



Museum Profile

MATTRESS FACTORY

ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

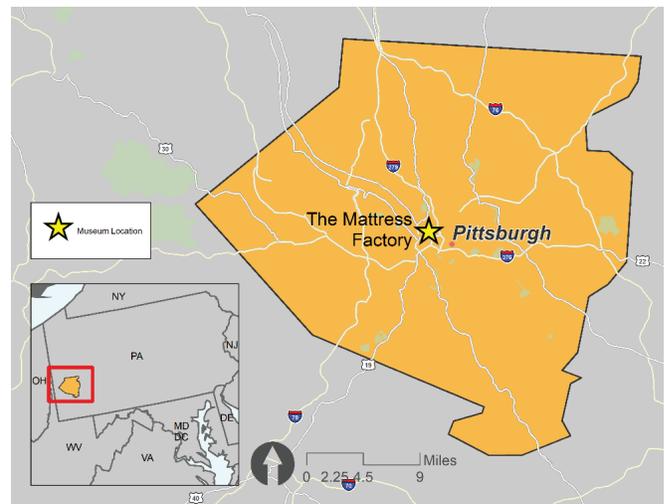
Museum Profile: Mattress Factory



ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

The Mattress Factory is a nationally and internationally recognized contemporary art museum that hosts and supports artists working in diverse mediums such as site-specific installations, video, and performance art. The Mattress Factory is located in the Northside area of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a diverse group of neighborhoods across the Allegheny River from downtown Pittsburgh that features many cultural institutions. In 2019, the Mattress Factory generated roughly \$956,000 in earned income, hosted more than 58,000 visitors, and offered a diverse array of programming with a range of community partners.

The Mattress Factory was founded initially by artists as a residency program and installation site for established and emerging artists. Its Education Department and programs “strive to facilitate unique and empowering experiences for program participants that mirror the support and freedom we offer our artists in residency.” The Mattress Factory’s on- and off-site activities



promote a hands-on, inquiry-based approach to learning and are designed to be responsive to community needs. The museum’s staff are also practiced at using art as a therapeutic tool to support emotional and social wellbeing within the community.

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Allegheny County is an urban county with a population of 1,230,360 (2016). Allegheny County residents are majority White (79 percent). The median household income is \$54,357 a year,

roughly comparable to the national median income, and the poverty rate is 8.7 percent, well below the national poverty rate of 11 percent.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Allegheny County	1,230,360	-4.0	79.4	12.8	1.9	3.4	2.5	\$54,357	8.7

Compared to other urban counties across the country, Allegheny County residents enjoy elevated levels of Community Health and School Effectiveness. Allegheny County fell in the top quartile on the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes.¹ Health Care & Social

Assistance; Retail Trade; Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services; and Education Services represent the largest employment sectors in Allegheny County, employing 46 percent of all working adults.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Retail Trade	% Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services	% Education Services
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	10.9	6.7	9.2
Allegheny County	671,860	18.0	10.0	10.0	8.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

¹ Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Allegheny County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In December 2019, the study team conducted interviews with eight current museum staff and representatives from six different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with the Mattress Factory staff and partners focused on understanding the programming and partnerships that support formal and informal learning and personal and community health in Allegheny County.

In addition, the following data were used to create the network map included in this profile:

- Program reviews for several of the Mattress Factory's programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select Mattress Factory programs and partnerships that support formal and informal education and the overall educational capacity of the broader community
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections the Mattress Factory maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

THE MATTRESS FACTORY SUPPORTS SOCIAL WELLBEING BY PROVIDING CREATIVE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES THAT EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS

Through its Education Department, the Mattress Factory provides education and outreach programs that give participants and visitors the opportunity to experiment, experience, and engage with art. Staff and partners who participated in the site visit repeatedly pointed to the Mattress Factory's ability to inspire creative thinking and enhance both informal education and social wellbeing through its programming. One way the Mattress Factory promotes these aims is through its museum educators—staff who take a variety of approaches to educating audiences about the museum, its art, and its values. Across these different approaches, the common emphasis is on experiential, social, and emotional learning: encouraging patrons to approach and interact with the art, creating an inclusive atmosphere for on-site programs, and conducting outreach programs designed for groups with complex needs.

Educational Outreach Programs Are Designed for Pittsburgh's Vulnerable Populations

The Mattress Factory partners with several local groups through educational outreach programs. The Mattress Factory's outreach programs center around "providing access to creative safe-spaces" and "providing resources for learners of all ages to explore and reflect." Several programs center on the therapeutic potential of art: that creativity and artistic expression are pathways to informal education, community health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

For instance, the Mattress Factory partners with a Northside mission to offer programs for women and children impacted by homelessness, addiction, and abuse. The Mattress Factory's outreach manager and museum educators work with women and children in separate weekly sessions on creative projects that incorporate

both writing and art. The Mattress Factory's outreach broadens the perception of what art is among participants who may not have had previous exposure to installation art or museum experiences and makes art personal for the participants. This promotes informal education by encouraging conversation, reaction, and reflection.

There is also a therapeutic, socio-emotional dimension to the Mattress Factory's programs. Through art, the Mattress Factory builds a safe space for participants to express themselves and a wider platform for supporting mental health. For example, during one project, participants created board games in which the board was made up of where they were, where they wanted to be, and the steps they might take to get there. The process encouraged introspection, learning about oneself, and self-esteem—all steps to promoting improved mental health in challenging circumstances. One staff member observed:

"We're working with women and children to work through their own life experiences through art and find another way of communicating things that they might not want to talk about but create art about. What they are willing to share about themselves . . . there are a lot of emotions in the art they create."

The Mattress Factory also promotes the therapeutic potential of art through its partnership with Wesley High School, a local private school for students with autism, learning disabilities, and behavioral needs. The Mattress Factory designed a successful program that linked to the school curriculum around facial expressions and emotions. On a visit to the museum, students were introduced to one of the collage art installations by Pepe Mar and attended the artist's creation process, experiencing that, "It's OK to be different, and it's OK to have a vision. [Art] does not have to be a sculpture or a painting." Afterward, students picked an

emotion out of a hat and used it to create large, colorful installation art pieces with recycled and found materials, similar to Mar's works. This outreach culminated in the students installing their artwork at the Mattress Factory and hosting an opening attended by family, friends, and the community.

Part of this partnership's success was the Mattress Factory's emphasis on hands-on exploration and engagement, as compared to experiences students might get at a traditional art museum visit. The site-specific installations, designed to be closely interactive with the audience, allowed students more freedom around the art and gave them the ability to relate to it in different ways. One educator noted:

"This museum opens up a lot of dialogue . . . especially for students that have a difficult time opening up and discussing things and using their verbal skills, it really opens up some conversations. It really makes them think about things."

The Mattress Factory has a long-standing partnership with another local program that provides in-school, after-school, and summer camp activities and supports for girls ages 8–18 and their families. Many of these families are low-income or single-parent households, and the program is designed to help both parents and young people navigate the education system and the challenges of growing up. The program director noted that:

"These are at-risk urban youth who may have never been to a museum, the experience might scare them at the beginning, they might be withdrawn or not want to do the things that are planned."

Yet, the Mattress Factory has been consistently open, willing to work with and engage participants despite challenges through its weekly after-school art program.

The Mattress Factory Engages and Empowers Teens

One Mattress Factory staff member observed that, “Contemporary art and teens are perfect partners because they are both pushing the boundaries in the contemporary world.”

Museum staff engage teens with varying levels of commitment to get as many teens “in the door” as possible. They run social media challenges with the installations in the museum with prizes like coffee at the on-site café as a low-commitment way for teens to interact with the Mattress Factory’s installations. They also hold a series of art workshops geared toward teenagers, most of which take place in the summer. The highest level of commitment is participation in the Mattress Factory’s Teen Art Cooperative, which meets for two hours each week. The Mattress Factory’s teen art programs emphasize creativity and agency. Participants create and plan program events. They meet with and discuss the careers of local artists outside the definition of traditional art careers like tattoo artists, jewelry artists, and installation artists. They also learn the practicalities of how a museum operates. Through these activities, young people learn new skills—collaboration, confidence, and

expressing ideas—and how they might pursue college and career paths. The Cooperative also provides a space for teens to explore identity and confidence issues.

Like the educational outreach staff, the teen art educators work with an audience that requires understanding and time to build trust, engagement, and relationships. Staff have participated in training to do this work effectively. For instance, the teen art coordinator attended a teen mental health workshop and a national conference for museum educators around teen engagement. The teen art coordinator also cofounded a network for staff people at museums throughout Pittsburgh who work with teens to share knowledge, coordinate program scheduling, and ensure teens have both social and emotional outlets each day outside school. The teen art program’s approach has paid dividends, as teen program participants remain connected to the institution; a Mattress Factory staff member and intern come from the teen internship and Cooperative program, respectively.

A NEEDS-BASED APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT ENHANCES EXPERIENCES FOR PATRONS AND PARTNERS

The Mattress Factory’s programs leverage the power of art to promote both informal education and socio-emotional wellbeing. This is in part because of the Mattress Factory’s approach to designing and delivering programming. The Mattress Factory’s focus on relationship building as it engages with its partners helps the museum closely understand the needs of the communities it works in and enriches its collaboration. Partners consistently valued the way that the Mattress Factory intentionally shapes programming to the specific needs of each group it works with, whether it be women and children

affected by homelessness, students on the autism spectrum, or young at-risk girls. As one educator put it:

“The roles of educators [at the Mattress Factory] are so much more flexible, working with all different partnerships and all different people, reading them and really working with personal specific needs. I find that to be really unique to this museum. There’s a real emphasis with the individuals we are working with.”

At the beginning of the partner engagement process, the Mattress Factory provides a list of different activities, ideas, and materials to the partner organizations, who review and comment depending on the age and number of students and their audiences' unique needs. Partners and educators then meet to draw up a working syllabus for each education outreach program and review these syllabi with staff before the program begins. The Mattress Factory also ensures that the programming is accessible to partners: It often conducts education outreach at the partner program's site, and it provides all materials used in programming to mitigate any financial strain. Finally, the Mattress Factory continues to tailor projects and lesson plans to each participant, incorporating their likes and dislikes as the programs unfold.

Several partners described these steps as important ways that the Mattress Factory builds confidence with community partners. One museum staff member observed:

"[Our process] speaks to an authentic building of trust. Museums fall into the trap of going into a community without building a sufficient relationship with them and that can backfire. This stands out to me as something that the Mattress Factory is doing really well."

When outreach programs conclude, the Mattress Factory often invites partner groups to display their work. Art educators teach program participants how to install and display their art: how to consider layout in the space, how to physically install their art, and how to create an artist's statement about their work. Participants invite friends and family to attend an opening of the exhibition. The outreach programs, therefore, begin with the Mattress Factory extending itself to community partners and shaping programming around their needs and end with bringing participants into the art-making process and the museum space.

THE MATTRESS FACTORY IS EXPANDING THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS—ENCOURAGING CREATIVE EXPLORATION AND ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

One Mattress Factory educator explained, "It's about the audience here and the art and ideas are about facilitating conversation with them."

The Mattress Factory's programming and partnerships speak to the myriad ways in which it is expanding the traditional perception of a museum—not just a place where visitors come to look at art, but a space that engages the surrounding community and encourages a sense of creativity and exploration. As one partner described a visit, "The experiences you get are so unique . . . it's not just you standing there; you engage it. You create your own meaning." The museum endeavors to make art accessible to everyone in the community.

One facet of this work is challenging a stereotype that art is not supposed to be touched and that there is a specific way that visitors are supposed to conduct themselves. Rather than being a space owned by curators, the Mattress Factory is more fluid and "DIY." Staff take the "messy and nontraditional" attitude of installation art and use this perspective to engage with visitors. For instance, staff center tours around asking questions of the audience ("What does this evoke for you?"; "How does it make you feel?"). This creates an open-ended environment that promotes curiosity and participation; the museum encourages visitors to interact and create their own relationship with the exhibits. Within the museum, drop-in activities further foster an atmosphere of informal learning and creative problem-solving. The Mattress Factory

offers ARTLab and InstallationLab, interactive hands-on programming that occurs on-site. Activities are free with admission, inspired by current exhibitions, artists, and ideas, and the artists themselves sometimes lead these activities.

While the Mattress Factory is internationally renowned for installation art, it has increasingly focused on community outreach and engaging residents of the Northside area, too. As one staff member noted, it's about breaking down barriers and making art accessible rather than intimidating: "Artists are doing amazing work, but you don't have to be an artist to experience it." A partner echoed this view:

"Their philosophy about art and what can be art really opens up a lot of perspective in the community. It lets kids explore. There's no barrier—you don't have to be an artist or connoisseur to come to the Mattress Factory and enjoy things."

The Mattress Factory also expands its visitor base through partnerships with Pittsburgh Public Schools, particularly schools in the surrounding Northside area, and relationships with school art teachers. Through field trips, the Mattress Factory becomes a firsthand way for teachers to expose their students to art and to new ways of thinking about art. The Mattress Factory also hosts summer camps, another opportunity for young people to get involved with the museum.

The Mattress Factory has a long-standing relationship with the local Carnegie library branch, Woods Run, and brings programming to the library twice a month. This engages children and their parents who might not have otherwise engaged with the Mattress Factory or visited the museum. It also addresses a resource gap: There is limited art education in the schools that Woods Run serves. Library partners noted that the Mattress Factory's off-site facilitation skills were key to making art accessible and approachable to a broader audience. One library staff member observed:

"Facilitation and the way the Mattress Factory understands how kids develop interest in art . . . they bring in projects with basic materials (which anyone can find) and they have a framework for what you can do with it or what they've done with it. But they don't limit them. It makes kids feel confident. They have trouble feeling confident at school. The way the Mattress Factory is facilitating makes it easy for them to try again and reinvest. And it's not just kids, but also the people around the kids."

Given that arts and cultural amenities are not as readily available to some residents in low-income areas, the Mattress Factory is working on expanding the role of the museum to be further responsive to community needs. It has begun assessing ways to evolve its work and establish other partnerships with people and places in the Northside neighborhoods. The Mattress Factory has a biweekly internal diversity council that considers questions like what diversity looks like and how to approach race, class, and geography given traditional disparities in the arts and culture sector. Following a monthslong internal committee discussion, departments now work to incorporate community outreach in their programming and initiatives. Furthermore, the museum strives to ensure that finances are not a barrier to access: Admission is half off for residents of the Northside area. All activities and programming are free, which allows the Mattress Factory to hold sessions in different places and "not just meet people, but really get to know people" in the surrounding community.

This is emblematic of the power of informal education to positively influence individual growth, exploration, and confidence. But the Mattress Factory's impacts go beyond individual change. From a broader perspective, social wellbeing flows through the social connections that the Mattress Factory maintains and facilitates between individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. Whether it is collaborating with a local partner to meet a specific need, facilitating broader networks, or just providing a space for people and groups

to meet and explore, the Mattress Factory creates physical and emotional spaces for these connections to happen. Like its installations, social connections are a product and response to

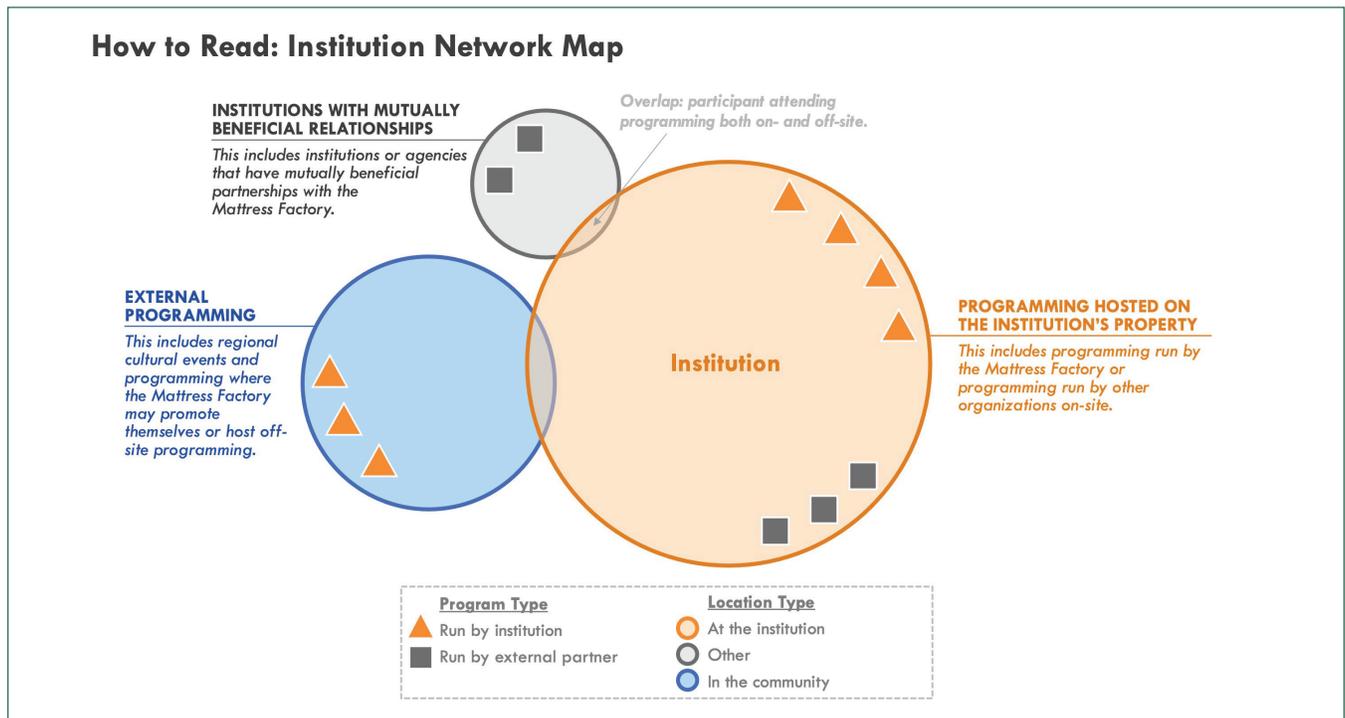
the museum site. These connections strengthen the community's collective ability to sustain itself and thrive into the future.

MATTRESS FACTORY NETWORK MAP

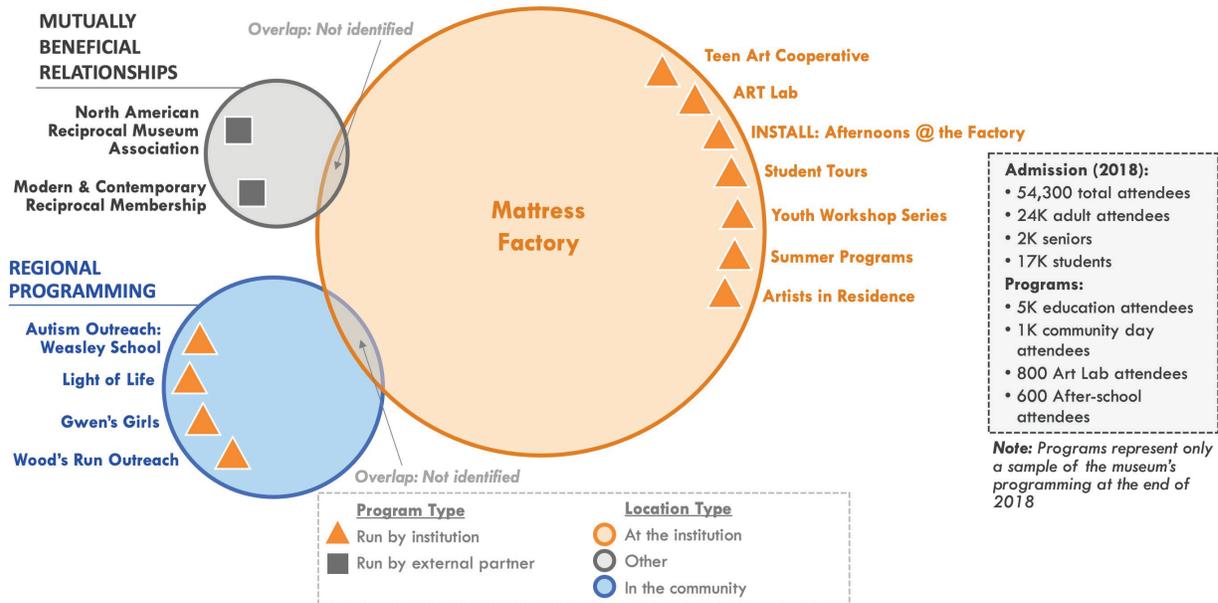
Using data provided by the Mattress Factory, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections the museum maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between the Mattress Factory and those entities that offer programming at the museum itself and those that support cross-

marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the museum, and it includes examples of off-site, Mattress Factory-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the Mattress Factory's programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the museum maintains.

NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader impact of the relationships between the Mattress Factory and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the museum in different ways.



Mattress Factory Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the programs offered by the Mattress Factory. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the museum—both programs produced by the Mattress Factory and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by the Mattress Factory and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other regional organizations.