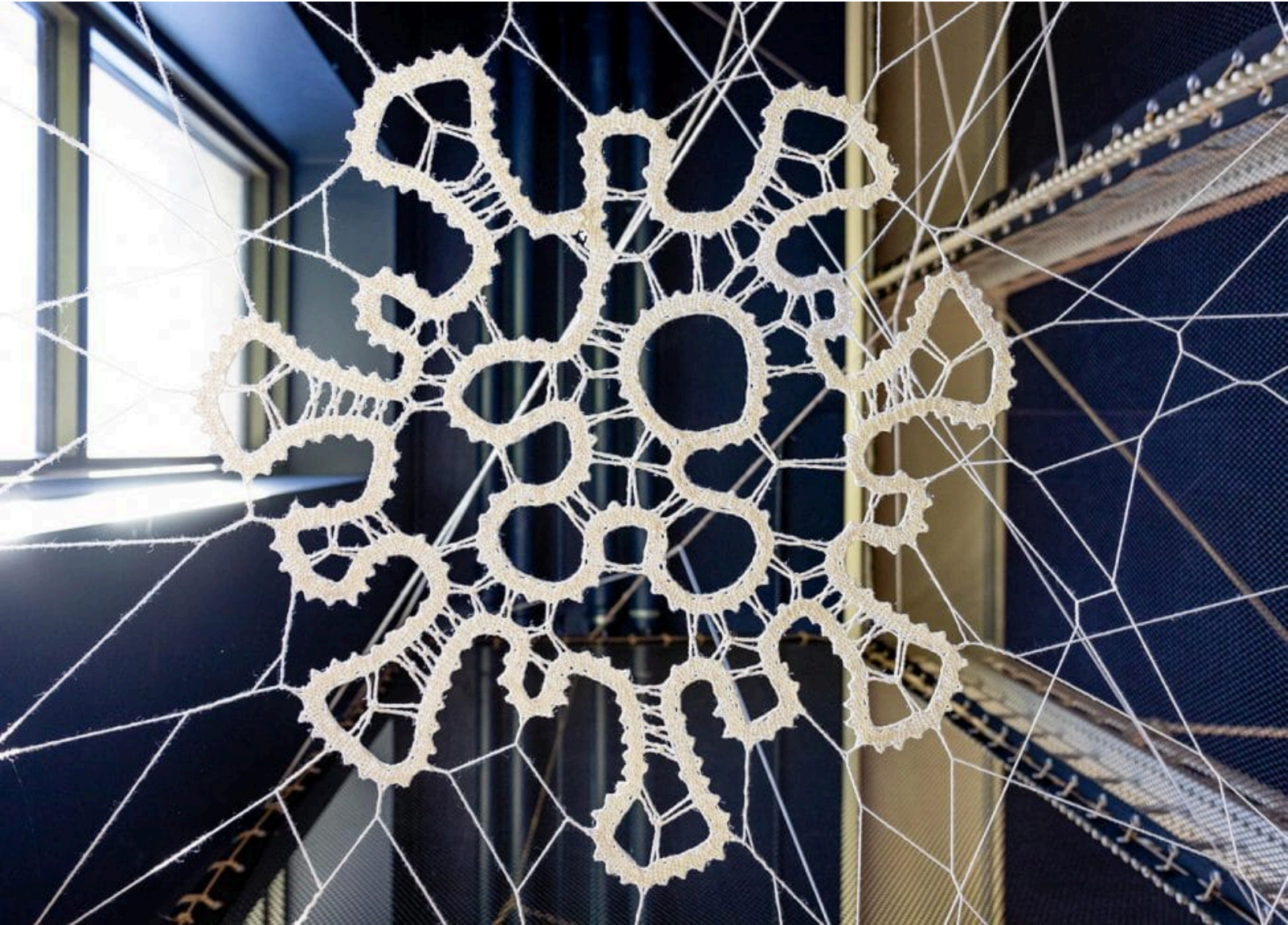




# **Baseline evaluation:**

## **Exploring MuseumLab's role as a microcosm of Pittsburgh's arts ecosystem**

**museumlab**

**THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS**  
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# About the project

With generous support from the Heinz Endowments, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh is engaging in an effort to strengthen the creative ecosystem in Pittsburgh. Akiva and colleagues conducted an analysis of Pittsburgh's arts scene in 2024 and identified Children's Museum of Pittsburgh as one of the most connected nodes in the network. That was without intentional effort. This project asks, how much can we strengthen the ecosystem if we specifically work towards that goal?

Our project focuses on MuseumLab, a bold initiative led by Children's Museum of Pittsburgh. MuseumLab is an historic building that has been lovingly renovated as a space to foster innovation through art and making for youth and adults. Since 2019, the Children's Museum and its partners who share the MuseumLab building have delivered a wide range of impactful programming. This project is examining how four of these programs - which traditionally have operated independently - could coordinate their efforts to maximize positive impacts on Pittsburgh's creatives. The following pages showcase the four key programs.





## Creatives Membership

Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's newest membership program is designed specifically for adults. The Creatives Membership, which began in fall 2025, activates MuseumLab as a hub for creative growth and community connection. Adult creatives gain access to shared studio space, workshops, critiques, and wellness activities, as well as the ability to host events in the space. Members range from professional artists to weekend crafters to educators and parents looking for creative outlets. Some are aiming to build their audiences for their entrepreneurial ventures. Others are looking to build specific skills. Some members simply want to try something new in the company of friends. Whatever participants' goals, activities are designed to be supportive, foster networking, and ignite creatives' creative endeavors.



## MlabPASS

MuseumLab's other new membership program is MlabPASS. Launched in early 2025, MlabPASS provides middle school youth with workshops, open studio time, and special events. Whereas youth visitors to MuseumLab typically need to be accompanied by an adult, Mlab Pass is young people's ticket to parent-free, drop-off activities created just for middle school students. The program's approach to creativity-focused youth development fosters hands-on skills, entrepreneurial thinking, and a sense of belonging. It is a bridge between highly structured programming for elementary school learners and the wealth of more open-ended creative experiences that are available for high school students in Pittsburgh: MlabPASS expands access to Pittsburgh's premier middle school makerspace for metalworking and other mediums.



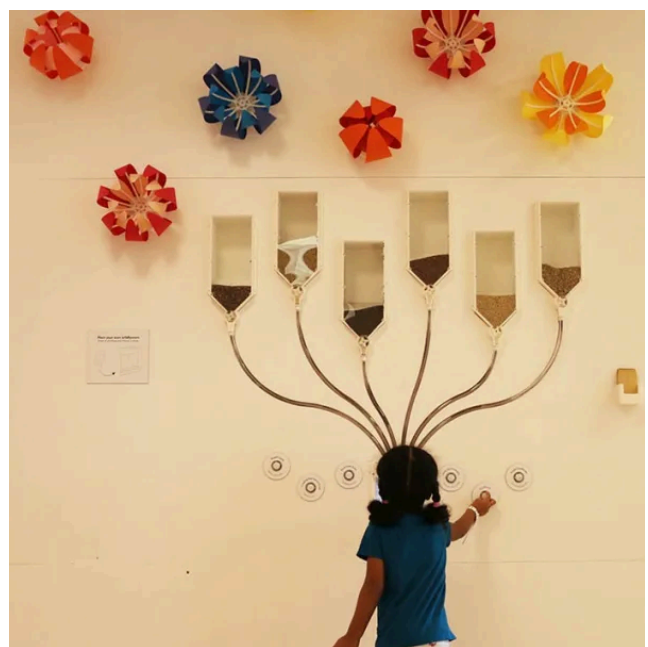
## MuseumLab for Museum Professionals

MuseumLab for Museum Professionals (MLMP) is a long-term professional learning program that equips museum leaders and practitioners to drive creative innovation in exhibits and programs. Through a mix of virtual sessions, an intensive in-person residency at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, ongoing mentorship, and peer learning, participants develop and prototype bold ideas that emphasize creativity, authenticity, accessibility, and audience engagement. By connecting museum professionals to new skills, collaborative networks, and real-world prototyping experiences, MLMP strengthens the broader museum and arts ecosystem—locally and nationally—by cultivating practitioners who can take informed creative risks and share their expertise with their home institutions.



## Tough Art

The Tough Art Residency invites artists to spend the summer at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, where they create original, interactive artworks "tough enough" to withstand hands-on use by children and families. Artists collaborate with museum staff and prototype their ideas in the Museum, resulting in creative and durable pieces. Over 19 years, the residency has supported over 75 artists and produced more than 60 installations, embedding art into the daily life of the Museum while providing artists with unique professional experiences and opportunities to expand their practice in public settings. By connecting staff and audiences in a highly collaborative process, Tough Art strengthens the region's creative ecosystem and inspires new approaches to art-making and audience engagement.





# Cultivating the ecosystem

Drawing on prior research about arts ecosystems, our project hypothesizes that investment in three main areas will lead to broader benefits for the Pittsburgh arts community:

1

**Shared resources:** By widening access to space, tools, materials, financial assets, and other resources, more people will be able to thrive with the arts.

2

**Strengthened skills:** Whether mastering artistic techniques or learning to navigate the creative economy, we can help people meet their goals.

3

**Networking:** When we get people together, it can spark employment options, nurture friendships, and build a sense of belonging in the arts.



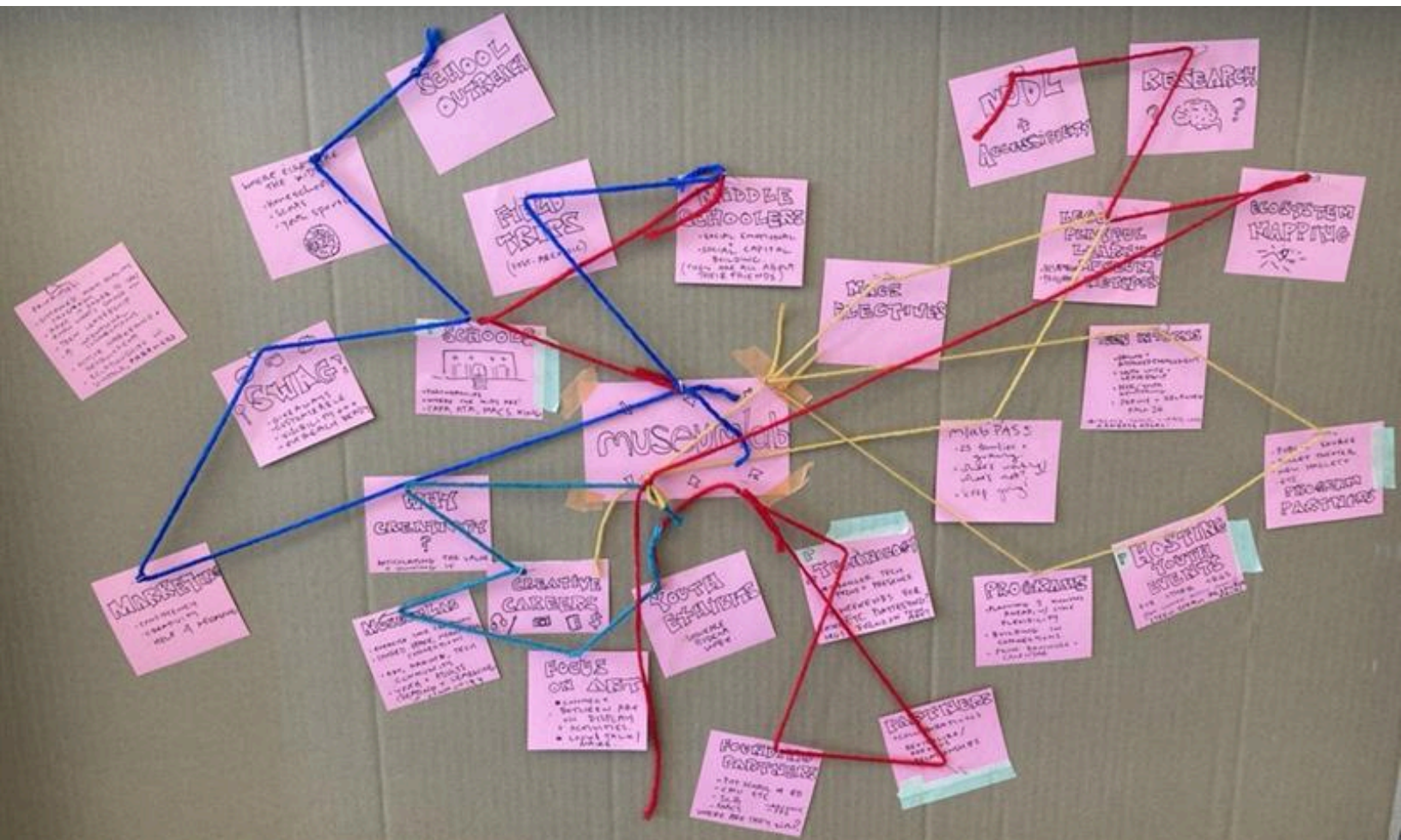


# Evaluation overview

The Children's Museum's Learning and Research team is conducting project evaluation to document and learn from project activities. This evaluation leverages the analytic tools of social network analysis to illuminate the connectivity of MuseumLab's programs, staff, and partners.

Evaluators worked with each of the focal programs to develop a comprehensive list of the audiences, partners, and staff who were involved with the program at the beginning of the grant activities. Each program generated both a quantitative directory—which documents each connection, the strength and type of involvement, and, when appropriate, the size of different audiences. Additionally, each program created a qualitative artifact that illustrates the nature of collaboration in a more artistic manner (see example photo below), fitting for the project topic of arts ecosystems.

The Learning and Research team then compiled data from both the quantitative and qualitative sources and used social network analysis to create a visual illustration of MuseumLab's creative ecosystem as well as quantitative metrics for the ecosystem's vitality. This analysis serves as a baseline; at the end of the project, we will repeat the process to compare as well as gathering additional supporting data to understand changes and their impacts.





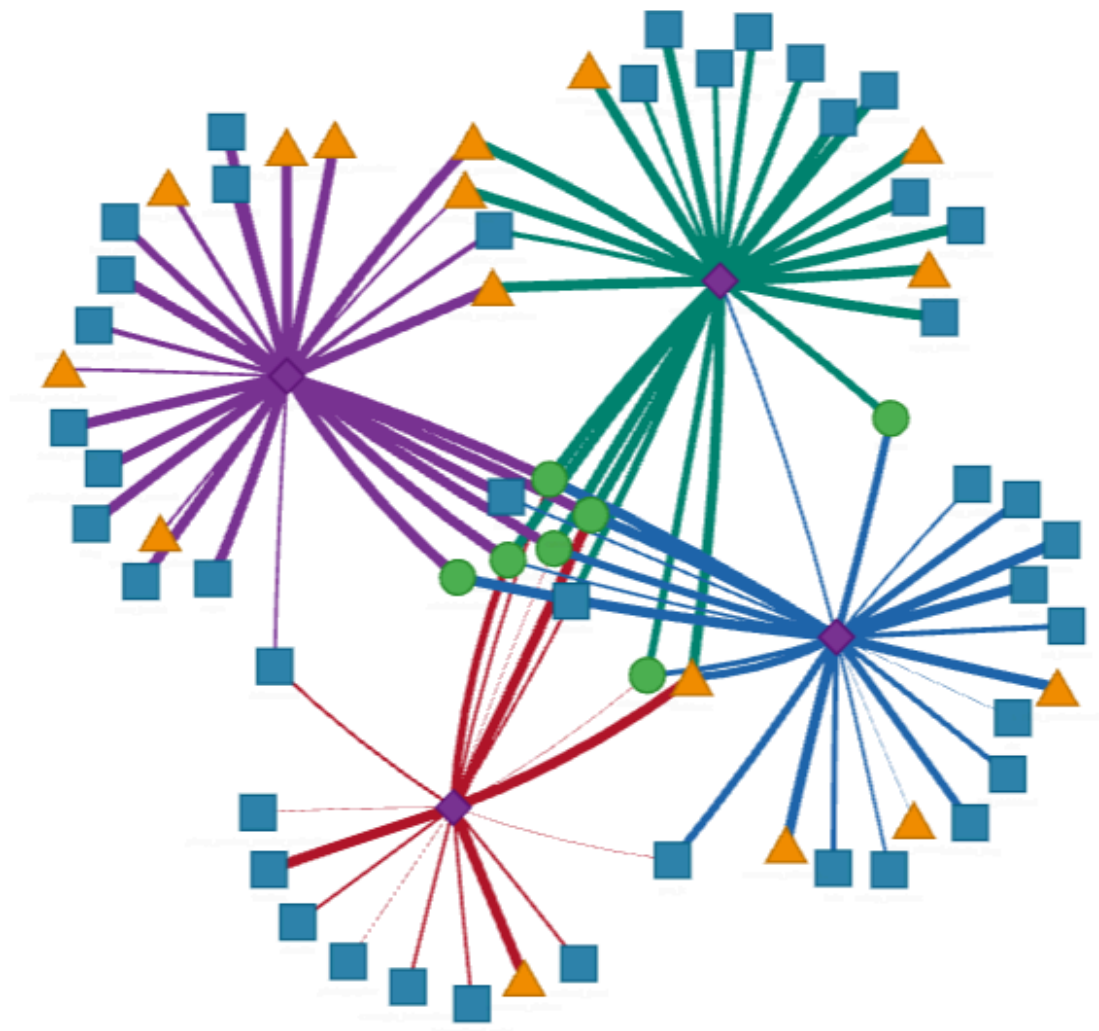
# The preliminary social network

The graphic below is a visualization of the baseline social network. Each point represents a different person, organization, or program:

- Purple diamonds are the four focal programs.
- Blue squares are for partners.
- Orange triangles are audiences.
- Green circles are Museum staff.

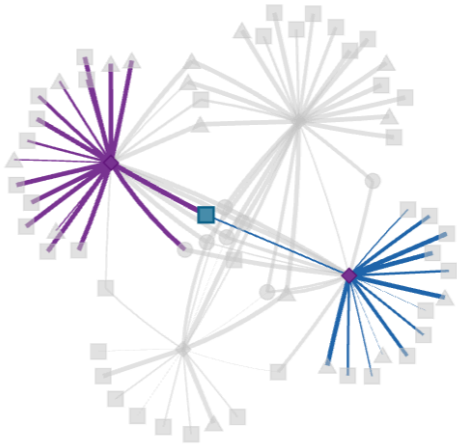
The lines in between demonstrate connections between the points:

- Purple lines (top left) are for MlabPASS.
- Green lines (top right) are for Creatives Membership.
- Red lines (bottom left) are for Tough Art.
- Blue lines (bottom right) are for MLMP.

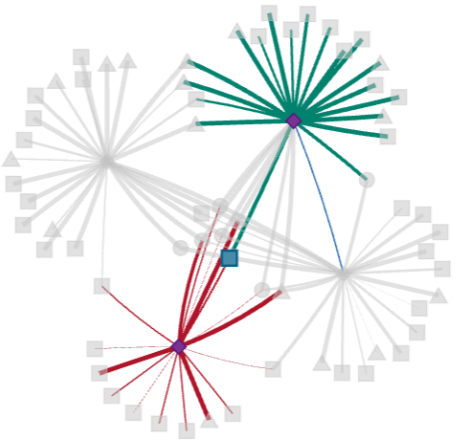




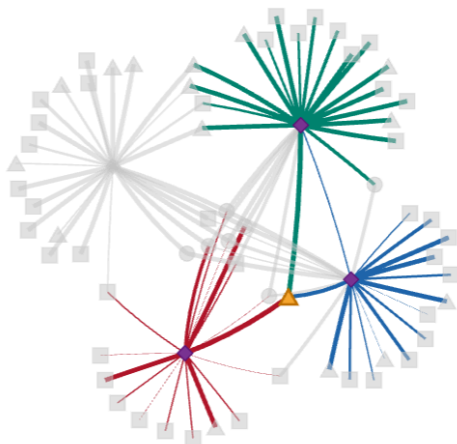
In addition to showing the breadth of the connections, the interactive visualization of our baseline network allows us to identify key relationships that are shared across programs. See several examples below.



Manchester Academic Charter School, whose middle school is housed in the MuseumLab building, has current partnerships with MlabPASS and MLMP.



The Creatives Membership and Tough Art program both collaborate with Shiftworks.



The artist residents from the Tough Art Program have been guest speakers for MLMP and have participated in the Creatives Membership program.



# Baseline network metrics

While social network analysis enables a wide range of analytic benchmarks, our team has narrowed in on three primary indicators that we will compare between the preliminary data and the summative study at the end of the project:

- 1** **Number of partners:** Our initial analysis generated **69 partners** (called “nodes”), which are represented by points on the visualization.
- 2** **Number of connections:** Amongst those nodes, we had **92 connections**, which are shown in the visual as lines between the points.
- 3** **Strength of connections:** Program staff weighted the strength of each connection on a five-point scale (1=minimal interaction, 5=vital). The average for the baseline analysis was **2.4**. In the visual, wider lines represent stronger connections.



# Looking forward: Shared visions

As the previous pages demonstrate, from the beginning of this project there are many points of connection and budding partnerships. Yet this project is about exploring what is possible with intentional intervention. One of the first steps of planning these interventions was identifying a shared vision of what we seek in our ecosystem. Program leaders began by jointly analyzing a range of definitions and frameworks for arts ecosystems, and the group illuminated several themes to guide their shared work:

1

**Organic but designed:** The group continued returning to a metaphor of an ecosystem as a garden. It is complex and you cannot fully control it, yet you can nurture and shape it towards a desired and beautiful result.

2

**Diverse and connected:** Participants emphasized a desire to foster connections across a wide range of people and organizations with complementary needs and assets. The word "(bio)diversity" came up often.

3

**Opportunity with joy:** Many ecosystem models emphasize economic ties. The group was cautiously optimistic about the chance to foster economic growth--which program participants desire--as long as it doesn't compromise or replace the joy of art for art's sake.

*Organic - life of its own*

"A network where artists, audiences, institutions, and resources connect and interact, much like elements in nature. Think of it as the place where creative ideas are born, grow, and influence the world around us...Consider the arts ecosystem as a carefully designed garden... This perspective introduces the idea of intention and responsibility. A healthy Arts Ecosystem isn't just vibrant; it is also resilient, equitable, and forward-thinking." -Lifestyle Sustainability

*These seem somewhat at odds with each other. Who is designing it?*

*Agree. Needs care + room to grow. Not a blue print.*

*alive*



# Measurable goals

With a shared vision and an understanding of our baseline, the group discussed what we'd like to see change before the end of the project. The ecosystem lens fostered nuanced considerations of what kinds of growth we desire--recognizing ways of making strategic choices versus trying to "do it all." Key priorities include:

1

**Audience growth:** Particularly in our new membership programs, we expect to see our efforts result in a larger reach of our already high-quality offerings.

2

**Shared connections:** In our final analysis, we hope to see more of the nodes in the center of the map, meaning they are connected to multiple focal programs. Numerically, we will have a higher ratio of connections to nodes.

3

**Strengthened ties:** Each program will identify strategic partners where they will invest energy. Our final analysis will qualitatively assess the nature of these partnerships and the mechanisms that are effective in boosting them.



# Initial ideas for building connections

During a planning retreat in January 2026, leaders of each focal program met to discuss ways of strengthening collaboration. A major theme, stemming from the goal of shared connections from the prior page, was the idea of getting participants of the four programs to connect. It was a lightbulb moment:

*We've been trying so hard to schedule things at different times so we don't bother each other, but what if we actually try to schedule things at the same time so creatives of all types can learn with and from one another and be inspired by all the amazing things going on at MuseumLab? Not only is this good for participants, but it creates efficiencies in catering, security, photography, and other costs.*

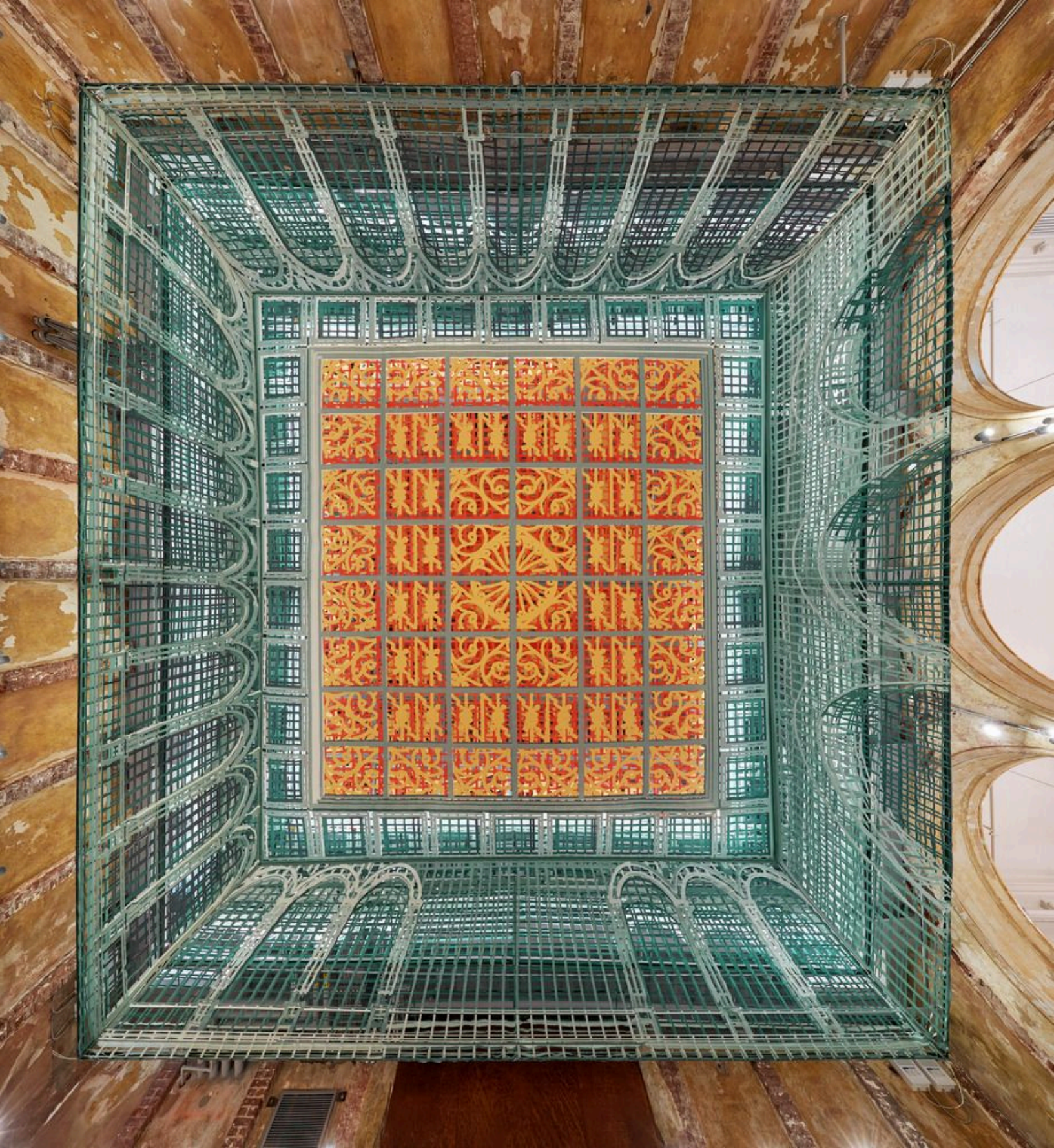
With the kickoff of MuseumLab for Museum Professionals (MLMP) upcoming, the group used it as a trial run, which will include several collaborative elements:

- A Tough Art alumnus serving as an MLMP speaker
- Staff from other programs leading MLMP workshops and attending keynotes
- Prototyping with Head Start, a shared connection with Tough Art
- A photographer working for MLMP and available to Museum staff that day
- A culminating event open to Creatives Membership members

We will evaluate the effectiveness of this co-planning after the MLMP kick-off and will adapt future plans from there. Numerous other ideas for collaboration came up, as well (see the photo below), and the group is meeting regularly to put them into action.







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