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Gen Z rewrites resilience

Research on how young people are building the emotional strength needed for an unpredictable future, from mini-challenges to digital breaks and pop-culture role models — and what we can learn from them.

Iida Korpiniitty & Linda Sivander

Summary

The research by Amos Rex and Noren on the everyday lives of 16–18-year-olds shows that young people consciously build resilience in response to an increasingly unpredictable world.

The ethnographical research followed five diverse friend groups from the capital region through interviews, museum and gallery visits, and collaborative analysis of the findings.

Rather than relying on one life path, young people actively create strategies to navigate uncertainty. They cultivate skills, attitudes and relationships, while protecting their energy and confidence. Despite different backgrounds and resources, four similar strategies emerged.

1. ACTIVELY INCREASING RESOURCES

"For once I managed to listen to a classical music concert locked in (...) We had studied it at school, so I had some background knowledge about the artist and the music, which is why I managed to concentrate even though I normally can't."

- MIKKO, 17

2. PROTECTION FROM STRESSFUL ISSUES

"We don't talk about politics, at least not in a large group, because we don't want to disturb the peace. We stay on a superficial level. With closer friends, you can talk about deeper things."

- SEAN, 18

3. ENABLING RECOVERY AND RENEWAL

"At a previous Amos Rex show I liked that I could lie on my stomach and there was mood lighting ... You didn't have to do anything."

- IISA, 16

4. SELF-REALISATION THROUGH CREATIVITY

"Minecraft can also be an art form, you can build anything from scratch ... Once we discovered a secret bunker weeks after a friend had built it without anyone knowing about it."

- MIKKO, 17

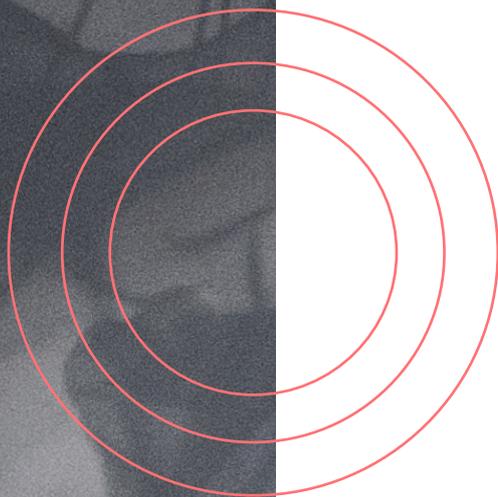# Belonging is not a given in cultural spaces

Image: Enni-Kukka Tuomala

While interactive museums are often experienced as accessible and engaging, traditional fine arts institutions can feel difficult to understand and approach. Being unsure about rules and disconnected from content can leave young people feeling subject to surveillance rather than dialogue.

Young people are actively seeking challenge, empowerment, and a counterweight to "brain-rotting" phone scrolling. To unlock a sense of inspiration and intellectual reward, museums need to enable deeper engagement and foster a sense of inclusion for all, not only for those who already feel at home in these cultural spaces.

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Image: Veera Nivalainen

Introduction

Being young and growing up has never been easy, but today, adulthood is increasingly characterised by uncertainty and constant change. The climate, economy, technology, and politics are changing at an unprecedented rate, and amid all this, young people must build their future.

Amos Rex and **Noren** collaborated on researching the everyday lives and experiences of 16–18-year-olds in the capital region. The research set out to understand what it is like to be young today, what challenges they face, and how they actively build resilience in their own lives.

Alongside this broader perspective, the study also explored young people's relationship to museums and other cultural institutions. This article examines why and how young people focus on strengthening their resources, and how different social actors can better support young people in an unpredictable world.

Conducting the study

This ethnographic research included five different groups of friends from diverse backgrounds, totalling 16 young people. We met with them twice in the autumn of 2024 to explore their everyday lives, dreams and concerns. The young people also visited museums or galleries of their choice and reflected on the experience in diary form. They took part in producing knowledge and analysing the findings with us. This provided us with in-depth information about how young people experience the world around them.

All participant names used in this publication have been changed to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Image: Veera Nivalainen
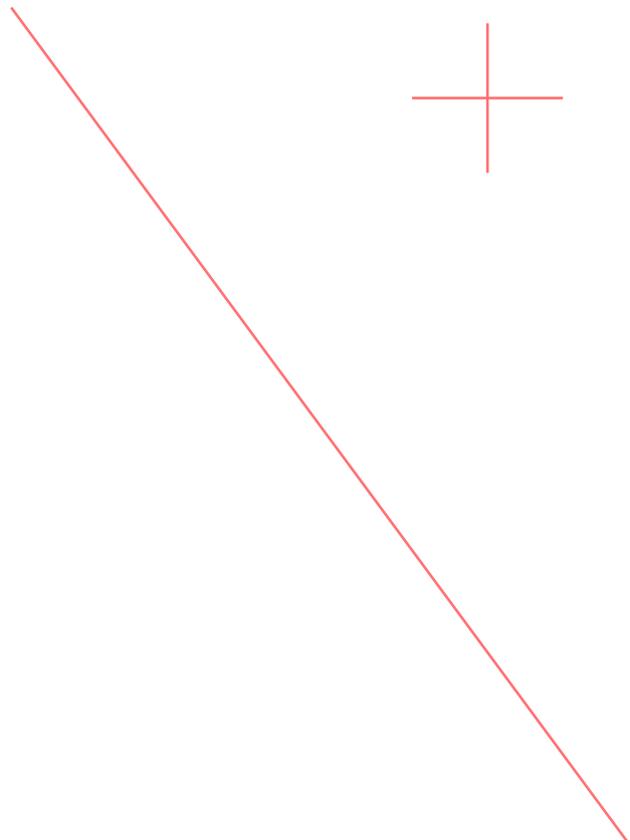
Youth on shaky ground

Mikko and Panu, 17-year-olds, arrive at the meeting a little late. We discuss the importance of social skills, friendship, and the difficulty of talking about social issues. Discussions can easily escalate, and it can be scary to participate in them, except with your closest friends.

They excitedly tell us about their visit to the **Finnish Museum of Photography** to see **Tyler Mitchell's** exhibition *Wish This Was Real*. "For once, it wasn't fake art," but the works really said something. They think **Kendrick Lamar** was influenced by the artist's aesthetic. They both love music, but last time we talked about how uncertain it is to build a career in it. Mikko sees business studies as a safer choice.

"[Tyler Mitchell's] exhibition was really good! The works were really great, and they told a story in a way that you could understand, and the pictures featured real people, not elites. Kendrick Lamar has probably been influenced by it; he probably identifies with it as a black man. The album cover was in the same style."

– PANU, 17

At our last meeting, we spread out cards on the table from various places, from fast food restaurants to libraries. The **Musiikkitalo** concert and event venue gets a unanimous rating of being a "complete banger." Mikko explains how he managed to listen to a two-hour concert: "We had studied it at school, so I had some background knowledge, which is why I was able to concentrate even though I normally can't." Panu, on the other hand, says he loves **YouTube.** "It doesn't make me feel stupid" when I watch longer videos, almost like documentaries. You can learn something, and your "brain doesn't rot.". In the discussion, both emphasize the importance of "screen-free" experiences, because they are good for you. Panu says he has cut down his phone use for the sake of his mental health.

Image: Stella Ojala
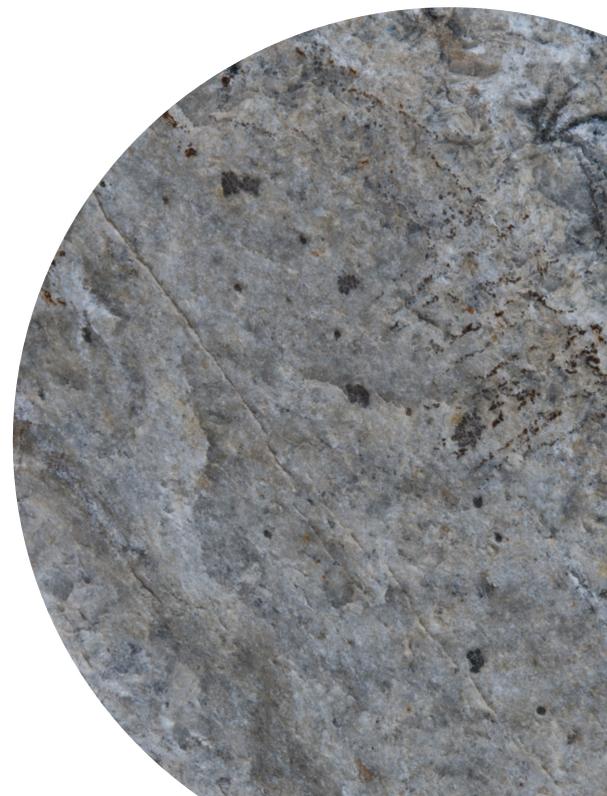
Image: Josefina Nelimarkka

"For once I managed to listen to a classical music concert locked in (...) We had studied it at school, so I had some background knowledge about the artist and the music, which is why I managed to concentrate even though I normally can't."

– MIKKO, 17

As different as the groups of friends we met are, their words reveal both inspiration and vulnerability. They have dreams, but these are overshadowed by uncertainty. To pursue a good life – family, financial security, caring for others, moments of carefree enjoyment – young people must actively nurture their resources.

Challenges shaping young people's lives

Image: Kerttu Penttilä

CHALLENGE 1: Crises and constant uncertainty

Climate change, the pandemic, and war in Europe have left their mark. They have exposed the vulnerability of societal structures. Young people learn early on that success stories are not guaranteed, and long-term plans can change overnight. The future does not appear to be a predictable path – a house, career and family – but rather a changing playing field of random opportunities. You must be able to seize the moment with the available resources.

Young people focus on their well-being here and now, and prepare for the future, even though they don't yet know what it will bring. They talk about meaningful spare time, nurturing friendships, managing their own anxiety, and how everyday challenges can be turned into small victories.

CHALLENGE 2: Polarisation and retreating into micro-communities

As people's trust in institutions crumbles and the political climate is marked by heightened polarisation, young people are increasingly turning inward. Although social media was based on the promise of endless social communities and extensive networks, practical experience has proven the opposite – social media, echo chamber and increased hate speech are pulling us apart. Young people, too, are focusing on communities with deep bonds, such as their own families or close friendships built on security, trust, and authenticity. These communities allow young people to be vulnerable and express their unfinished thoughts or even "the wrong thing" without fear of rejection or social sanctions.

"People used to treat each other as human beings even if they disagreed. It feels like this is only getting worse. In the end, it can lead to everyone just hating each other, and politics will no longer be a place to discuss issues and solve them."

– CALLE, 17

Image: Terhi Tuomi

"I always leave if a political topic comes up at school. You get labelled immediately if you say something wrong, and on top of that, people won't leave you alone until you change your mind… Once, my friend had a really long conversation with a very religious person. They were really arguing, but in a very respectful way. It was really interesting to listen to."
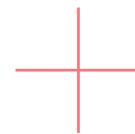
– MIKKO, 17

"We don't talk about politics, at least not in a large group, because we don't want to disturb the peace. We stay on a superficial level. With closer friends, you can talk about deeper things."

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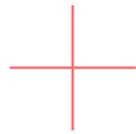
CHALLENGE 3: Performance pressures and constant comparison

At the same time, our individualistic society places greater pressure on young people, as it does on all of us, to succeed. For example, changes in education, such as entrance exam reforms, have increased academic competition among even younger people. On the other hand, rapid and viral social media success stories and an exaggerated celebrity culture reinforce the idea that progress, success, and prosperity must be continuous and visible. For many, this leads to a decline in resilience and increased stress, which is responded to in different ways. Some young people focus even more intensely on achieving their goals and replace their "unnecessary" hobbies with homework and more developmental activities. For others, the pressure can be more crippling, and abandoning an academic path altogether may be seen as an easier option than trying to navigate the pressures of success.

CHALLENGE 4: The double-edged sword of technology

Technology and social media play a contradictory role in young people's everyday lives. They open a window to diverse role models and inspiration and help maintain social relationships. At the same time, they increase pressure and consume time that could be better spent elsewhere. Social media is a high-stakes arena where missteps are punished, and strategic self-presentation is essential. Young people are very aware of this tension. Amidst constant scrutiny, they admire authenticity but often censor themselves to stay safe. Young people's digital lives are subject to careful navigation, aiming to maximise benefits and minimise risks. At the core of mental health practices is often an effort to limit social media and screen time by deleting apps and seeking offline experiences and communities.

"I had good grades but I didn't want the pace that lower secondary school had, I don't think I would've managed in upper secondary school. I'm so prone to stress, I thought upper secondary might be too much pace-wise."

– MANNA, 17

"Scrolling through your phone isn't the same as doing something truly inspiring, like going somewhere... In the summer, I went cycling on my own and rode about 10 kilometres. The best thing was that I exceeded my expectations, because I thought I couldn't do it and that I wouldn't be able to keep going, but the feeling when I got home and realised, I had done it [was amazing]."

– ALISA, 16

Image: Ingrid Guyon

Young people's strategies for building resilience

Image: Veera Nivalainen

Despite their different backgrounds and life situations, young people use remarkably similar terms to describe their conscious efforts for strengthening their own resources and ability to cope with the pressures and uncertainties shaping their everyday lives. Building resilience was a common thread in young people's everyday lives and was reflected in practical strategies that they applied creatively, each from their own starting point and with the resources available to them.

These practical strategies can be divided into four complementary goals that young people strive to balance in their lives:

1. Actively increasing resources

2. Protection from stressful issues

3. Enabling recovery and renewal

4. Self-realisation through creativity

The relationship of young people with digital environments, and social media in particular, was interestingly reflected in their strategies for building resilience. Young people were able to acquire useful information through YouTube videos, strengthen their ability to protect themselves from appearance pressures by following courageous role models on Instagram, relax by sharing funny videos on TikTok, or exercise their creativity in building their own accounts. However, young people often contrasted the time spent in front of a screen with resilience-building leisure activities. Such leisure activities almost always meant the need to disconnect from the screen, which was not found to be easy, even if they wanted to.

Talking about their social media use, young people often felt disheartened, and ashamed. Social media took up a lot of their free time and young people were concerned about its "brain-rotting" effect. On the other hand, they pointed out that while they often tried to limit their own social media use and screen time, adults were responsible for inventing social media and for the amount of time they were forced to spend in front of screens, even at school.

Image: Veera Nivalainen

STRATEGY 1: Actively increasing resources

Young people look for opportunities that give them a sense of accomplishment and competence. These are often challenges they set for themselves or ways to turn the challenges the world throws at them into exercises that help them grow. The challenges range from bike rides to watching long-form videos, cooking, giving presentations, football practice, or, at their simplest, waking up and going to school.

> "School is also about facing challenges, and that's how I overcome difficulties. For example, giving a speech in front of the class is difficult, but I got through it. I'm developing my own resources"
>
> – OLIVIA, 16

Empowering leisure time is characterised by challenging tasks, effort, the accumulation of concrete knowledge and skills, and, on the other hand, the development of the right attitude, willpower, and self-confidence.

All this is like a toolkit that young people can use to cope with the challenges and surprises that come their way and build their path to a good life in an uncertain world.

STRATEGY 2: Protection from stressful issues

Because young people spend much of their time navigating environments characterised by an aggressive discussion culture, they feel it is safest to avoid discussions on topics they consider controversial – which often includes almost all topics related to society or values. They carefully curate their social media presence or refrain from posting any content publicly.

"I don't post that much on my public account anymore... It's pretty scary when you don't know who shared it and why, like if a lot of people share a video you're in, are they laughing at me?"

- KAISA, 16

Whereas public spaces, school classrooms, and wider circles of friends appear risky, young people tend to cherish extremely confidential and close friendships and family relationships. In these relationships, they can relax, express themselves freely, and discuss difficult topics together. At the same time, they consciously limit their exposure to emotionally charged content, such as news or films and exhibitions dealing with heavy topics.

STRATEGY 3: Enabling recovery and renewal

All young people describe feeling stressed and lacking in unstructured free time in their everyday lives. Many of them also feel pressure to spend a large part of their free time on "empowering" activities, i.e., activities aimed at increasing their knowledge and skills.

To counterbalance this, however, young people understand that they need restorative free time – time that is characterised by fun and silliness rather than usefulness and rationality. Hanging out with friends at the mall, confessing embarrassing crushes to friends, spending evenings at the playground, going to the cottage with the family, or cuddling with a sweetheart are seen by many as the most precious moments – moments that must be protected and secured.

Some young people say they have realised that simply having fun is ultimately more important than a status and big ambitions. Others say they are afraid of facing burnout.

"I know I'll burn out if I keep putting all my energy into everything, so I have to prioritise. You can't be a straight-A student in everything."

- OLIVIA, 16

STRATEGY 4:
Self-realisation through creativity

Creativity appears in young people's lives as a way to strengthen resilience through all the above strategies. At art exhibitions, they gain insights into other people's experiences and increase their understanding of the world. Painting or jamming is a way to "switch off your brain" after school, and playing football or **Minecraft** offers an opportunity to strengthen friendships and express yourself.

"In music, there's a lot of time to think, while in football, you have to be creative with your body and make quick decisions."

– SEAN, 17

"Minecraft can also be art, you can build anything from scratch (…) Once, weeks later, we found a secret bunker that a friend had built, and no one knew about."

– MIKKO, 17

Creativity also serves as a tool for exploring the world and one's authentic self. Whether it's playing games, applying makeup, sitting at the piano, or having a deep conversation with a friend, creativity acts as a channel for reflection, emotional processing, and self-expression. It is not just about building resources – it is a means through which young people can become visible as their true, authentic selves, understand their place in the world, and even influence it through their actions and by example.

In other words, if building resilience keeps the engine running, creativity polishes the compass.

At the same time, the study highlights how unequal access young people have to different forms of creativity. They distinguish between everyday creativity and formal, institutionalised art, such as museums and visual arts, and this formal culture appears distant and normative to many. This challenge of accessibility, and the polarisation that it enforces, are key problems that cultural institutions should address.

The role of cultural institutions and social actors

When resilience becomes a key survival skill, young people should not be left alone to develop the skill. Not everyone has equal access to the cultural, social, emotional, or economic resources needed to build resilience. This is where social actors – such as municipal institutions, the education system, businesses, and cultural institutions – can and must step in.

Currently, however, many institutions, especially in the arts and culture, are more likely to reach young people who are already better equipped to enjoy what they offer. At the same time, this may inadvertently exclude precisely those young people for whom these institutions could be of great importance. When experiences of exclusion begin to accumulate for others, and only some can reap the benefits, the consequences of polarisation will be felt further down the line. Without the active work of social actors, there is a risk that inequality and polarisation will deepen further – and we will fail to support a generation that is already under extreme pressure.

Image: Tuomas Uusheimo

Young people in public spaces: subject to surveillance, not dialogue
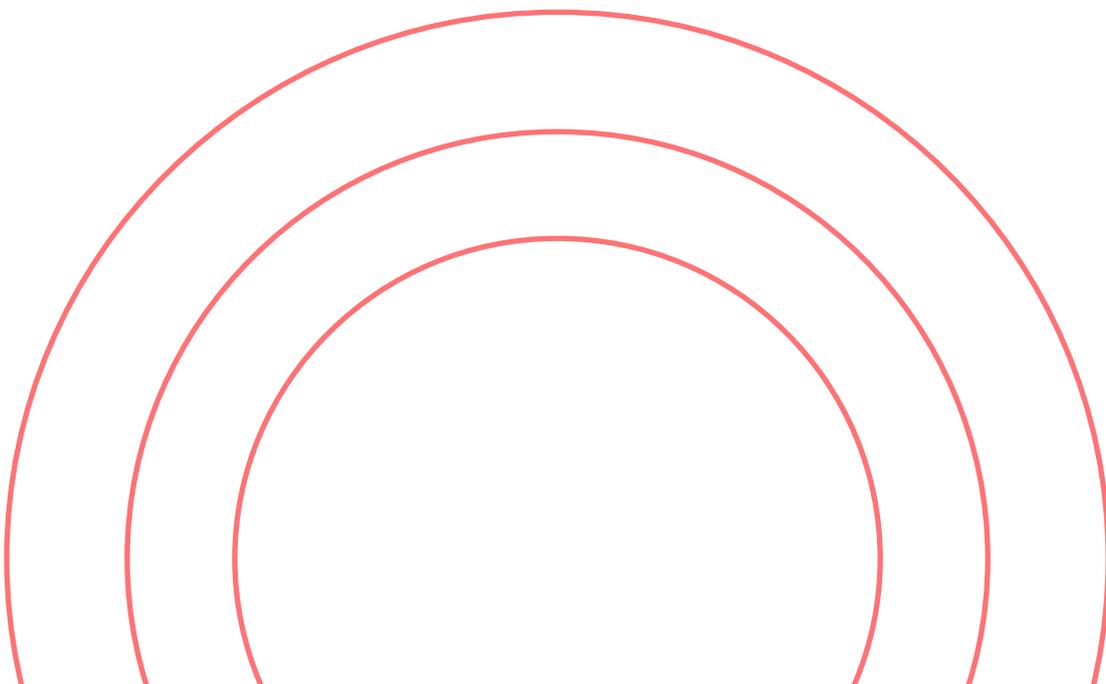
In public discourse and spaces, young people are often treated as a problem that needs to be managed. They are easily labelled as noisy or disruptive – even dangerous. This is particularly evident in traditional cultural institutions, such as museums, where unwritten rules of behaviour can alienate young people.

" I don't use cultural institutions that much because they cost money. You usually go there with adults, because if you go alone, you feel like you're a filthy young person who's just there to disturb others... If they say it's for everyone, it means it's for adults."

- ALMA, 16

At the same time, young people already live in a culture that emphasises self-control and constant monitoring. Social media forces them to regulate their self-expression and be constantly evaluated. When

public institutions reflect this dynamic, even unconsciously, they can reinforce the very pressures that young people want to escape.

Cultural institutions – especially museums, libraries, and art institutions – are often perceived as spaces for learning, inspiration, and reflection. For young people who are striving to develop their resources in a variety of ways and understand their place in a particularly uncertain world, these promises could be of particular significance. However, cultural institutions appear distant and difficult to access for many young people. They can feel like places that subtly – or sometimes more directly – send the message that young people are not welcome.

This section examines the potential of cultural institutions to support the resilience of young people and, on the other hand, the barriers that continue to limit this possibility.
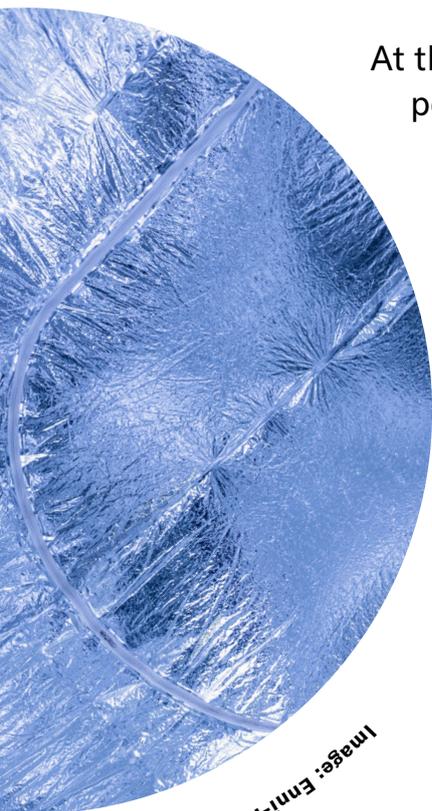
Image: Enni-Kukka Tuomala

Image: Enni-Kukka Tuomala

IMPLICATION 1: Meaningful Offline Experiences

Cultural institutions have the potential to meet young people's need to acquire diverse resources for the future. They can increase useful knowledge and skills, support the safe handling of difficult issues, and strengthen mental resilience.

However, the study showed that learning often requires prior support and information. For example, Mikko was able to concentrate on a classical music concert because he had received a lot of background information at school, which made it easier for him to immerse himself in the work and resulted in a rewarding experience.

Image: Josefiina Nelimarkka
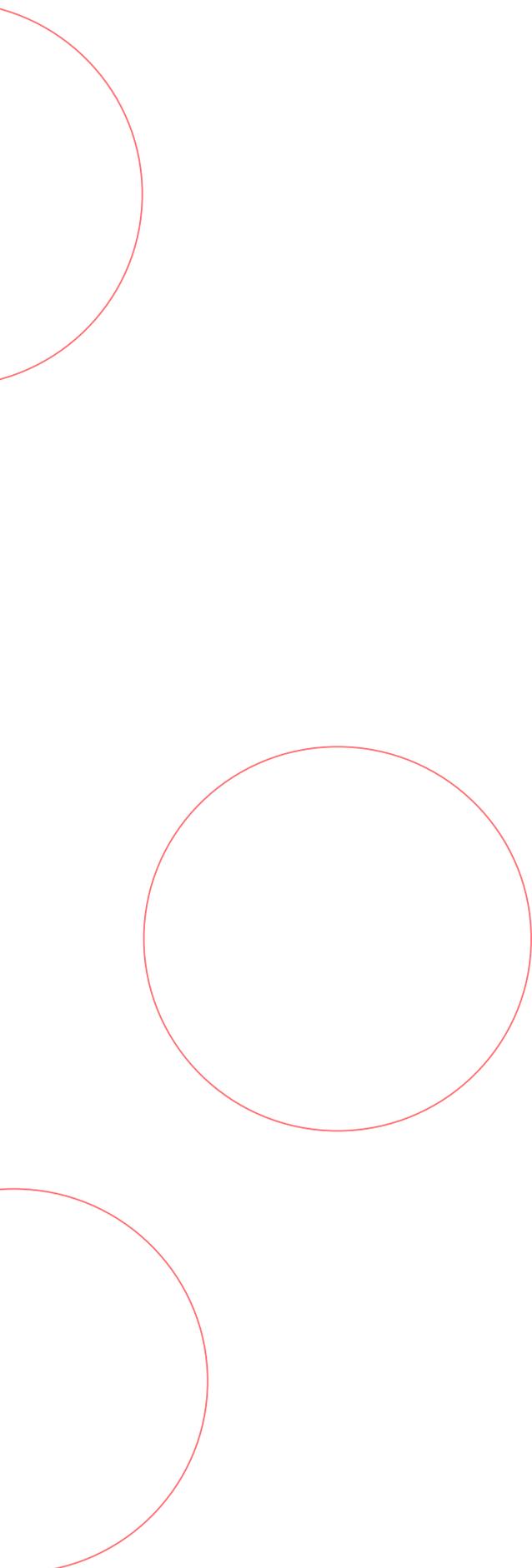
Experiences where young people feel that art truly speaks to them are empowering. Many would like more background information about the artists and their thinking in order to engage more deeply with the works. Art feels especially approachable when it connects to young people's own lives, uses familiar symbolism, or offers enough context and support for interpretation. In these moments, art becomes not just something to look at, but a meaningful space for reflection and self-understanding. Conversely, when art feels inaccessible or difficult to understand, it can be discouraging and raise the threshold to seek out cultural experiences in the future. Such experiences are described as anxiety-inducing and the works pretentious or simply boring.

Examples of authenticity and the courage to be oneself can also be strengthening. **The Barbie movie** serves as a memory for **Alma**, from which she can draw strength whenever she needs it. Young people feel they need discussions from different perspectives and fear the effects of polarisation. At the same time, respectful dialogue on difficult topics is considered rare. Cultural institutions and the arts are seen as having the potential to address complex issues, but at the same time, young people wonder whether they offer genuinely diverse perspectives.

"After the Barbie movie, I felt so good, like now I'm going to live my life. I still think about that feeling and draw strength from it"

– ALMA, 16

Restricting the use of phones in cultural spaces is considered a good thing, as these spaces are intended to be a counterbalance to "brain-rotting" screen time and "quick dopamine hits." On the other hand, the integration of screens into exhibitions is often perceived as disruptive or at least unnecessary. Although videos are sometimes considered a more accessible way of communicating information than long blocks of text, screens are not wanted for their own sake.

"I would like to learn more about these works, as I don't really understand what they are about. I don't like that the information is behind QR codes either, because then I have to take out my phone, and all my notifications bombard me and my thoughts are immediately somewhere else."

– LAURA, 16

IMPLICATION 2: Stress-Free Spaces

Cultural institutions offer young people an opportunity to take a break from their everyday worries. Even just being without a phone is seen as a relief – it offers a break from constant availability and protects them from stressful content. At the same time, young people feel that their behaviour in cultural spaces is not fully accepted. Even if they follow the rules, they feel like they are being watched – especially in museums, where discussing and reflecting on art is not always welcome and walking around with headphones on is considered embarrassing.

"Cultural institutions are educational. They are not the kind of places where young people usually hang out. Young people like to spend time talking, and you can't talk there. But I've talked enough with my mom, so it's easier to go with her."

– SIIRI, 16
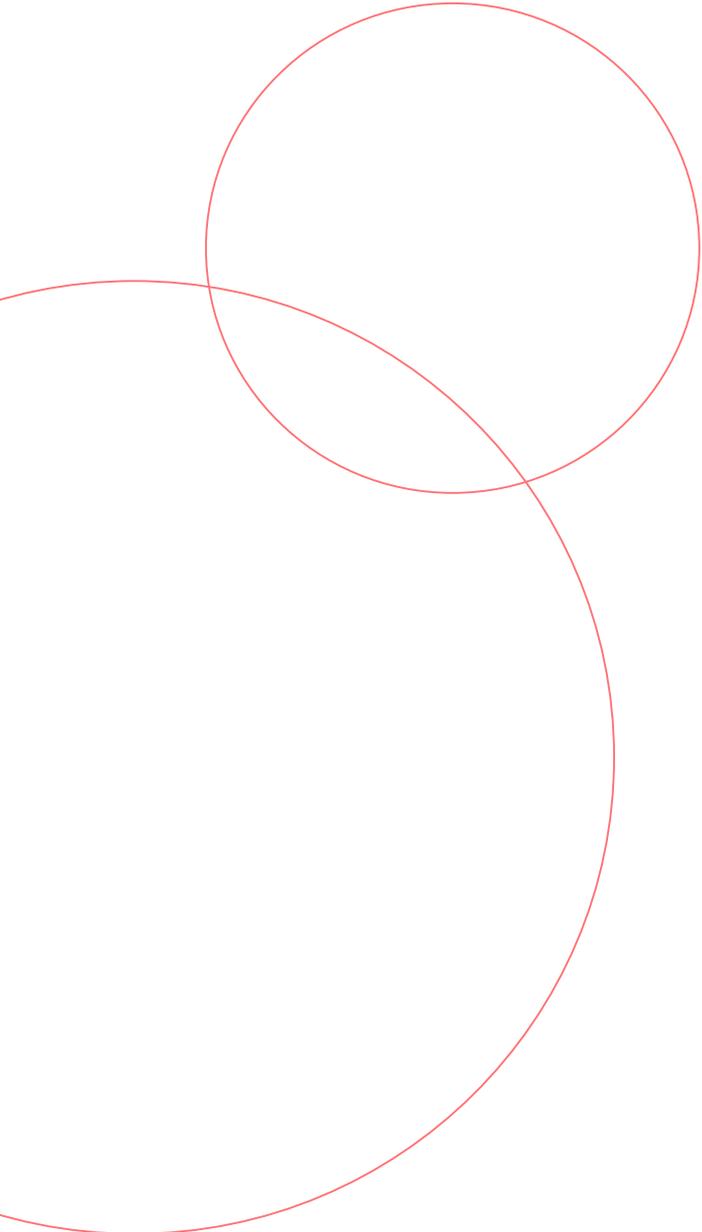
Young people also recognize places where they can relax and be themselves without having to worry about annoying others. Parks, fast food restaurants, and sushi buffets are examples of such everyday safe havens. Cultural institutions have the potential to offer similar carefreeness and safety, but at present they are often associated with rules of conduct and a feeling that young people are not genuinely welcome there.

"Just walking up to the till, if an older person is selling tickets and they ask your age and give you a funny look, you get this feeling that you don't belong there. When it should be like you're people too and you have the right to be here."

– ALMA, 16

Another factor limiting access to cultural experiences is the fear that they will be too overwhelming. Exhibitions that evoke strong emotions without necessarily providing the tools to process them, or that require intense concentration, can feel exhausting. Museums are also perceived as physically demanding due to the long walking distances involved. After visiting some museums, young people describe feeling mentally exhausted. .

IMPLICATION 3: Rest, Play and Fun

Although young people find making an effort rewarding and consider culturally enriching experiences beneficial and educational, their everyday lives are already full of demanding situations and stress. In their limited free time, young people feel the need, above all, to recover. Positive experiences of cultural institutions are often linked to rest and relaxation. Young people particularly remember cultural experiences that allowed them to lie down, enjoy soundscapes, or engage in free-form, playful activities.
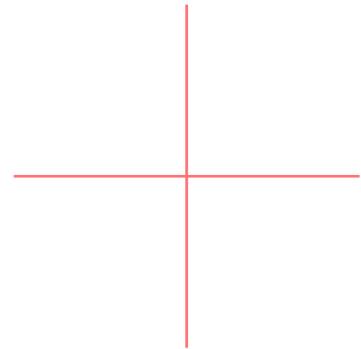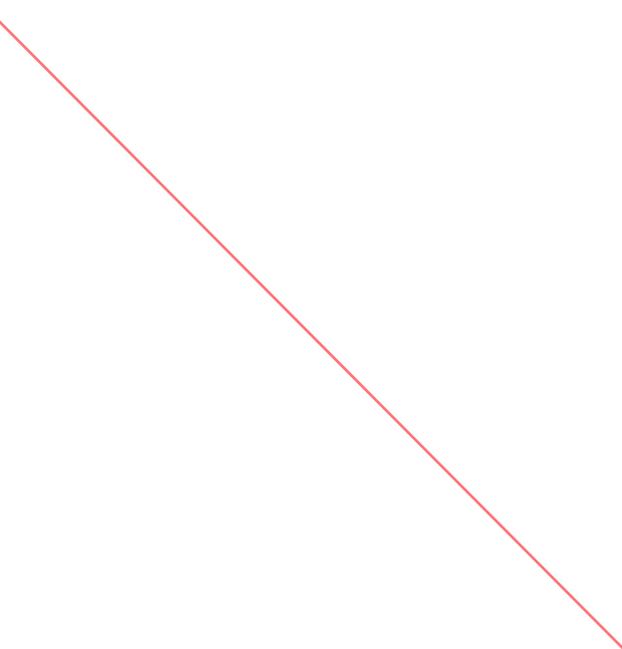
Image: Stella Ojala

"At a previous
exhibition at Amos
Rex, I liked that you
could lie on your
stomach and there
was mood lighting...
You didn't have to
do anything."

– IISA, 16

Young people's favourite museums include **Heureka** and **Luomus,** which combine fun activities, a relaxed atmosphere, and the opportunity to chat with friends. The presence of younger children shapes the rules of behaviour in these spaces, which also gives young people the freedom to be themselves. At the same time, it is worth noting that these museums also offer learning opportunities in an accessible and stimulating format that encourage concentration.

"Heureka is a cool museum compared to some others because you can do stuff yourself, which is why we've been there before, like you get to do, try, and see different things."

– IISA, 16

"I think it's a good thing I was taken to museums as a kid, even if I wasn't that interested at the time, because it helps with going to them now."

– UPU, 17

IMPLICATION 4:
Sparking creativity

For many young people, creative activities are an important way to strengthen their own resources and recover from stress. Young people also draw strength and inspiration from the examples set by others – especially when someone dares to express themselves authentically and courageously. Some young people draw inspiration from art exhibitions on both an abstract and concrete level, for example by carrying a notebook with them in which they can draw or write when inspiration strikes.

However, it is noteworthy that positive experiences of art exhibitions are limited to a small group of young people. They often have a background in either formal art education or a family that considers the use of cultural institutions important and actively encourages it. Knowledge of art and its discourses enable these young people not only to enjoy art, but also to critically examine it – even to the extent that they are able to offer subtle

Image: Stella Ojala

criticism of art institutions and society. At the same time, young people who do not have a similar background feel that formal art is distant and do not see it as related to their own creativity or source of inspiration.

This highlights a key challenge for cultural institutions: culture is inaccessible without cultural capital. The same phenomenon is also repeated in relation to social debate. Young people who already have knowledge of social issues and are accustomed to discussing them, are able to participate in the debate and deepen their understanding through art, for example. At the same time, some young people feel that social issues are distant and irrelevant to them. This reveals how certain voices are easily left out of the discussion – and are unable to benefit from the institutions whose task is to support social participation.

"Art and what you're supposed to think about it is really only in the hands of a small circle of people... They use difficult language because it makes the people who understand it feel special, and if it were made easier to understand, older people would immediately start saying that we're ruining culture... But if the purpose of art is to make you think and stimulate your mind, what kind of thoughts can art inspire if you don't understand it at all?"

– PANU, 17

"I go to museums a lot with my mom, she's really interested in culture... We also go to art museums quite often with school, like when we went to the Modern Gothic exhibition at the Ateneum, I was really inspired by it."

– SIIRI, 16

"At its best, art stirs something in you, and then I start thinking about why it makes me feel that way, and what that says about me. I go with a notebook, and I come away feeling really inspired and start doing my own thing in response to it."

–MANNA, 17

Accessibility for young people means accessibility for everyone

The cultural sector often considers itself to be open, and a lot of effort is put into accessibility. However, accessibility does not simply mean declaring that "this is for everyone." Accessibility is also about identification, familiarity, and providing the tools needed to participate. Young people need to feel that their ways of seeing, experiencing, feeling, and expressing themselves are acceptable.

The design of institutions that are genuinely accessible to young people should be seen as part of a broader effort to build social inclusion. When institutions are adapted to the needs of young people, they often become more accessible to other groups that are easily marginalised. For example, spaces that allow for rest also benefit people with sensory sensitivities and physical disabilities, and more relaxed rules of conduct make museums more accessible to families with children.

Cultural institutions have unique potential: they can provide moments of empowerment, protection from stress and opportunities for recovery, as well as creativity and inspiration – and thus support resilience, especially among young people. However, realising this potential requires that institutions recognise their own accessibility challenges, especially in more formal and regulated environments such as art museums.
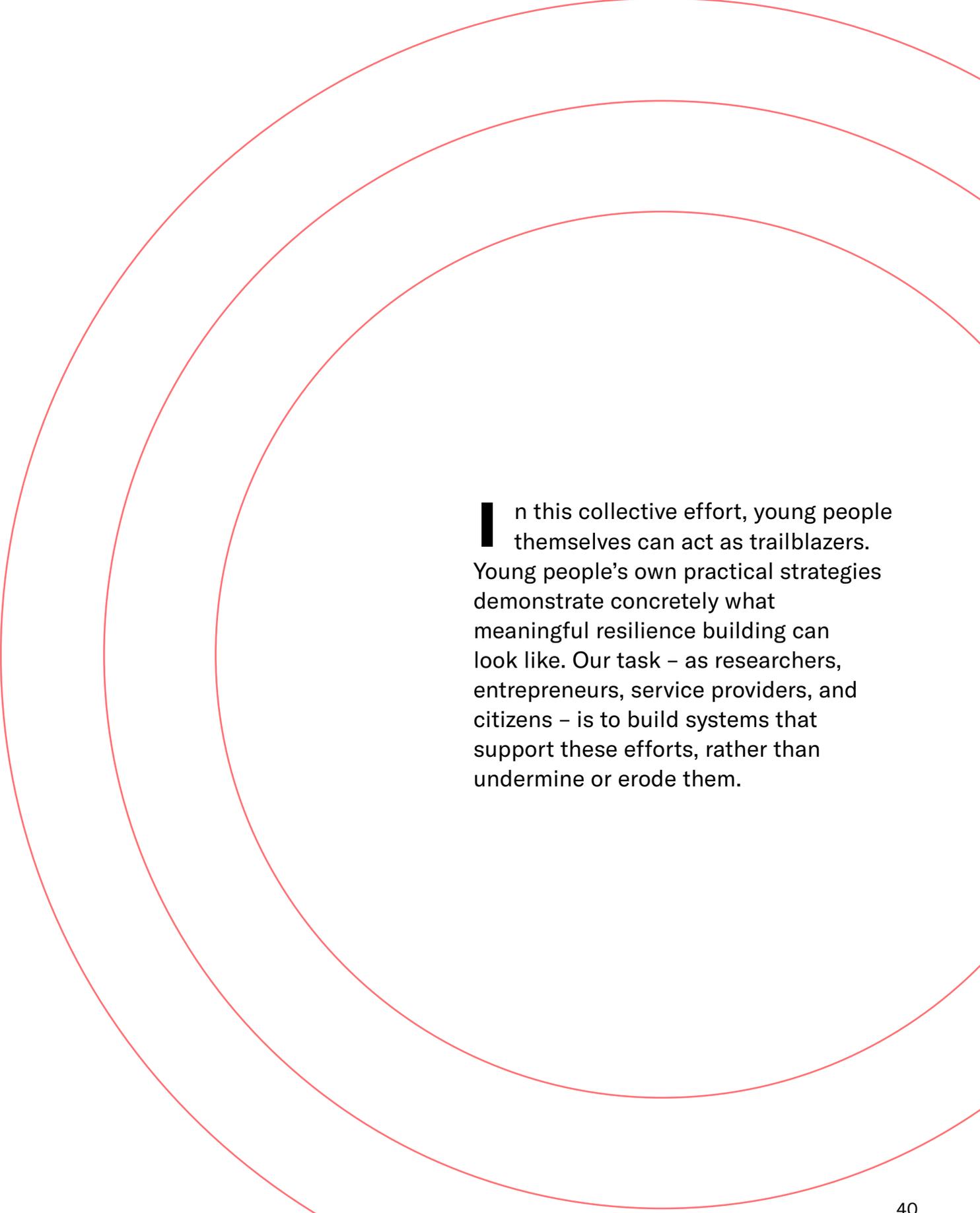
In this collective effort, young people themselves can act as trailblazers. Young people's own practical strategies demonstrate concretely what meaningful resilience building can look like. Our task – as researchers, entrepreneurs, service providers, and citizens – is to build systems that support these efforts, rather than undermine or erode them.

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