

COMMON GROUND

Play. Listen. Belong.

Why Should We Stop Being Weird?

Many neurodivergent people grow up feeling pressure to mask their differences and conform to neurotypical expectations. While accessibility can help people fit in, truly inclusive design creates spaces where they can belong.

Common Ground is a neurodiversity-focused social and retail hub within Bristol's Old Fire Station. Through a record shop, tabletop gaming store, and flexible gathering space, it creates opportunities for authentic, in-person connection.

Music supports expression and discovery, while games provide structured social interaction through shared interests. Together, these spaces celebrate neurodiversity, creating an environment where difference is welcomed and community can thrive.

The Site:

The Old Fire Station, Silver St, Bristol
The old Bridewell Firestation is a landmark building in the centre of the city and was in operation as a fire station from 1930 to 1973.

The historic building forms part of a triangular site bounded by Bridewell Street, Silver Street and Nelson Street. The site historically included a police station, magistrates' courts and fire station arranged around a shared courtyard.

The building reflects early twentieth-century civic architecture, combining functional planning with restrained classical detailing. Its street-facing elevation is characterised by a series of large red doors for fire engines. Internally, the station originally contained engine bays, workshops and accommodation for firefighters arranged across multiple floors.



Not every space is made for everyone.

Many social environments can be difficult to navigate for neurodivergent individuals who have difficulties interpreting unspoken expectations of how to act, respond, or participate. This can lead to feeling a lack of belonging due to being "too much" or "not enough".

Roughly 1 in 7 people in the UK are neurodivergent.

(Source: NHS Scotland)

In May 2026, it is estimated that 2,492,000 people in England have ADHD, including those without a diagnosis.

(Source: NHS England)



Common Ground is a space shaped around difference.

It explores how environments can support both connection and retreat. It brings together two analogue spaces: a tabletop game shop and a music shop, shaped by pre-digital nostalgia where interaction is offline, and in the moment.

A fifth of neurodivergent adults have been laughed at because of their neurodiversity.

(Source: Zurich UK)

Autistic individuals are up to 4 times more likely to experience loneliness than neurotypical people.

(Source: Swansea University)

What is Neurodiversity?

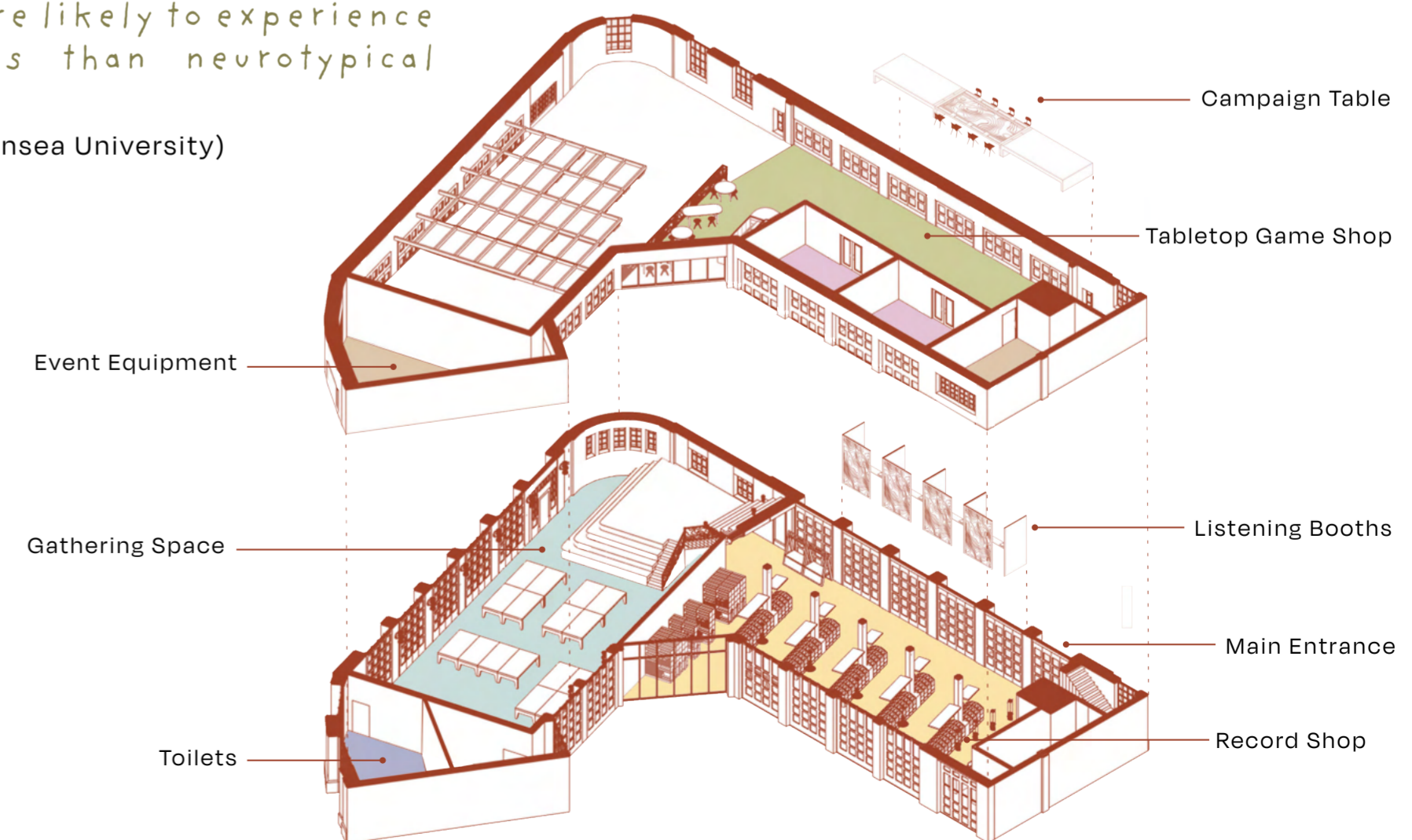
The word neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder, ADHD or learning disabilities. The neurodiversity movement emerged during the 1990s, aiming to increase acceptance and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences.

(Source: Harvard Health)



An environment of belonging.

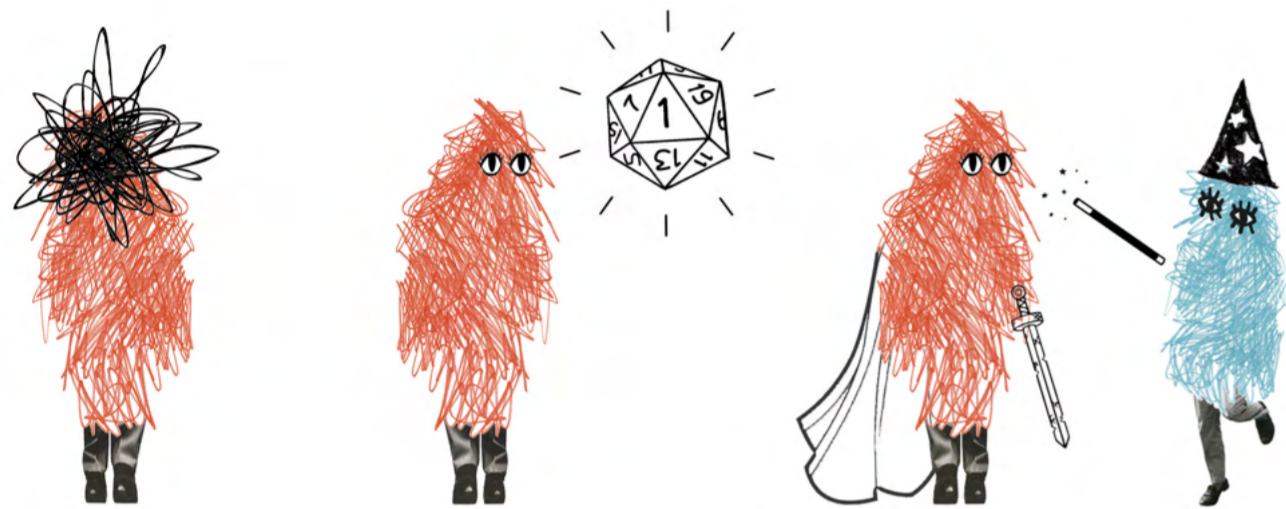
Tabletop games offer structure and shared interaction, while music provides emotional expression and escape. Designed with neurodivergent users at the heart, the project holds space to those who need it.



In the age of online gaming why should we look to tabletop games?

There is increasing evidence that tabletop role-playing games offer significant social, educational, and therapeutic benefits, particularly for neurodivergent people. Studies from the University of Plymouth found that games such as Dungeons & Dragons can improve confidence, assertiveness, and real-world social engagement.

It has been shown that those with autism enjoy board games because they take the pressure off the uncertainty around social interactions. Clear rules, shared objectives, and structured communication create a safer environment for connection. Board games also allow individuals to safely experiment with challenging scenarios like conflict resolution, and offer opportunities to explore identity through character play.



While online gaming has enabled many neurodivergent people to find connection and community, accessible opportunities for in-person play remain limited. Digital spaces therefore often become the primary means of social engagement. Common Ground responds to this by creating a welcoming physical environment where neurodivergent people can experience the social, educational, and therapeutic benefits of tabletop gaming in person, free from pressure to conform to neurotypical expectations.

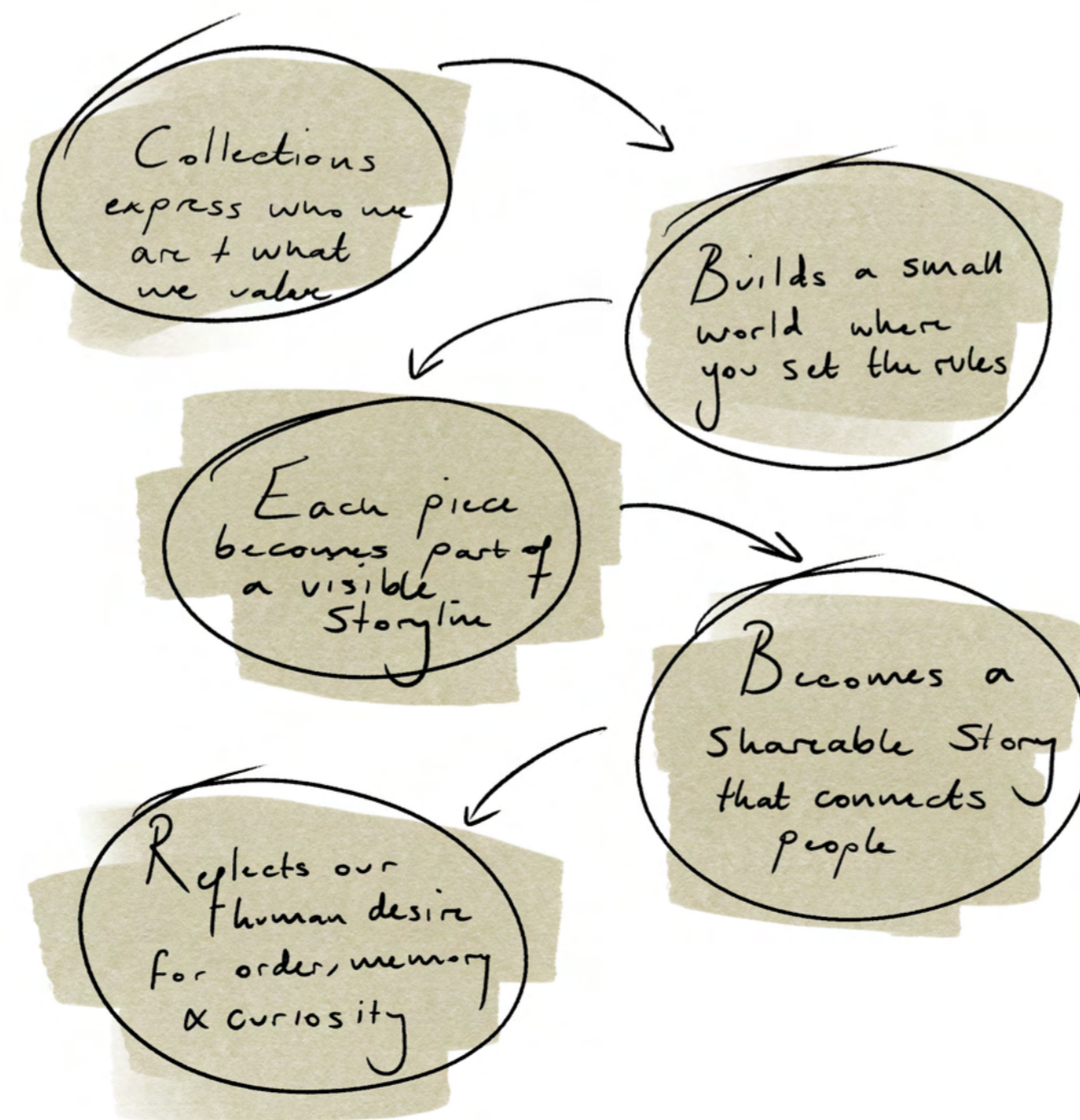
“A lot of people are socially awkward within this hobby but this is their safe space. It’s where they feel like someone else likes the same thing as they do.”

This research highlighted tabletop gaming as an important area to explore within the design. Despite its proven social and therapeutic benefits, the hobby is often burdened by stereotypes of being “nerdy” or “weird”. This reinforced the need to create a space that not only accommodates these interests but celebrates them and treats them with dignity.

The design therefore approaches tabletop gaming as a meaningful social and cultural activity. The spaces are designed with a sense of seriousness and respect, avoiding the infantilisation that can often accompany environments aimed at neurodivergent users. At the same time, the interior embraces creativity, imagination, and playfulness, reflecting the activities it hosts and the communities it serves.



Card collections are more than paper:



Interview with Ryan Thurlby Pokémon fan and card collector

Ryan is 18 and was diagnosed with autism a few years ago.

Pokémon has become a major passion in his life and plays an important role in helping him express himself and connect with others.

It also inspires his creativity & he is an exceptionally talented artist, as shown by his drawing of Flareon.

Q: When did you first become interested in Pokémon?

A: I've always liked it. But the first game I ever played was Pokémon X and Y in 2013

Q: How does Pokémon help you connect with other people?

A: There are people of all ages who enjoy it and the fan base keeps growing. You can learn a lot about someone by what they collect and it can be a conversation starter. I went to a TCG (Trading Card Game) club and met more people like me with autism and the cards really helped start conversations and meet new people. Finding people with similar favourite Pokémon feels like finding someone who likes the same football team as you.

Q: Do you feel more confident talking about something you care about?

A: Yes. If I go into a conversation not knowing what I am going to say it can feel hard. If it's a topic I know a lot about I don't have to rehearse the conversation in my head because I already know all the facts.

Mimikyu is a Pokémon that many neurodivergent fans see themselves in. It disguises itself as Pikachu, the franchise's most recognisable character, seeking acceptance through imitation.

Beneath the disguise lies a vulnerable creature that hides its true form out of fear of rejection, prioritising connection over authenticity.



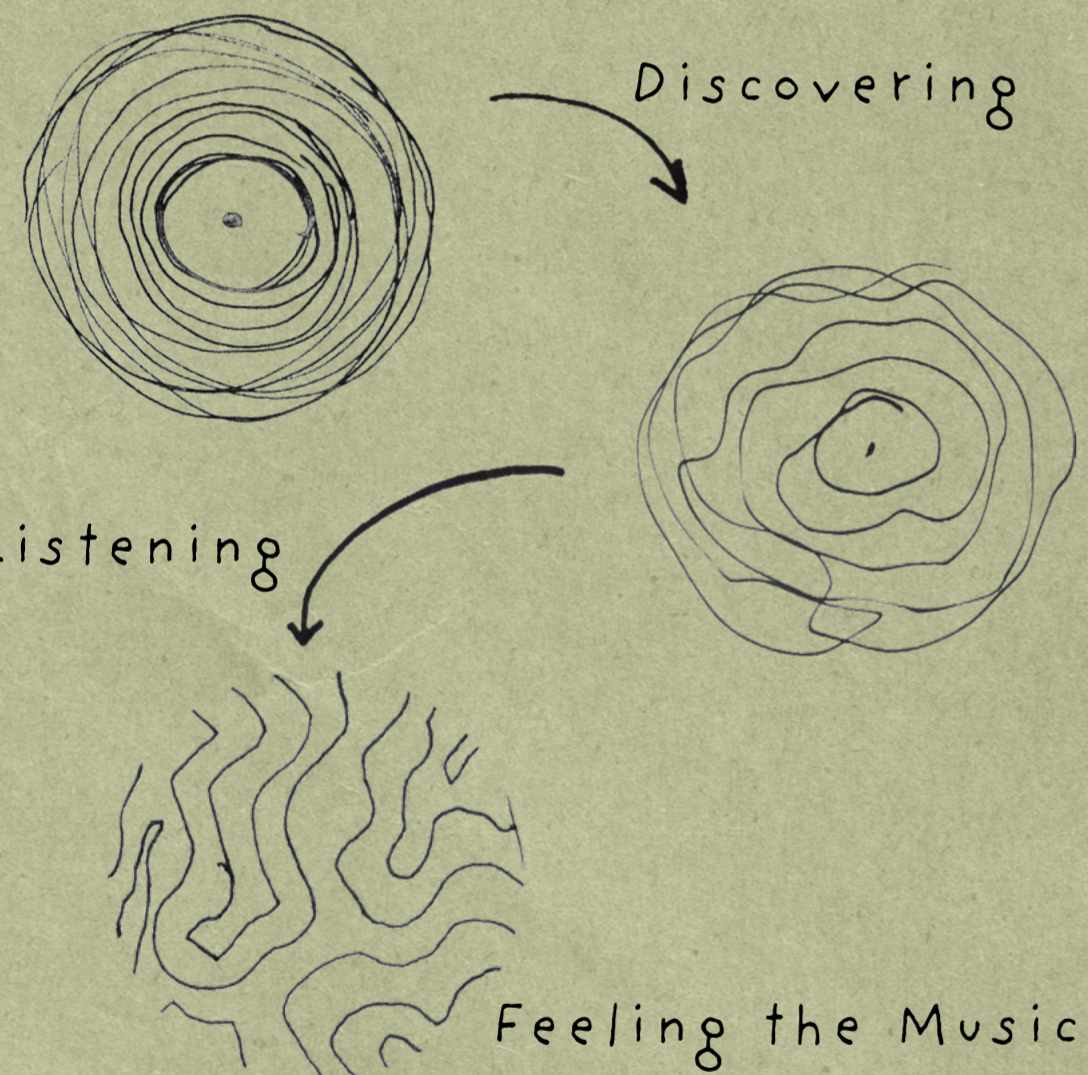
The mask comes at a cost. Many experience deep exhaustion from constant masking, which can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression. Like Mimikyu, they long to be accepted as they truly are, without disguise.

For many neurodivergent people, Mimikyu embodies the exhausting practice of masking. Masking means suppressing stimming & other behaviours, in order to blend into a neurotypical society.

Music for the neurodivergent brain

ADHD is often misunderstood as a simple inability to pay attention. In reality, it can feel like paying attention to everything at once. Background conversations, passing sounds, visual movement, and internal thoughts all compete for attention. Music can help by occupying the parts of the brain that might otherwise be drawn to distracting stimuli. In this sense, it functions much like a fidget toy: providing enough structured stimulation to reduce the urge to seek distraction elsewhere. For many people with ADHD, music makes it easier to concentrate, regulate attention, and remain engaged with the task at hand.

From my own experience, music is not simply enjoyable; it is essential. It helps me measure the passage of time. If three or four songs have played, I know that roughly ten minutes have passed. Without this external reference, my sense of time becomes unreliable: what feels like five minutes can sometimes turn out to be an hour.



Neurodivergent people also often feel music more deeply. It is often a full-body, multi-sensory experience. For people with ADHD, music has been shown to stimulate dopamine release, helping to improve concentration and sustain attention. For autistic people, music can provide a valuable tool for emotional expression, sensory regulation, and self-soothing.

Many neurodivergent people also find comfort in repetition. Returning to the same songs, playlists, or rhythms can create a sense of familiarity and predictability in an often overwhelming world. Rather than becoming repetitive, familiar music can provide stability, regulation, and a reliable source of enjoyment.

“Please understand.
We don’t want no trouble.
We just want the right to be different.
That’s all.”
- Pulp

Music is an important tool in the everyday lives of many neurodivergent people, supporting focus, emotional regulation, sensory processing, and wellbeing. While digital platforms have made music more accessible than ever, they have also transformed the way we discover it. Platforms such as Spotify can accurately predict what we are likely to enjoy. However, this process often removes the social and human dimensions of music discovery.

This informed the decision to incorporate an analogue record shop centred on human discovery. The space celebrates the excitement of finding an unexpected album, receiving a recommendation from a stranger, or bonding over a shared musical interest. It recognises that the rituals surrounding music, browsing shelves, exchanging records, recommending artists, and sharing stories, can be just as valuable as listening itself.

An algorithm may predict exactly what we want to hear next, but it can never replicate the memory of another person’s eyes lighting up as they say, “You have to hear this.”



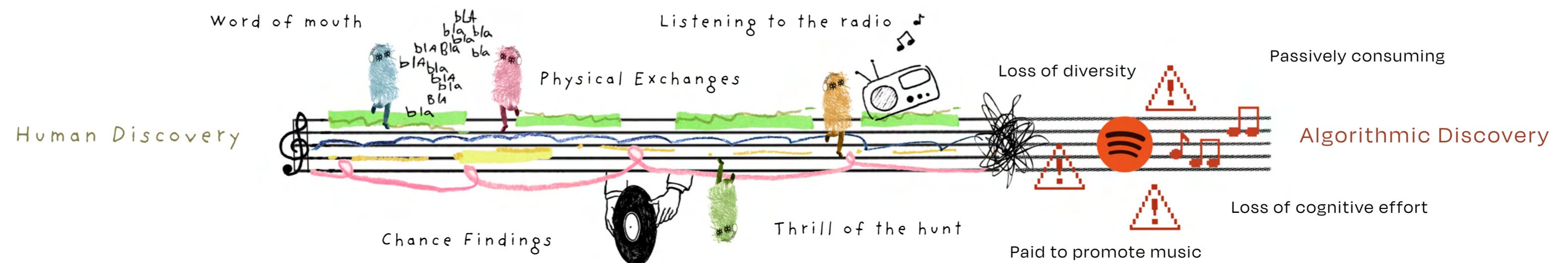
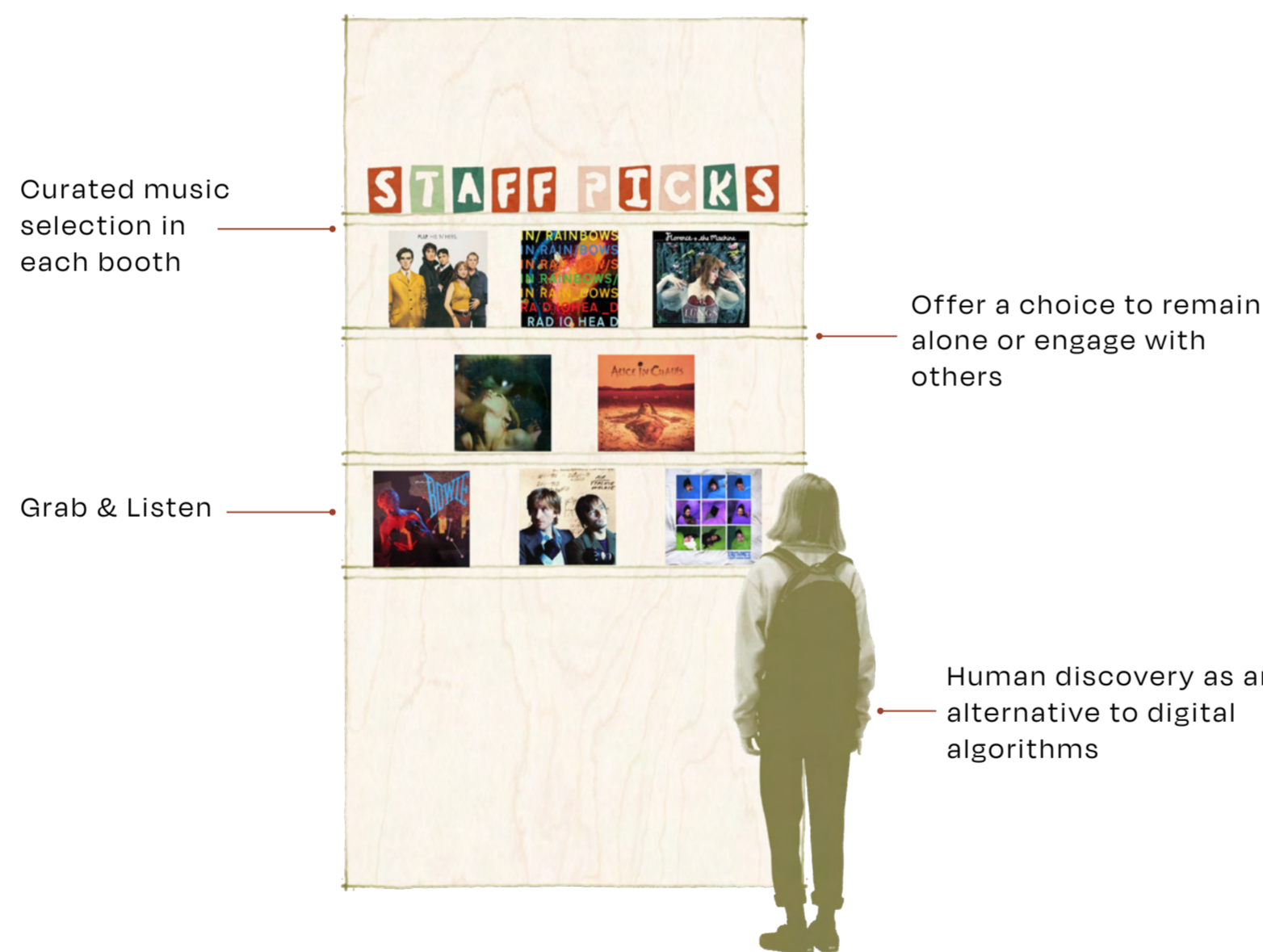
Listening Booth Design

The listening booths are designed to accommodate different social preferences, allowing visitors to either share a listening experience or engage with music independently. They provide moments of comfort, retreat, and connection, creating a space where people can experience music on their own terms.

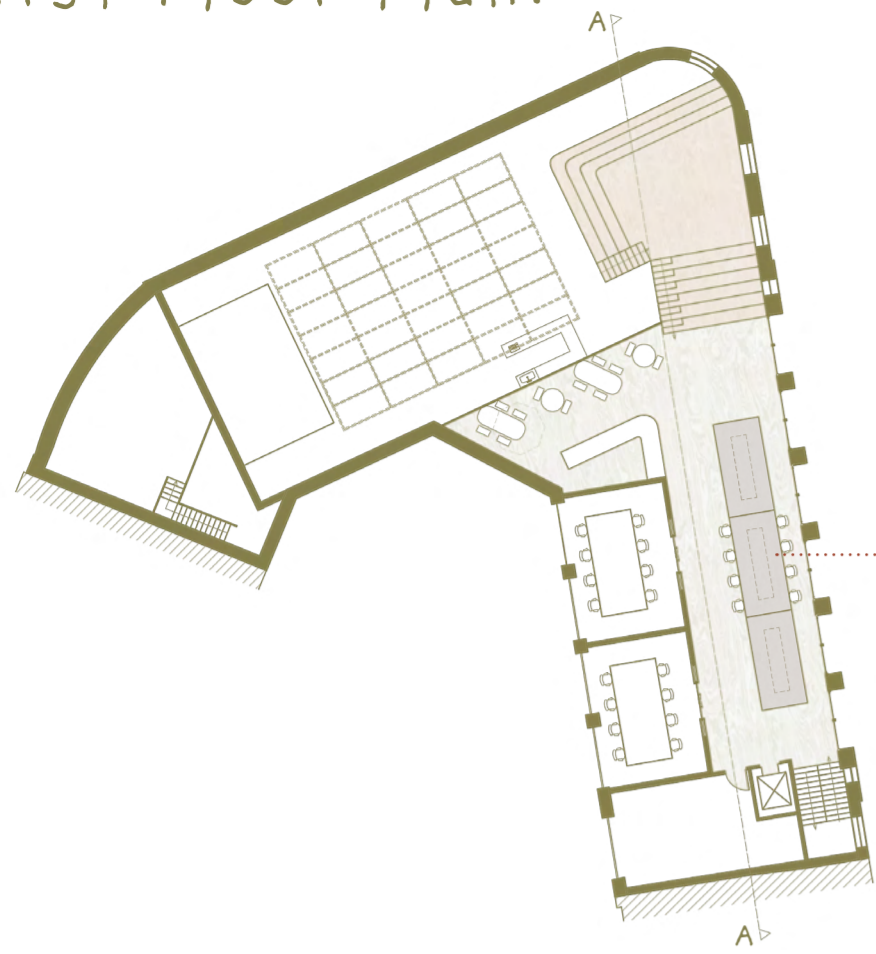
The form of the booths emerged through an exploration of the vinyl record, reinterpreting its typically rigid geometry into a more fluid and expressive language. This flowing form became a key design motif, informing patterns and details throughout the project.

The pattern reflects both the physical grooves of a record and the emotional experience of listening to music. Its rises and falls evoke the rhythms, intensity, and movement of sound, capturing the deeply immersive and often multisensory relationship many neurodivergent people have with music.

“They listen with their ears, while we listen with our whole being.”



First Floor Plan:



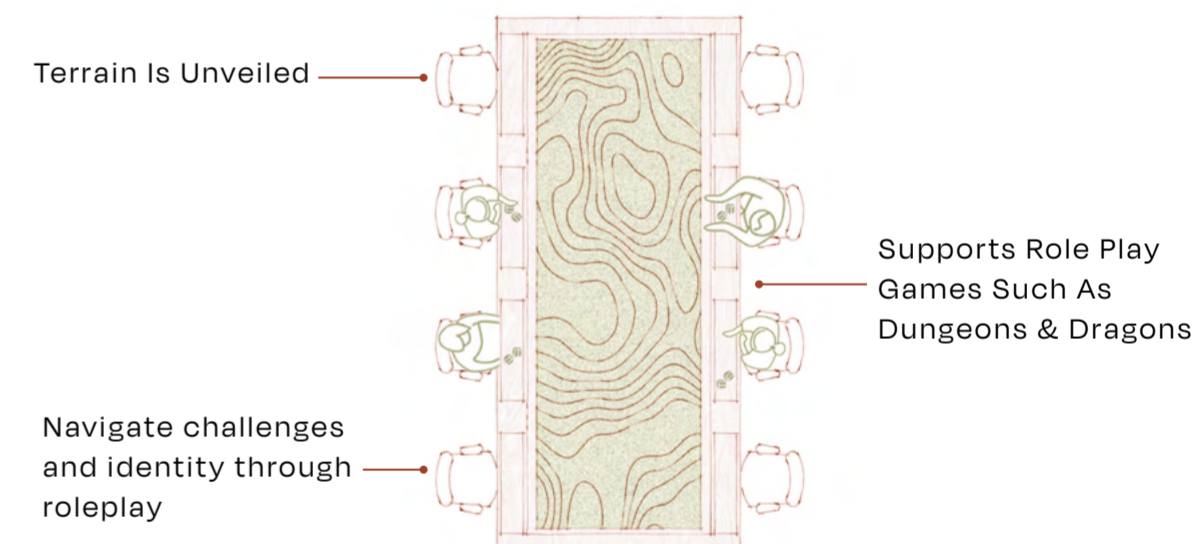
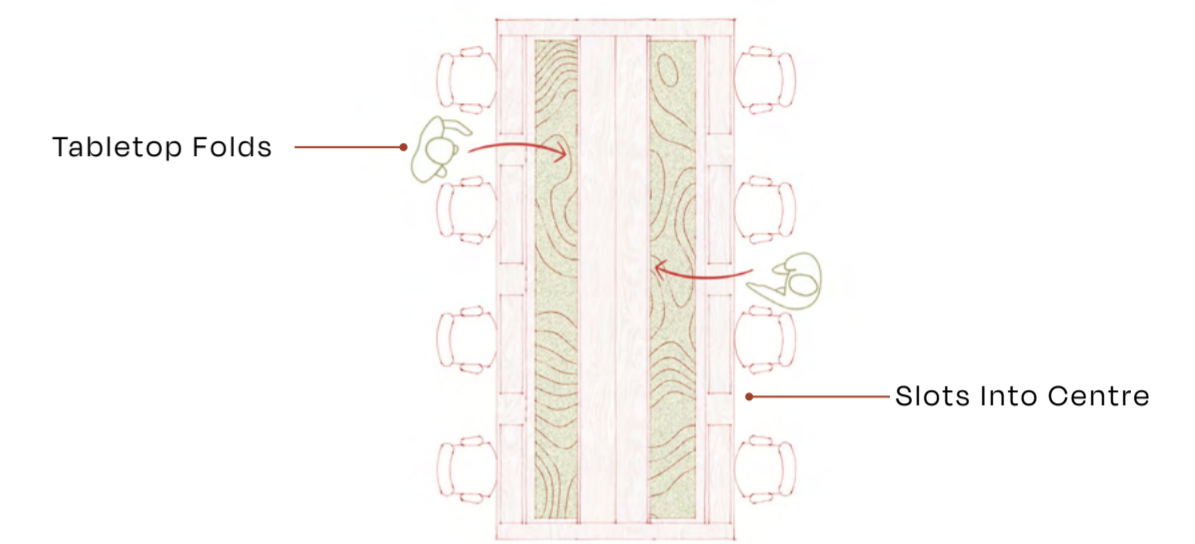
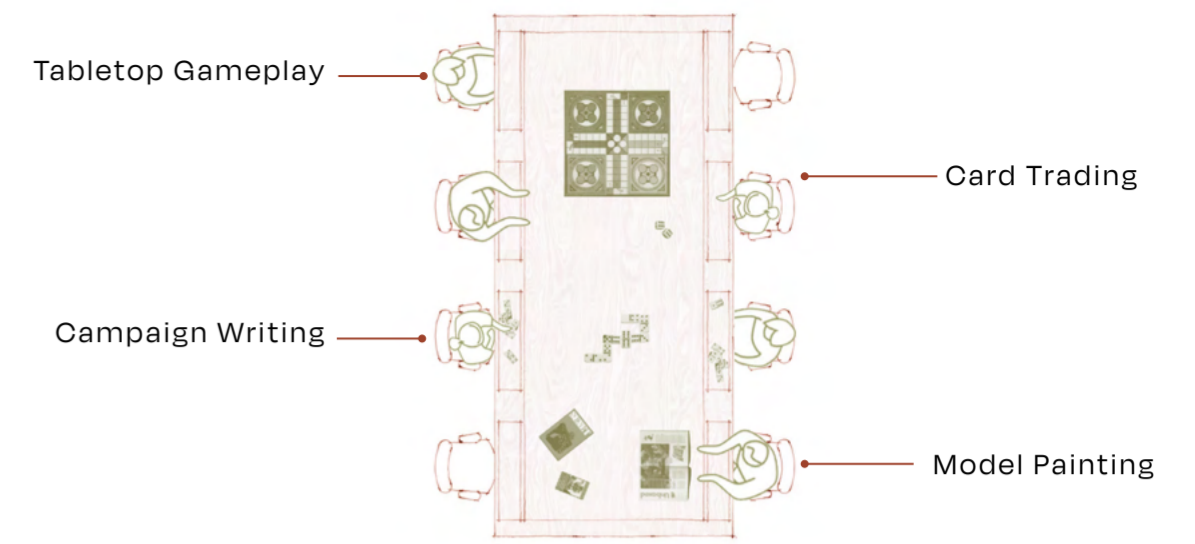
Campaign Table

The campaign table is designed as a multifunctional centrepiece that supports both retail display and gameplay.

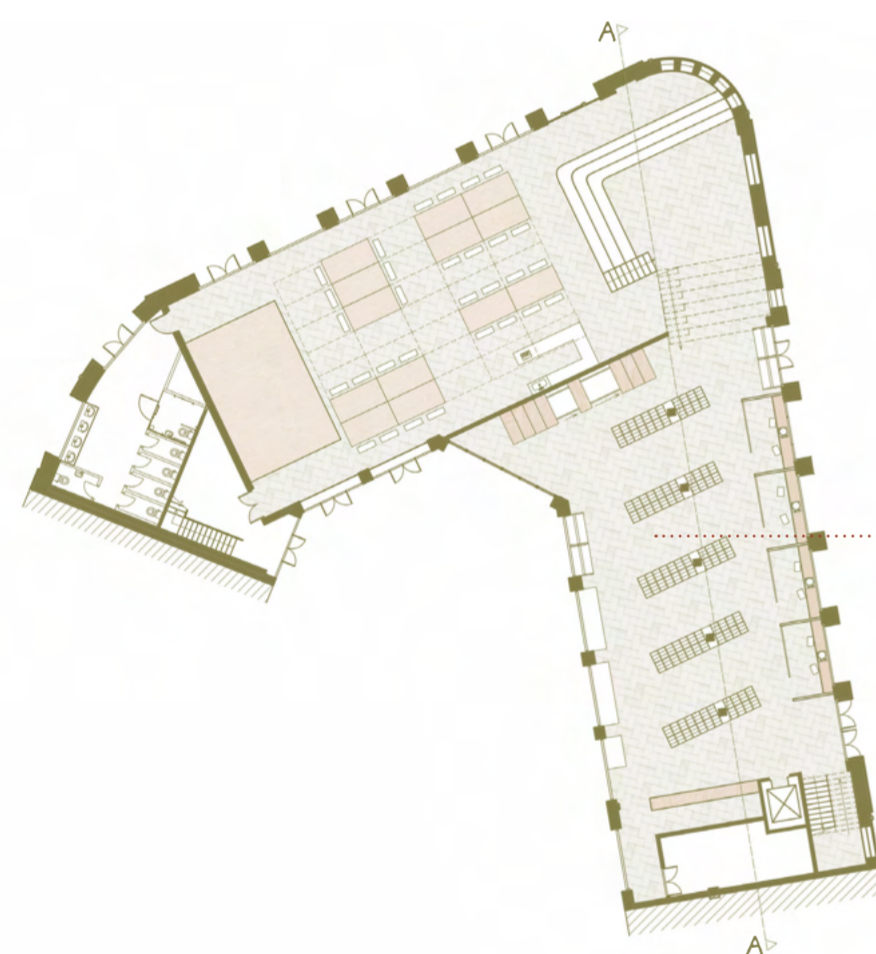
The flat surface accommodates a range of activities, including board gaming, trading card sessions, miniature painting, and campaign planning.

The tabletop folds into the centre to reveal terrain beneath. Transforming it into an immersive gaming environment, allowing players to bring their campaigns to life and become fully absorbed in the worlds they create together.

By adapting to different activities throughout the day, the campaign table becomes both a social hub and a catalyst for creative play.



Ground Floor Plan:



Slow Browsing

The record store is designed to encourage slow, exploratory browsing, with circulation paths wrapping around display areas to promote discovery rather than direct destination-led movement.

Clear sightlines across the space ensure overall visibility, helping users feel oriented and secure by maintaining awareness of their surroundings. At the same time, more private moments of retreat are provided through the listening booths, offering spaces for withdrawal, reflection, and focused engagement with music.

Together, these qualities balance openness & enclosure, supporting both social interaction and individual comfort.

Final Model @1:50 Scale



Interaction

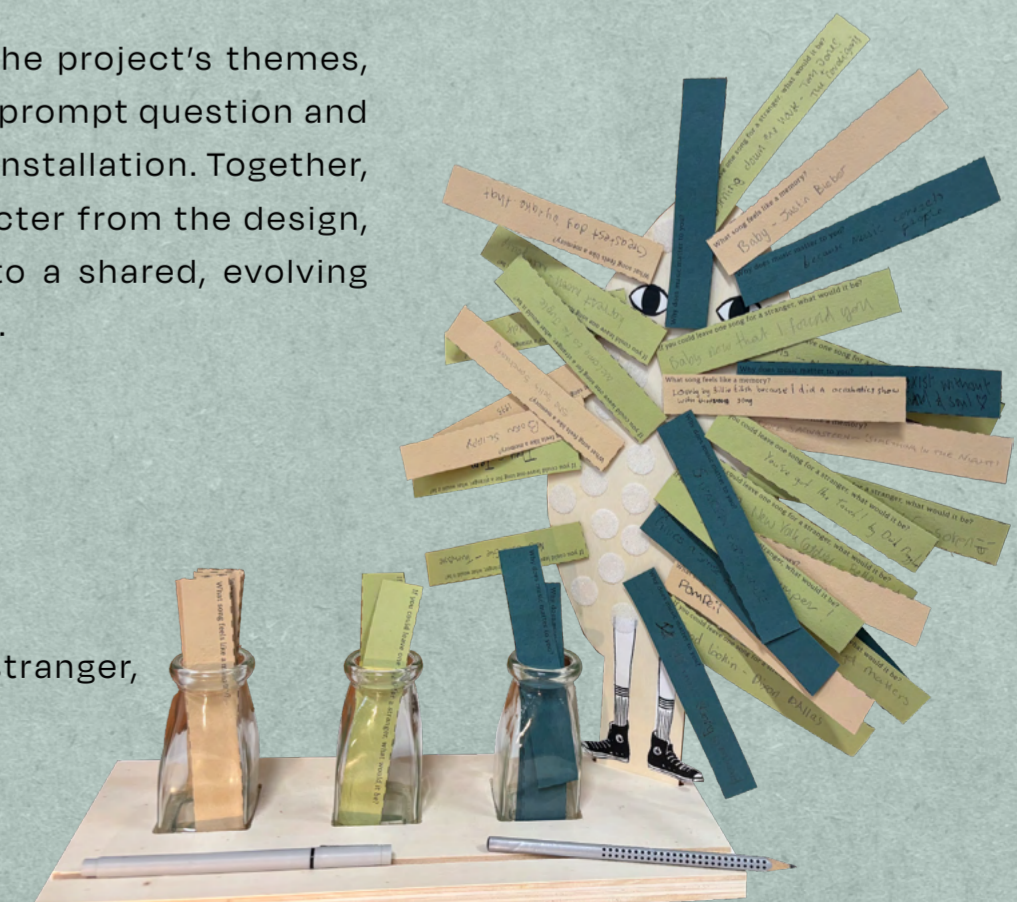
I encouraged engagement with the project's themes, by asking people to respond to a prompt question and add their answers to a collective installation. Together, these responses formed a character from the design, turning individual reflections into a shared, evolving expression of the project's ideas.

The questions included:

What song feels like a memory?

Why does music matter to you?

If you could leave one song for a stranger, what would it be?



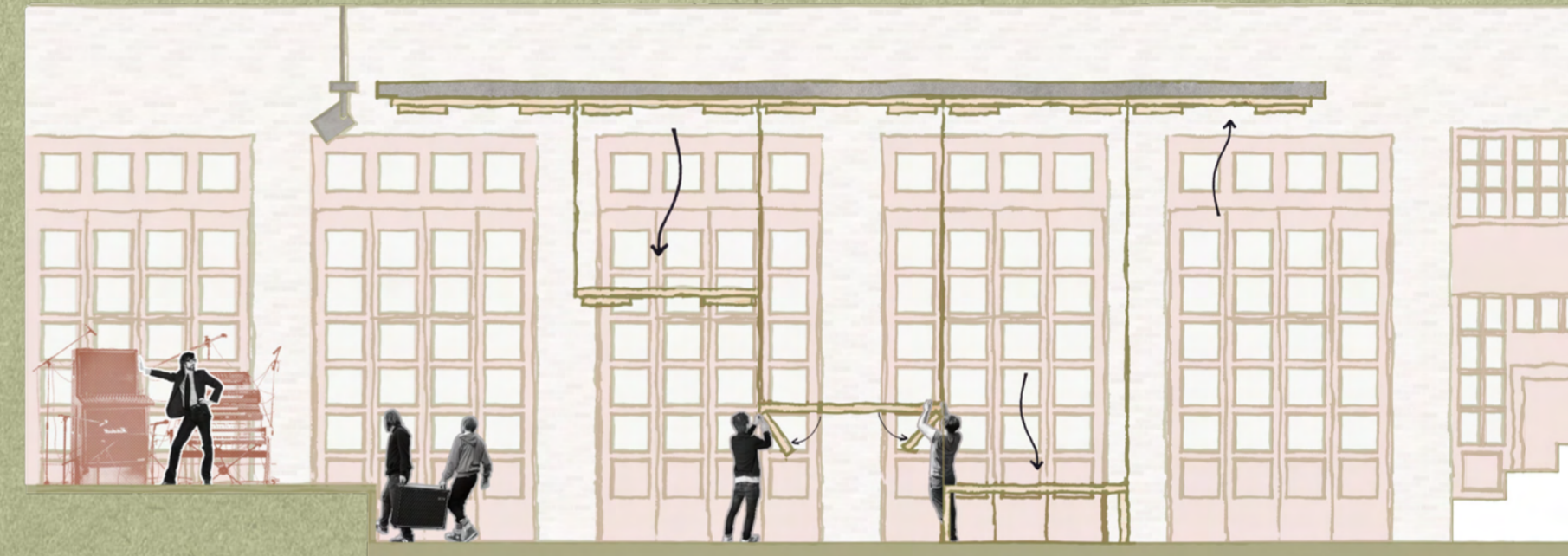
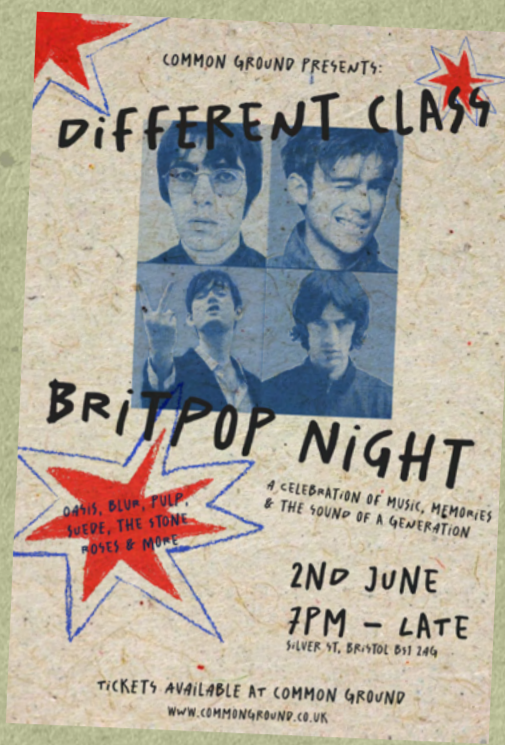


Gathering Space

The gathering space forms the heart of the project, connecting the record shop and tabletop gaming store. Designed as a flexible social hub, it supports a range of activities, from informal encounters, conversation, and moments of rest to live music, listening parties, trading card events, and tabletop gaming tournaments.

Suspended tables integrate lighting and can be lowered as needed, allowing the layout to adapt to different group sizes and events. This adjustable arrangement enables the space to shift seamlessly between everyday use and larger community gatherings.

Through this flexibility, the gathering space becomes a platform for shared experiences, celebrating the role of music, play, and community in bringing people together.



Board Game Steps

The main staircase acts as more than a circulation route. Designed as stepped seating, it provides opportunities for visitors to pause, observe, and interact as they move through the building.

The steps house a selection of board games, encouraging spontaneous play and informal social encounters. The staircase creates opportunities for connection where people normally pass each other by. Whether joining a game, watching others play, or simply taking a seat, visitors are invited to engage with the community at their own pace.

The Board Game Steps support the project's aim of creating low-pressure social environments, where interaction feels natural, accessible, and driven by shared interests.

