

Unnecessarily Beautiful Spaces for Young Minds on Fire

How 826 Valencia, and Dozens of Centers Like It, Got Built—and Why

Edited by

**The International Alliance
of Youth Writing Centers**

Introduction by

Dave Eggers & Amanda Uhle



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SAN FRANCISCO

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Edited by

**The International Alliance
of Youth Writing Centers**

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Established:
2016

Designers:
Gensler, Interstice
Architects, Office,
MKThink, BCCI, and
Jonas Kellner

Area:
5,200 sq. ft.

Address:
180 Golden Gate Ave.
San Francisco, CA

826 VALENCIA TENDERLOIN

826 Valencia: Tenderloin Center

San Francisco, CA



(Opposite) One almost feels underwater as they enter the emporium. (Above) Customers are treated to souvenirs from the travels of King Carl, the royal pufferfish.



The center is walkable from the original location; it's not reachable by boat.

How does this space differ from the original 826 Valencia?

We wanted King Carl's Emporium to feel like you were stepping into an old department store. There isn't much retail in the Tenderloin District, so we wanted to offer a range of daily-use products with a whimsical twist (e.g., lip balm is "Unicorn Horn Polish"). Because the Tenderloin neighborhood is very ethnically diverse, we thought that the theme of a traveling royal pufferfish could include items and experiences from many different cultures around the world. We also honored these populations by putting the motto SET FORTH AND EXPLORE on the windows in eight different languages. When people venture inside, a scavenger hunt nicely provides structure for those who need a little encouragement to explore. While we were creating a storefront that would also serve as reception for our programming, we wanted to positively activate the street and considered greater monitoring and safety. Simple improvements like windows and a whimsical mural increase neighborhood pride and allow passersby to see the students at work. Many people do not know that the Tenderloin is home to over three thousand young people and we wanted to create a joyful and beautiful space for them.



One important takeaway from this book: if at all possible, include a secret door.



The Fog Bank allows one to withdraw fog, a common currency in San Francisco.



Can you find the human hiding in this photo?

How did you gather support for creating this space?

While working with more people is, in some ways, more work, it makes each piece of the project more manageable on a budget. It also engages the community in the space from the beginning. Always focus on the mission and how what you're doing makes a positive impact on the students and community. Treat this ask much like you would any monetary donation: be clear about purpose, explain the opportunity in an inspiring manner, express lots of gratitude all the time, and have excellent follow-through on all tasks to make it easy for people to be involved. Also, engaging passionate pro bono partners ensures one more advocate asking others to be generous as well. Our construction partner asked every subcontractor if they would donate their portion of the project and often the answer was yes. ●



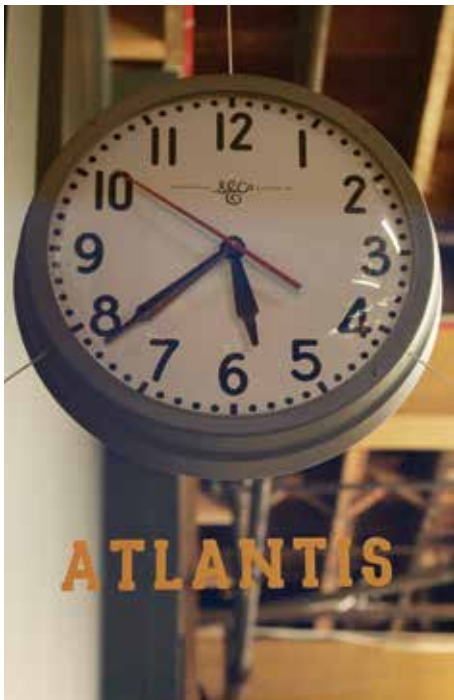
Furthermore: if at all possible, include multiple secret doors.



Drawer nameplates honor donors to the center.



Woodland creatures are rare but welcome visitors.



A clock displays the time in Atlantis (which is real).



When asked what the new center in the Tenderloin District needed, one of the students at 826 Valencia suggested a tree fort. Weirdly, the new space actually had an odd little mezzanine, so that was converted into an actual, bona-fide indoor tree fort. Typically, students are allowed to explore it after—and only after—their assignments are completed.



Indoor tree house, anyone?

All kinds of work, from hard to whimsical and all points in between, happens in settings like this.



Woodland creatures, ocean-loving monsters, and humans alike love nooks, crannies, and display cases with items of interest.



Many (even famous) writers have never had the opportunity to read on a large tree stump. Not so for students who come to 826 Valencia: Tenderloin Center.



1

PRETTY GOOD PENCILS

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

No. 2 pencils equipped with inspiring and joyful quotes from 826's own King Carl to help you bust through any writer's block.

2

KEY TO... KEYTAG

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

Finally, we unlocked the keys to the universe, and you can have them too, for a nominal fee. You're welcome.

3

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE 2.0

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

From lists of demands to distress signals to poems that are too personal to share with the crew, now you don't have to decide which message is most important—send them all! Two gigabytes of USB storage. That equates to roughly one hundred thousand scrolls of parchment, depending on how big you write.

4

STILTS FOR TINY CREATURES

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

Also firewood kindling and non-magic wands. Sold only in pairs. Do not ask to separate. Helmet use advised.

5

GNOME BE-GONE

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

The safest, most foolproof method of ridding your forest or abode of pesky gnomes. For best results, scrunch your left toe and sprinkle Be-Gone dust over your left shoulder while reciting an original limerick.

6

ENCHANTED FOREST FIPPLE FLUTE

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

Let the sweet soprano sounds of the fipple flute recorder take you places. Like the cobblestone streets of a quaint German village. Or the Aegean Sea under moonlight. Or a scary hole inside a dead tree during a thunderstorm. Make beautiful music, my friend.

7

UNICORN HORN POLISH

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

Nourishing balm for that not-overly-shiny shine. Organic, gluten-free, non-GMO, petroleum-free, and cruelty-free. Never tested on unicorns.

8

GIANT SQUID INK PENS

Designer and Writer:
Office and 826 Valencia

Handcrafted in Michigan, these fine writing instruments may or may not contain ink from a Giant Squid.

Every kid in the world needs a safe, welcoming, and even weird place to write. That's the theory behind 826 Valencia, a writing and tutoring center started in 2002. That center, with a pirate-themed storefront, inspired similar—and similarly gorgeous and strange—centers around the world, from Chicago to Stockholm to Melbourne. This joyous and boundlessly creative book, filled with stunning photos of the world's most welcoming and wild spaces for young minds, seeks to inspire more communities, schools, and libraries to build their own unnecessarily beautiful centers for young thinkers.



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