

Redefining Home

During COVID, Generation Z felt the negative effects of a world in which physical third spaces were completely discarded. Now, some Gen Zers are taking charge and rebuilding those spaces themselves — out of their very own homes.

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For Haiden Nourse, writing is a solitary act.

Only when she is alone and undistracted, sitting on her bed with her legs tucked beneath her, can she pour herself onto the page the way her work necessitates. But today, Nourse doesn't have time to sit by herself and write. Today, she's baking. Furiously.

There are five pastries on the menu for tonight, plus homemade sangria, which she's drinking most of, scolding herself for getting high on her own supply as she scurries between tarts and cookies. Nobody asked her to labor over baked goods for the night — she just wants to make sure people feel at home. Between kitchen timers, Nourse pushes back the couches in her tiny college living room and lays plush blankets on the floor. She places tiny, battery-powered tea lights on every surface, and pulls a large, hardcover selection of Joni Mitchell lyrics down from the mantle, setting it on top of an already teetering pile of poetry books.

Nourse has only gotten through half of her long to-do list by now, and she won't finish it until people are already lined up at her door. Out of breath, with her strawberry blond ponytail falling loose, she'll push her way through the crowd with packets of original poetry in hand, still warm from the library printer. But there's not one part of Nourse that's worried tonight won't go how she wants it to. She doesn't have time to worry. It's 7:30 P.M., and readings start at 8.

On one Saturday night every month, Nourse's house takes on its own identity, independent of her, her housemates, or the building itself. Her Euclid Ave. home becomes *the Salon* — an intimate literary hub for student artists to share their work; a meeting of the minds in a world where so often, they have nowhere to go but work, school, or home.

"There's something so beautiful and powerful about it," Nourse says. "It feels like we can connect with each other, like there's good in the world again. There's magic in the world again."

But that magic wasn't always so precious. When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered coffee shops, music venues, and other common spaces that had long served as hubs for community, the world was forced to turn to screens that promised to rekindle connection, but often delivered loneliness.

Post-COVID, studies have found that only about [64% of college-aged Gen Zers](#) have self-identified as “recovered” from the pandemic: healed and able to move on from the experience socially, physically, relationally, and mentally. Those who aren’t recovered cite significant delays in finding themselves and a community that accepts them. Those who are cite resilience, adaptability, and finding hope in moving forward. Though Gen Z are often perceived as [jaded and apathetic](#), all are interested in rebuilding what’s been taken away from them.

“Gen Z became more adaptable to change, more resilient, and self-reflected more (during COVID),” says Dr. J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, a professor at Montana State University whose research focuses on the mental health of Gen Z college students during the pandemic. “And many became much more appreciative of their relationships.”

Now, as some college students like Nourse emerge from the wreckage of lockdown, they’re combining those skills of resilience and appreciation for the people around them, creating community spaces and opening up their creaky college rental homes to others. By transforming their Syracuse, NY living rooms into literary salons and basements into music venues and comedy clubs, they’ve created a DIY network of third spaces where young people can meet, create, and belong.

“Whenever people ask me about going to school at Syracuse, I instantly start talking about this community-forward spirit that the students almost get possessed by,” Audrey Valentine-Weisburd tells me from her Brooklyn, NY apartment. Weisburd graduated from SU in Spring 2025, and during the second semester of her senior year, the Salon was her brainchild and passion project. “There’s such a desolate feel to Syracuse sometimes, with the long winters and the city’s socioeconomic problems, and that’s one way we try to make it feel warm. We get as close to each other as possible.”

Ben Tupper, the landlord behind RentFromBen, an iconic rental company used by SU students to find rickety old houses of their own, says that though students have always wanted to do things in their own way, this particular culture has boomed in the University Neighborhood over the past five years. Once COVID restrictions began to lift, students became increasingly interested in community: building it, sustaining it, and holding it close. Private homes became gathering places, flickering lights in the distance to the weary travelers of Gen Z, tired of their endless search for acceptance and authenticity in the digital age.

“I think COVID showed us how deeply lonely we all are,” Nourse says. “When you’re forced to be isolated, it sets in, like ‘I don’t really know my neighbors, I don’t see the kids at school every day.’ That was hard for me. I didn’t have a lot of friends at that time.”

“During the pandemic, young adults felt increased isolation. They found it difficult to meet new people. They were frustrated with inconsistent policies,” Vaterlaus says. “Many were particularly upset that they couldn’t have traditional college experiences.”

Kelly Matlock, a senior at SU studying writing and rhetoric, acknowledges that her COVID experience wasn't particularly unique — but it still took plenty away from her.

"I tried to meet my social needs with virtual calls and Discord, and then I tried to supplement that with long bike rides and spending time at the park," she says. "But it was still very isolating. I remember feeling super lonely."

Once restrictions *were* lifted, the social landscape had completely changed. "Coming back senior year was super difficult," Matlock says. "I had come back to the same clubs and communities, but the dynamics had shifted. It was very strange."

College delivered more of the same, and Matlock had trouble finding a community that she felt connected to. It wasn't until she first attended the Playground, a DIY, student-run comedy club in a stranger's basement, that she felt at home.

Originally from LA, Matlock grew up with a foundation in the arts, the joys of which had been harder to access during and post-COVID. At college, that artistic part of her identity wasn't so widely accepted. But suddenly, as she found herself surrounded by creatives all packed into a tiny basement, laughing at raunchy jokes, the Playground changed her mindset.

"I was like, 'Oh, thank God. These are my people,'" she says. "I was super relieved."

For Matlock, the colorful signature-covered walls of the Playground opened the floodgates of community. To this day, she's close with the performers she saw on her first night in the audience. And now, when she performs, her best friends sit cross-legged on the floor where she once sat.

She shows me a photo of them. The room is crowded with people sitting on the floor, giggling and leaning on each other. Four girls are laughing and gazing up at the stage as Matlock performs. "When I first saw this picture, I burst into tears," she tells me.

According to Weisburd, who spent a semester managing the Playground before creating the Salon, that's exactly what these types of spaces provide: recognition. Knowledge that there's someone else in the world who thinks and feels the way you do.

"Sometimes on social media you'll see someone articulating some strange emotion or experience you thought nobody else had gone through, but it's artificial still. It's fleeting," Weisburd says. "The way these spaces function, it kind of sits in you and it doesn't leave. There's that sense of collective intimacy."

Coined by [Ray Oldenburg](#) in 1989, "third spaces" — places that aren't work or home, where individuals can gather and simply enjoy the company and conversation around them — are essential to community vitality. But the pandemic came with a worldwide attitude shift: anything dispensable, which was most everything, was done away with. In a world where being any

closer than 6 feet to another person is dangerous, the spaces that Oldenburg viewed as invaluable to community building were the first to go.

Dr. Daniel Aldrich, director of Northeastern University's [resilience studies](#) program, explains that the loss wasn't just about physical spaces, but the joy and sense of community that they provided. "The worst combination is a physical lockdown plus a social lockdown, where you don't really feel like you're talking to people, you don't feel things are normal again," he says. "I think we're beginning to recognize that mental and physical health aren't just a product of having access to a hospital or healthcare systems. You need a community, a network of assistance."

For many during lockdown, that community became entirely digital, but Aldrich warns that this substitution comes at a cost. His research shows that digital connection, while better than nothing, can't provide the kind of social capital that helps communities cope with disasters. "Even if we hate working from the office, there is something about being face to face with people you simply cannot get by doing it online."

Community networks are about physical presence and the kind of trust that only builds when you can look someone in the eye. For Gen Z, who spent crucial developmental years — the adolescent brain is [second only in malleability](#) to that of the human infant — behind screens, this distinction [became painfully clear](#). Friendly faces sit right beside food, water, and shelter at the base of our hierarchy of needs. But in the wake of physical and digital spaces merging, it's difficult for us to deprioritize the ease that online life provides.

"Since COVID, the two dichotomous environments of virtual and physical — I'm not sure they're so dichotomous anymore. Because of COVID and the forced connection virtually, people have become much more fluid in their physical and virtual connections," says Dr. Dana Vaux, a [researcher](#) specializing in third spaces.

Generation Z are digital natives, born into a world of computers, swaddled in blankets of online discourse, and sailed in a basket down a river of endless scrolling. During the pandemic, that digital space became Gen Z's primary source of connection. Post-COVID, the digital and the physical have merged, creating a new, convenient, normal — one that some young people are beginning to reject.

"You have to be inconvenienced," Nourse says. "We're missing out on interacting with people every day — we order our food in. We stay in our houses. We walk home with our AirPods in. I feel like we're all just concaving as people."

Pre-pandemic, Vaux found that Facebook almost met Oldenburg's criteria for the third space better than physical ones: accessible, accommodating, and neutral ground; a "leveling" space with a playful atmosphere and regular clientele, where conversation is the main activity and participants can feel a sense of home away from home. But regardless of its technical ability to

meet our social needs, over-reliance on social media for human connection comes with real consequences.

“I think a lot of people thought screens were the substitute for humanity,” Aldrich says. “And the reality is that hours of Minecraft or being on Discord servers or Instagram — those things won’t make up for the reality that face-to-face communication is a critical need for human beings. And it’s a big part of our mental health.”

These spaces combat that reliance on the digital, at least in part. Looking around the room at the Salon, nobody has their phones out. “Nobody even wants to reach for them,” Weisburd says. “There’s no reason for it.”

The Salon was created, in part, to keep people present. “People look at Gen Z and see a very ironic and desensitized generation,” Weisburd says. “But I’ve always believed that sensitivity is a very strong thing, especially when harnessed and nurtured and shared with others. I wanted The Salon to bring out people’s more sensitive sides.” By bringing others into a private home to engage with vulnerable art, she says that the community that arises is attentive, gentle, and strong.

When I ask Tupper about how he believes home and community interact, he scoffs.

He tells me home and community are entirely opposite, almost bewildered at the sentiment that maybe the two could cross paths. When one interacts with the other, in Tupper’s opinion, both of their purposes are entirely defeated. “Home is where you spend your time, where you love and know you can trust everyone, where you’re vulnerable,” he exclaims. “It’s where you walk around in your underwear!”

Some of Gen Z’s definition of home is similar: that sense of comfort and vulnerability is an undeniable throughline. But according to Weisburd, whose interest in the idea of *home* piqued when she selected it as the topic for her senior thesis, it’s become something much more nebulous for young people.

“When you ask Gen Zers, their definitions of home are much more blurry. Home is vast, fluid, and immaterial,” she says. “And it’s something we create for each other — something we owe each other.”

That sense of responsibility is a common thread between the students who have turned their homes into community hubs, but there’s a vulnerability that comes with it. Sometimes, vulnerability is essential to these spaces’ functions. The former Playground house switched ownership at the beginning of the 2025-26 academic year, and the involved comics had to move the location to a bar just off campus. But there’s a different energy to the space, with fluorescent lights and a real-life stage. Though it’s technically an upgraded setup, according to Matlock, they’ve already begun searching for another house’s basement to relocate to. The Salon couldn’t accomplish its goal of warmth and community if it weren’t for the soft lighting, the

closeness of the space, and the knowledge that some stranger has let you into their most intimate world. Patrons settle into the couches, pillows, and blankets with ease. Their walls come down, exactly as Weisburd intended.

But for Polly Hoffman and Philip Martins, that intersection between the public and the private quickly became fraught with tension. In the 2024-25 academic year, they were two of the six tenants renting 605 Euclid — a DIY house show venue they named Dazed, formerly known as Redgate.

For the past three years, the narrow path curving around the house up to the back porch was littered with people every Friday night. Some of them took the cold in stride as they waited in line for the music, which was often already buzzing through the walls. Others stood outside, whether it was May or December — sometimes smoking cigarettes, sometimes drinking hot chocolate. They stepped inside once or twice to get a drink or let their faces warm up, then went right back out to the porch.

With its iconic firetruck-red Japanese Torii out front, Dazed was an active, student-run music venue in the University Neighborhood for three years. Every weekend was organized chaos: the basement was loud, the floors were sticky, the faces were familiar, and the system, as always, was highly efficient. The people who knew and loved Dazed were known and loved right back.

The last Dazed show, before anyone knew it would be their last, was the perfect image of what those Friday nights looked like: Martins stood on a rock in a green fishing vest, yelling something about paying \$10 to the elusive Venmo persona *Daisy Becker*. Heavy bass and grungy guitar drifted up through the house's foundation. The guys working the door chain smoked with the back porch regulars as they stamped attendees' hands. One of them announced that he'd been high all day, and that he wasn't coming down anytime soon — not if he could help it. *Dazed Loves You!* read the ink on everyone's fists. As I approached the sliding door to wander inside, where Hoffman poured out shots to the very brim of tiny red solo cups, but not one drop over, I glanced back one more time. A bearded concert-goer in a mesh shirt had Martins grabbed by the shoulders, shaking him as he shouted.

"Y'all are fucking diamonds in the rough, man," he slurred. "You're rubies, glistening like piss."

Martins was once an avid and energetic Redgate fan. It was a staple of his life as a freshman. As a sophomore, he spent nights excitedly shadowing its former tenants to prepare for the year of shows ahead: an impending, hope-filled cycle of full-circle moments. But as a junior, Martins simply called his Friday nights at Dazed "work" with a heavy sigh. The pressures hit their peak quickly, and he decided that his senior year, he'd live somewhere else — and thus, "live for himself."

For both Martins and Hoffman, the decision to live at Dazed was born from a peculiar mix of nostalgia and duty. When Hoffman stumbled across the house on her landlord's website, she

recognized the address immediately — organized as ever, she'd kept a list of every house show venue address she had been to.

But living at a house known for letting strangers in once a week meant sacrifice. Her biggest fear was simple: "Our house is getting trashed every single Friday."

Nevertheless, she and her friends agreed that they had to do it — if they didn't, she wondered, who would?

Every Friday, like clockwork, the grind began. By 5 P.M., the house was tense. Dinner had to be early, so the dishwasher could run and the plates and silverware could be locked away. By 7 P.M., it was "full chaos": sound equipment, ice runs, unpacking cases of beer, coordinating with bands, photographers, door staff. Plus, Hoffman's makeshift bar was the only thing standing between hordes of strangers and the stairs to the bedrooms behind her — a critical task. The previous tenants once found someone hiding in a corner of the basement, still drunk, long after everyone else had left.

Relationships within Dazed were strained, too. "There were disagreements between the people who cared the most," Hoffman admits with a sad smile. "It honestly resulted in some of us being less close. We're all still friendly, but it definitely put us through some stuff."

They got the email over the summer, after starting to prepare for another semester of long nights and loud music: an accident at another property and subsequent lawsuit had forced Tupper to remove insurance protections for tenants who host large parties. Hoffman and her housemates knew it would have to be the end.

"There wasn't a single show where nothing went wrong," she admits. "It would be just our luck."

Now, on Friday nights, Hoffman goes to the bars and the birthday parties she would have had to skip if weekly Dazed shows had continued. But there's a loss in that freedom. Dazed is still putting on the occasional concert at an outside, better-established venue, but the DIY music scene at Syracuse has dwindled regardless.

She finds comfort in continuity, though. Her father ran house shows in the 90s, and she did the same in the 2020s. "It'll come in waves," she says. "They're never going to be able to get rid of it."

"I really wouldn't have wanted to spend junior year any other way. It was probably the coolest college experience I could have had," Hoffman says, then pauses. "But I don't think I'd do it again. Once in a lifetime for a reason. *Once.*"

Nourse is only beginning to stumble into the issues that ended Dazed's run: scheduling issues, flu season, and unwanted address leaks have taken some of the innocent joy out of her undertaking. According to Weisburd, the stresses she felt while hosting the Salon also

prevented her from experiencing the presence that she aimed to preserve. She admits that this tends to be the nature of these ventures.

Regardless of the struggles, the thing that drives these students to continue doing what they do is the difference they've seen these spaces make. It's the power of the butterfly effect: one day, someone opened the door to their house and allowed strangers to enter, to read their poetry, perform their music, or crack vulgar jokes into a crowd of soon-to-be familiar faces. Today, ironclad communities persist, despite the shifting nature of the spaces themselves. Hoffman still looks back at photos from nights in her basement, smiling as the colored lights illuminate newfound friendships in the audience, mirroring those that she once found in that very same place.

Nourse describes it as a "contact high." As each poet reads their work off a white sheet of paper, they create a one-to-one connection with every individual person in the room. The space is quiet, but charged with electricity. "It's like, I've just connected with about 12 different people within the span of an hour. It's kind of overwhelming," Nourse says. "It's so magical, and it doesn't go away. I don't know why anyone does drugs."

"That just made me want to write a poem of my own," James Lillienfeld, a senior at SU studying biology, tells me after a night of listening attentively at the Salon. Practically, I have some trouble believing him. But the grin plastered across his face gives me some blind faith. I, too, want to write a million poems as I walk into the brisk night.

As the final, dwindling mass of people trickles out of Nourse's house, her night is just beginning. She changes into a light blue nightgown for a friend of a friend's pajama party, leaving the crumbs and cups on the floor for her future self to deal with. She'll be endeared by them tomorrow.

It's September in Syracuse, and the evenings haven't grown too cold just yet. She doesn't need a jacket. Street lamps illuminate the first of the leaves to have fallen to the pavement. It's almost a new moon, just 1% of the waning crescent visible, but it doesn't register until later — she recognizes the street she and her friends have turned onto, and she knows exactly why. As Nourse and her friends approach their destination on Clarendon St., the yard littered with people from her adjacent social circles, she sees her ex-girlfriend for the first time in five months, trotting down the steps of her porch just a few rentals down.

Nourse read a poem that night entitled "Face to Face," about the same girl she first attended The Salon with. "I'd been in Syracuse for two weeks and hadn't seen my ex once. Even last year, after we broke up, I saw her almost every day for a month," she explains. "I was so interested in this idea of someone lurking in your universe, in the same city as you, but somehow you're not seeing them."

They talk for 20 minutes. Nourse still loves and cares about her, and she's emotional, but not sad. Maybe on another night she would have been, but tonight is different. "It was that divine

timing of the universe,” she says. “I saw this person who I thought, at one point in my life, was the only person I could get love from,” she says. “When she wasn’t there anymore, I was afraid that love was going to go away. But I’ve managed to create it for myself.”

She thinks back to a moment of clarity from earlier, as she sat on her living room floor, another poet reading aloud to the room. Though life has taken its toll on her, as it tends to do, something feels very different about the way she views the world around her after her first night hosting the Salon.

“I felt like everything I could have wanted was in that one room, and I’ve never known how to embrace love in my life without romance,” she explains to me, her eyes glittering.

Now that Nourse has the community she’s always craved, everything feels lighter. The Salon is an escape at the least, a lifeline at the most, and on most other nights of the semester, it’s just her college living room. But even then, it’s become something more. Her face is ablaze with excitement. This feeling is new, and she’s still at cruising altitude from the knowledge that even without what she once thought she needed, she has an unwavering community, and things might just turn out okay.

“There’s still so much love around me,” she says. “No matter what.”