts mood and overall wellbeing

Even brief, predictable contact (like seeing the same barista or neighbor regularly) supports emotional health.

## 4. They Strengthen Local Economies

Local third places:

- Support small businesses
- Keep spending circulating locally
- Attract foot traffic
- Make neighborhoods more desirable
- A lively third place often anchors a thriving commercial corridor.

*“For Americans, third places are **where we can both affirm our own identities and build empathy for identities different from our own.** The United States is a multicultural and multilingual country... third places allow for a space to meet people entirely different from us. We can meet people from different cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences, which encourages us to empathize with people of different identities. We can learn about the experiences of those different from us and use our resources to support our community, standing in solidarity no matter if we share an identity or not. Third places make us feel as if we belong to a society bigger than ourselves.”*

<https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/>



## 5. They Create Identity and Culture

Third places:

- Showcase local art and performance
- Preserve traditions
- Foster shared experiences
- Help neighborhoods feel distinct rather than interchangeable

They are where culture becomes visible and participatory.



*Depot Square*

## 6. They Increase Community Resilience

In times of crisis (storms, public health events, economic downturns), established third places:

- Become information hubs
- Offer mutual aid coordination
- Provide emotional support networks

Communities with strong social infrastructure recover faster.

## Examples of Third Places

- Independent cafés
- Public libraries
- Parks and plazas
- Community arts spaces
- Faith-based gathering spaces
- Barbershops and salons
- Neighborhood stages and outdoor performance venues



*Pop Up Plaza, Seasonal Installation, East Boston*

**A well-designed small stage can function as a powerful third place** – especially when it is informal, welcoming, and neighbor-facing. It creates repeated, low-barrier opportunities for people to gather and connect. One that:

- Welcomes people without requiring membership
- Creates repeated shared experiences
- Bridges artists and neighbors
- Works across generations, cultural backgrounds, etc.

*“It would be great to have more outdoor concerts.”*  
- participants at Discover Day (Oct. 18, 2021)

## SHIFT FROM SUBURBS AS BEDROOM COMMUNITIES TO COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

### Expanding opportunities for cultural activities in the suburbs

There is a **clear trend toward increasing cultural activities in suburban areas**, especially in North America and Europe. Several demographic, economic, and planning changes are driving suburbs to become more culturally active places rather than purely residential ones.



Lexington Center

The goal is to make cultural activity **part of daily life rather than a special trip.**

### Three critical conditions for suburban cultural vitality:

1. **Physical space** for cultural expression
2. **Programming and partnerships** that activate those spaces
3. **Community ownership and participation**

When these align, suburbs evolve from **bedroom communities into cultural communities.**

## Suburbs Are Becoming New Markets for the Performing Arts

Historically, large theaters, opera houses, and concert halls were concentrated in downtown cities. But suburban communities now represent **a large underserved audience with significant demand for arts experiences.**

Key drivers:

- Population growth and wealth in suburbs
- Families seeking local cultural amenities
- Reduced willingness to travel into cities for evening events

As a result, suburbs are increasingly developing:

- Performing arts centers
- community theaters
- music venues
- outdoor performance spaces
- These venues often serve as **new civic anchors** in places that previously lacked cultural gathering points.

## Growth of Community-Based and Local Talent Programming

Suburban arts scenes often emphasize **participation rather than just spectatorship**.

Examples of programming trends:

- community theater productions
- youth talent showcases
- school partnerships
- multicultural festivals
- amateur orchestras and dance groups



*increasingly popular public pianos*

Younger audiences are especially drawn to **inclusive and community-oriented programming** that reflects local identity and diversity.

This helps performing arts venues function as **social gathering spaces** rather than just entertainment venues.

## Smaller, Flexible, Multi-Use Performance Spaces

Instead of large opera-house style theaters, many suburban communities are building:

- small black-box theaters
- flexible performance halls
- outdoor stages and amphitheaters
- multi-purpose civic arts centers

Modern design trends emphasize **flexibility and intimacy**, allowing spaces to host theater, dance, music, lectures, and community events.

This approach makes the arts financially viable in smaller markets.

## Rise of Outdoor and Informal Performances

Many suburban communities are expanding **low-barrier outdoor arts programming**, such as:

- summer concerts on the green
- Shakespeare-in-the-park style productions
- outdoor dance and music festivals
- temporary pop-up performances



*The Corner Spot, Ashland MA*

Outdoor programming lowers costs, attracts families, and activates public spaces.

## Arts as a Tool for Community Identity

In suburban planning and placemaking, arts are increasingly used to:

- create town-center identity
- support downtown revitalization
- build social cohesion
- attract young families and professionals

Arts venues can function as **“third places”** – shared social environments outside home and work.

A recent study<sup>3</sup> published by Americans for the Arts Center for Arts and Culture and Health Alliance found that:

- a healthy place to live includes opportunities for and the presence of arts, culture, and creative expression
- arts, culture, and creative expression are important determinants of how communities fare

In Summary,

The trend is not simply “more theaters in suburbs.” Instead, suburban performing arts are shifting toward **community-based, flexible, collaborative, and outdoor cultural programming that strengthens local identity.**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/cultural- vitality-in-communities-interpretation-and-indicators>

## Why This Matters

Increasing cultural opportunities in suburbs can:

- strengthen social cohesion
- create local identity and pride
- reduce dependence on city centers
- support local artists and businesses
- provide accessible cultural experiences for families and seniors
- support health and wellness for all ages
- reduce feelings of loneliness, including in teens and elders
- support cultural education and exchange
- facilitate community building

*Vitality is a sense of a community feeling “alive” ...*

Arts activity has also been shown to **help build community connections and sense of place in suburban neighborhoods.**

Below are the main drivers and patterns of this trend.

## Suburbs Are Becoming More Diverse

Many suburbs now have highly diverse populations, often described as **“ethnoburbs”**—suburban communities with significant immigrant populations that bring their own cultural traditions, festivals, and institutions.

### Impacts on cultural life:

- Cultural festivals and food events
- Ethnic arts and performance traditions
- Community cultural centers
- Multilingual arts programming

This diversity has transformed many suburbs into vibrant cultural hubs that reflect global cultures rather than homogeneous post-war suburbs.



*Dancers at 2019 Lexington High School's Diwali celebration (PC: Wicked Lexington)*

## Demand for Arts Close to Home

Large suburban populations are creating demand for **local arts and cultural amenities**, including theaters, galleries, and performance venues.

Research shows that suburban residents often want **the same access to cultural activities as urban residents**, creating opportunities for new arts venues and programming.

Typical suburban cultural facilities now include:

- Performing arts centers
- Outdoor concert stages
- Art galleries and studios
- Cultural festivals and markets
- Community arts education programs

These help create a **“cultural focal point”** in places that historically lacked civic gathering spaces.

Cultural spaces play an important role in strengthening the resilience of communities. Beyond hosting the arts, they act as **civic anchors** that foster identity, participation and community cohesion. Cultural spaces are increasingly being intentionally designed to act as third places to support encounters among people of diverse backgrounds and in this way facilitate **community building**.



*Go Out Doors, Council for the Arts art installation, Lexington MA*

## Generational and Lifestyle Changes

Younger residents and remote workers increasingly want **amenity-rich suburban environments** with arts, culture, and social activity.

As a result, suburbs are adding:

- live music venues
- creative co-working spaces
- film screenings
- maker spaces
- cultural programming in parks

This reflects a shift from suburbs as **bedroom communities** to **complete communities**.