

Needham CATH Space Utilization Study

Contract ID #23BDC-035D

April 2023
FINAL





SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION



Introduction

This space utilization study by Bargmann Hendrie + Archetype, Inc. (BH+A) documents their observations and recommendations made to optimize the 20,000 sf Center at the Heights (the CATH) building. This study was authored for the Town of Needham's Department of Health & Human Services and the Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC).

These observations and recommendations respond to information gathered from three sources:

- The 2020 planning study authored by the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging at UMASS Boston's McCormick School, referred to in this study as "the UMASS report,"
- The 2022 feasibility study looking at converting the "lay" kitchen to commercial kitchen authored by Socotec Architects, referred to in this study as "the Socotec report," and
- Multiple site visits, interviews, and meetings with the Aging Services Division Staff (CATH Staff), Council on Aging members, and CATH patrons.

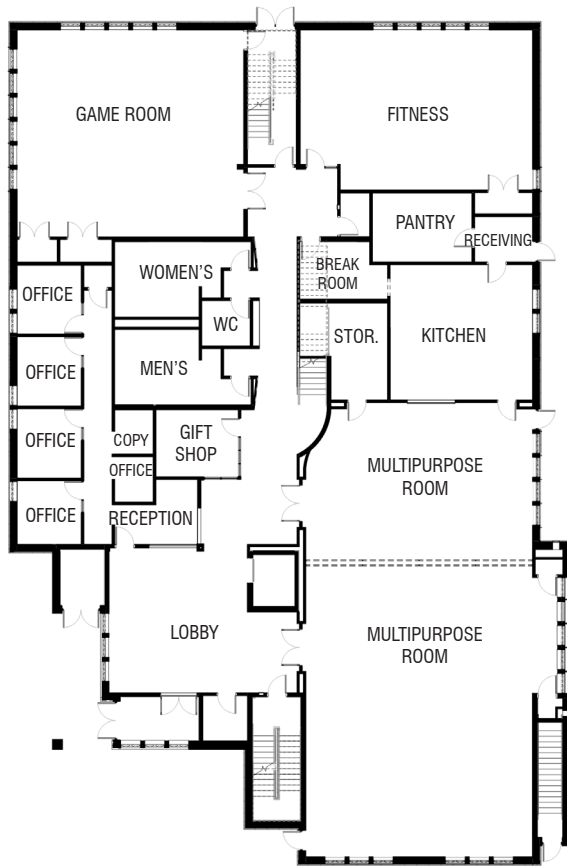
Copies of these reports and meeting minutes can be found in this study's appendix.



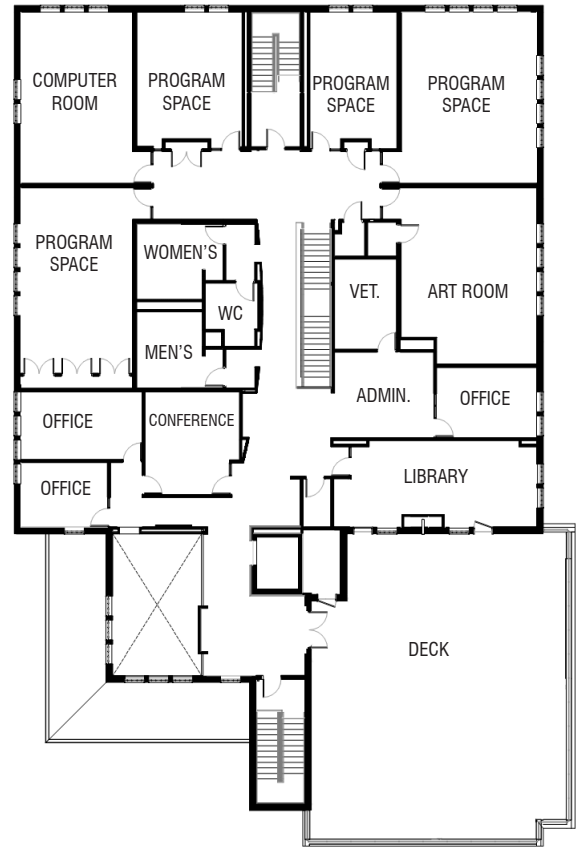
Figure 1.1: Multipurpose room filled with tables and chairs next to kitchen.

INTRODUCTION

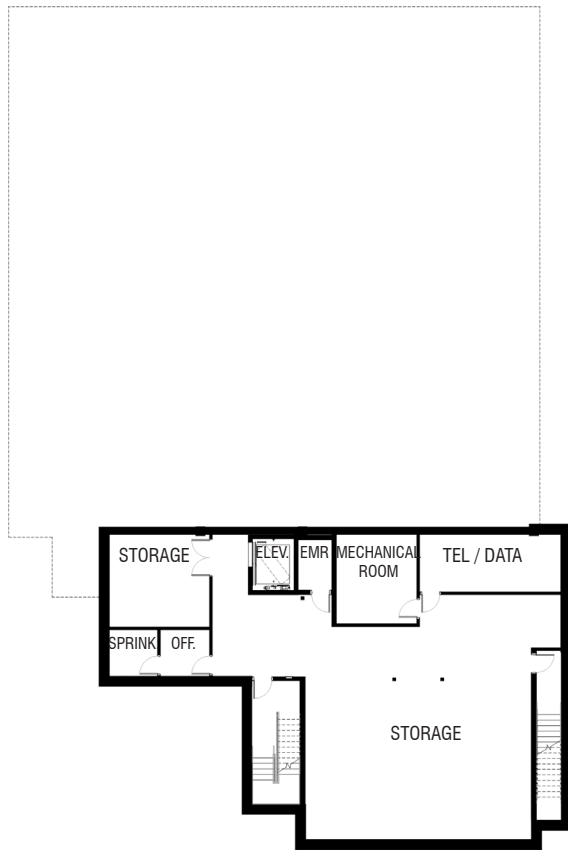
Needham CATH Building Overview



First Floor



Second Floor



Basement

SECTION 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Background

The Center at the Heights (CATH), the town of Needham's senior center, supports the health of senior citizens and their families via a variety of recreational, educational, and wellness programs by connecting patrons to social services in the community. The current CATH facility opened in 2014, having previously operated out of the basement of the Stephen Palmer Building.

This new CATH building reflects the town of Needham's commitment to its senior citizens. The center's original design responded to an increased need for services, programming, and the associated space required. With its opening in 2014, the CATH had more than threefold from approximately 6,000 to 20,000 sf.

The CATH was also designed to anticipate future needs, and this is the context within which this study is authored. While the 20,000 sf CATH facility has allowed for the expansion of programming and services, there are multiple challenges to optimizing this space so that the CATH can accommodate the present needs of its clientele.

Subsequent studies, including the UMASS and Socotec reports have returned to the issue of flexibility and ongoing improvement of the CATH facility.

BH+A vetted the recommendations from these reports and explored additional possible solutions recommended by the town's Department of Health and Human Services, Building Design and Construction Department, and Council on Aging. This vetting was done in consultation with CATH staff and patrons over a series of public meetings, focus groups, and interviews.

The intent is for this report to offer a "menu" of renovation alternates or options, and their associated costs. The town can then carry out any of these alternates as stand-alone projects or combine them into one large project. This report offers these renovation alternates in order of preference, to assist the town in prioritizing future work.



Figure 2.1: Patrons playing billiards in the game room.

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Observations

The space utilization study builds on the research presented in the 2020 UMASS report. This report included a resident survey, two focus groups, and two site visits. This complete study is included in the appendix to this report.

Key findings are summarized below:

- 75% of survey respondents valued the CATH and the services it offered.
- By 2030, the senior population (60+) in Needham is projected to increase by 33% from 7,500 residents to 10,000 residents.

Specific to programming and the building itself, patrons shared the following barriers to accessing programming and services:

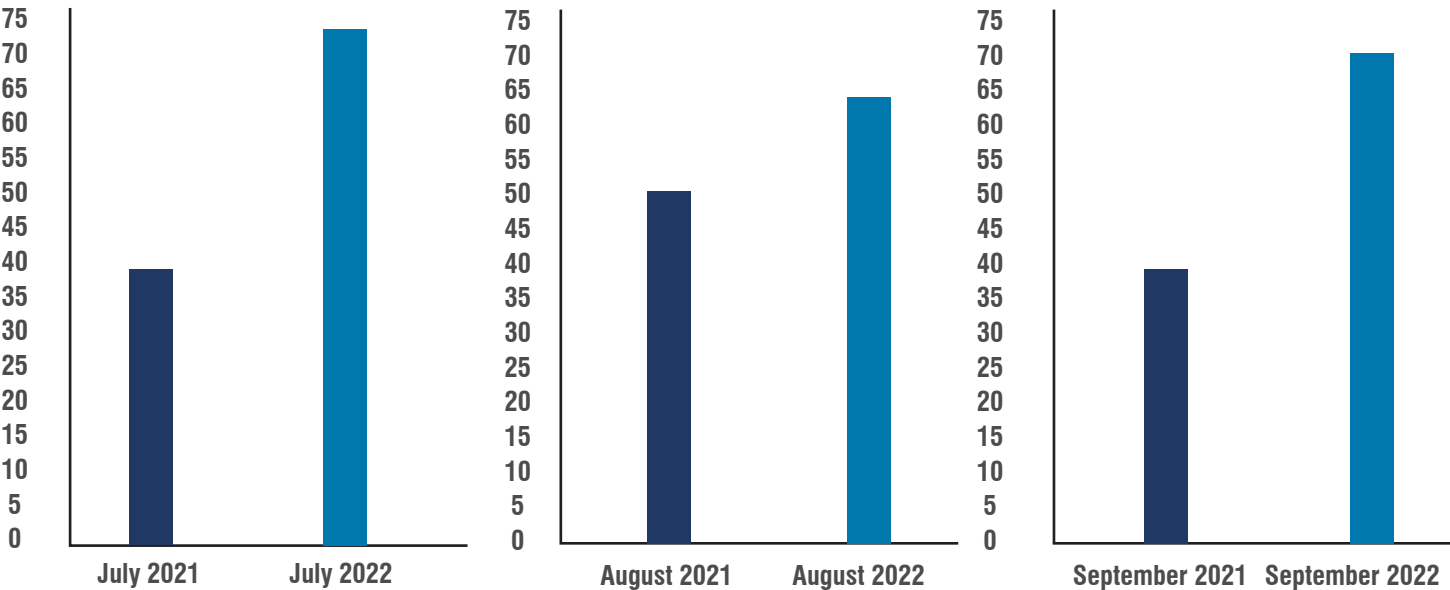
- Inconvenient parking.
- Inconvenient program schedules.
- Not enough space/offerings for physical fitness programming.
- Additional space for social services staff.
- Underused kitchen and roof deck.

Many of the UMASS report’s conclusions remain valid and BH+A’s own observations echo these findings. BH+A has organized these findings into two categories: challenges and barriers to programming at the CATH.

The following negatively impact the use of space at the CATH, putting pressure on limited programming space:

- **Increased Participation Post-COVID:** The CATH is attractive to Needham’s seniors, and is on track to recover post COVID. The UMASS study notes that pre-COVID, the center had 200 daily users on average and noted the senior population in Needham would continue to grow in years to come. Data collected in 2021 and 2022 show daily users increased from a low of 53 daily users to a peak of 205 daily users. Over this same time period, the number of general daily check-in patrons rose 50% from 27 to 42 patrons.

It should be noted that the accuracy of this data is limited by the configuration of the My Senior Center check-in system, which only records patrons who actively check-in at the front desk. Many patrons do not check-in or use the rear entrance to the multipurpose room which has no senior center check-in kiosk.

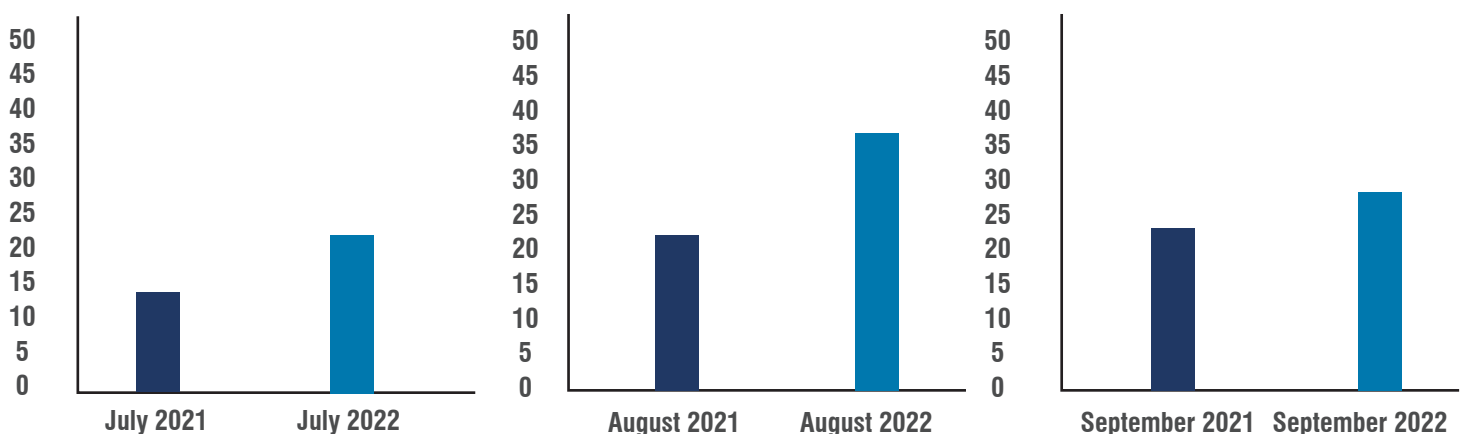


INCREASED GENERAL CHECK-IN PARTICIPATION POST-COVID

Figure 2.2: Daily participation numbers for 2021 and 2022.

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- Popularity of Meals Programs:** The center's meals program is one of its most popular. The meals program serves 150 patrons a day. This program is hybrid; breakfast and lunch are served at the CATH and patrons can also opt to have two meals delivered to their home. Prior to COVID, only homebound patrons were eligible for meal delivery. This requirement was suspended during COVID and the CATH is transitioning to the pre-COVID requirement.
 - Limited Hours of Operation:** The CATH currently operates Monday through Friday 8:30- 5:00 PM. There are no regular activities on the weekends or evenings. In addition, the shuttle does not operate after 2:00 PM.
- As membership increases and in-person programming returns to pre-COVID levels, the scheduling of the most popular programs at the CATH will be increasingly challenging, specifically physical fitness activities that need a large space over 1,000 sf.*
- The meals program operates out of the smaller half of the center's multipurpose room.** There is limited time between breakfast and lunch programs and limited time after the lunch program to use this space for other programming. In addition, it is difficult to set up and break down the large tables and chairs in this room, further restricting its use. As a result, the full-size multipurpose room is generally unavailable for other programming.
 - Popularity of Physical Fitness Programs:** The CATH's physical fitness classes are equally popular, including use of the fitness room's equipment. These types of programs are also space-intensive as patrons require considerable room to allow their free range of movement. For example, a yoga class with 10 students would be difficult to fit in any of the second floor program rooms. By contrast, at 3,000 sf, the full-size multipurpose room could accommodate 40 yoga students. The larger half of the multipurpose room can currently accommodate 25 yoga participants when the smaller half of the multipurpose room is used as a dining room.



INCREASED FITNESS PARTICIPATION POST-COVID

Figure 2.3: Daily participation numbers for 2021 and 2022.

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The following help create programming spaces at the CATH:

- **Remote Learning:** There are two program rooms at the CATH that are equipped for hybrid learning: the arts & crafts room and program room. These rooms are both 600 sf. Hybrid technology accommodates patrons' schedules and allows for social distancing and does not require the same amount of space as traditional in-person learning. However, this class format does not promote social activity which is particularly important for seniors who can be isolated in their homes and cutoff from the community.
- **Remote Work:** According to the UMASS report, 71% of Needham seniors age 60-62 and 43% of seniors age 65-74 work. Post-COVID, these seniors are likely to be working remotely, and have the flexibility to participate in daytime CATH activities they might not have been able to prior to the pandemic. In addition, remote work has dramatically changed the parking situation at the CATH. While the CATH parking lot is frequently full, the abutting MBTA parking lot is relatively empty. Parking scarcity was the number one complaint of survey respondents in the UMASS report. This problem seems to have a readily available solution.
- **Increased Municipal Office Space:** The town of Needham has continued to invest in its municipal properties, renovating and expanding community and office space for various municipal departments. Of note, the Rosemary Recreation Complex, constructed in 2018, provided additional programming and office space for the town, freeing up space, such as the Veterans' Department Office, at the CATH. In addition, the Rosemary Pool Complex's multipurpose room is large enough to be used for a wide range of programming from fitness classes to vaccine clinics. This space can also be used as overflow space for CATH programming.
- **Neighboring Senior Centers:** Senior centers are open to all, and Needham seniors are welcome to partake in activities at any neighboring community's senior center. The town of Newton is currently planning a large multigenerational center, the Newton Center for Active Living (NewCAL). When complete, this center may attract Needham residents. Demand on the CATH's amenities and program may diminish.



Figure 2.4: Tables and chairs on the roof deck.

- **Potential Use of Outdoor Space:** Outdoor space, the center's front lawn, patio, and roof deck have great potential. The front lawn can be programmed with a bocce court or outdoor lounge seating. The roof deck can be used as overflow space for fitness activities or used for meal programs in lieu of the small multipurpose room. This outdoor space with natural ventilation is attractive to seniors to address concerns of COVID transmission.
- **Potential Use of Informal Gathering Spaces:** The CATH is designed with informal social spaces on the first and second floors: the lobby and the second floor waiting area outside of the roof deck. These spaces can also serve as alternative spaces for meals.



Figure 2.5: The upstairs reading area outside of the roofdeck doors is underused. It could be fitted out with a coffee bar and used for meals.

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Recommendations

The CATH's physical layout compliments the center's administrative policies. Though not the focus of this study, cultivating supportive policies will aid in the best use of the center's spaces. BH + A proposes the following for consideration:

- **Increase the CATH's Hours of Operation:** Expanding the hours of operation for programming and transportation will reduce pressures on available rooms, specifically the multipurpose room and the fitness room.
- **Incentivize In-Person Programming:** To encourage patrons to return from remote to in-person programming, consider offering incentives such as discounts and free food.
- **Create Social and Food-Friendly Spaces:** The CATH's current food policy, which allows food and drink in all spaces, should be promoted. Mobile "grab n' go" carts can be set up in the lobby and the space outside of the roof deck to encourage to activate these spaces and lessen the burden on the small multipurpose room.
- **Install Second My Senior Center Kiosk:** Setting up a My Senior Center kiosk will help the CATH get more accurate headcounts. It should be noted that even though using a second kiosk can capture who is visiting the CATH, patrons cannot use it to sign in for specific programming.



Figure 2.6: Patron checking in using the MySeniorCenter kiosk.

Alternates

In addition to these administrative solutions, BH+A proposes the following space renovations and reconfigurations. These recommendations are proposed as stand-alone alternates and projects, which the town can carry out as funds become available. The alternates were reduced from a much larger pool of ideas after vetting by the town, Council on Aging, and CATH patrons. These recommendations are listed in order of preference and discussed in more depth under the Alternates section of this report:

- **Commercial Kitchen Conversion:** Convert the existing “lay” kitchen to a commercial kitchen for large-scale meal production.
- **Fitness Room Expansion:** Provide additional strength-training equipment by moving the fitness room to the current game room and move the game room to the former fitness room space.
- **Vestibule Addition & Accessible Parking:** Provide a second rear entrance, legitimizing the small multipurpose room’s egress door which is an unofficial entrance to the building. Equip this entrance with a My Senior Center kiosk. Provide accessible parking closer to both the existing main entrance on Hillside Avenue and the new rear entrance.
- **Basement Renovation:** Provide additional flexible and overflow program space by finishing out the CATH’s basement. Provide an accessible restroom at this level.
- **Roof Deck Renovation:** Provide new furniture, privacy screens and a shade structure to make this space more inviting. Equip this space with a mobile food cart to activate the space.
- **Café Lounge Reconfiguration:** As part of the commercial kitchen renovation, convert the existing fitness room into a café-lounge space. Café lounge spaces are becoming increasingly popular in senior centers and can help take pressure off of the small multipurpose room.
- **Office Reconfiguration:** In order to provide a more private office space for the social service staff, convert the current computer lab into an open office for the programming staff, and use the current private offices on the first floor for social services.



Figure 2.7: Volunteers working inside the kitchen.

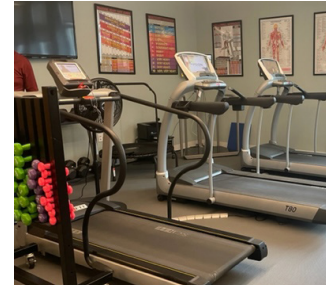


Figure 2.8: Gym equipment inside the fitness center.



Figure 2.9: Parking lot.



Figure 2.10: Basement space.



Figure 2.11: Roof deck.



Figure 2.12: Computer lab space.



Figure 2.13: Cafe/Lounge at Falmouth Senior Center.

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Community Engagement & Surveys

BH+A engaged CATH patrons and staff through presentations, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. Presentations and focus groups included (* indicates minutes from these presentations are included in the appendix to this study):

- **Programming Staff Focus Group October 6, 2022:** This was a small in-person focus group with the programming staff at the CATH. Five staff members participated.
- **Social Services Staff Focus Group October 6, 2022:** This was a small in-person focus group with the social services staff at the CATH. Five staff members participated.
- **Transportation and Maintenance Staff Focus Group October 6, 2022:** This was a small in-person focus group with the transportation staff at the CATH. Two staff members participated.
- **Fitness Staff Interview October 13, 2022*:** BH+A interviewed Stephen Cadigan, fitness instructor.
- **Council on Aging (CoA) Presentation, October 13, 2022 *:** BH+A gave a preliminary design presentation to the CoA and open to the public. The meeting was hybrid.
- **Coffee Group Presentation 1, October 18, 2022:** BH+A gave an in-person preliminary design presentation to CATH patrons and distributed questionnaires.
- **Coffee Group Presentation 2, November 21, 2022:** BH+A gave an in-person preliminary design presentation to CATH patrons and distributed questionnaires.
- **Pool Users Focus Group, November 21, 2022:** BH+A met with CATH patrons who used the game room's pool tables frequently. Three patrons participated.
- **Permanent Public Buildings Committee (PPBC) Presentation 1 October 25, 2022*:** BH+A presented preliminary findings and recommendations via ZOOM to the PPBC. This meeting was open to the public.
- **Permanent Public Buildings Committee (PPBC) Presentation 2 February 27, 2023:** BH+A presented follow-up findings and recommendations via ZOOM to the PPBC. This meeting was open to the public.

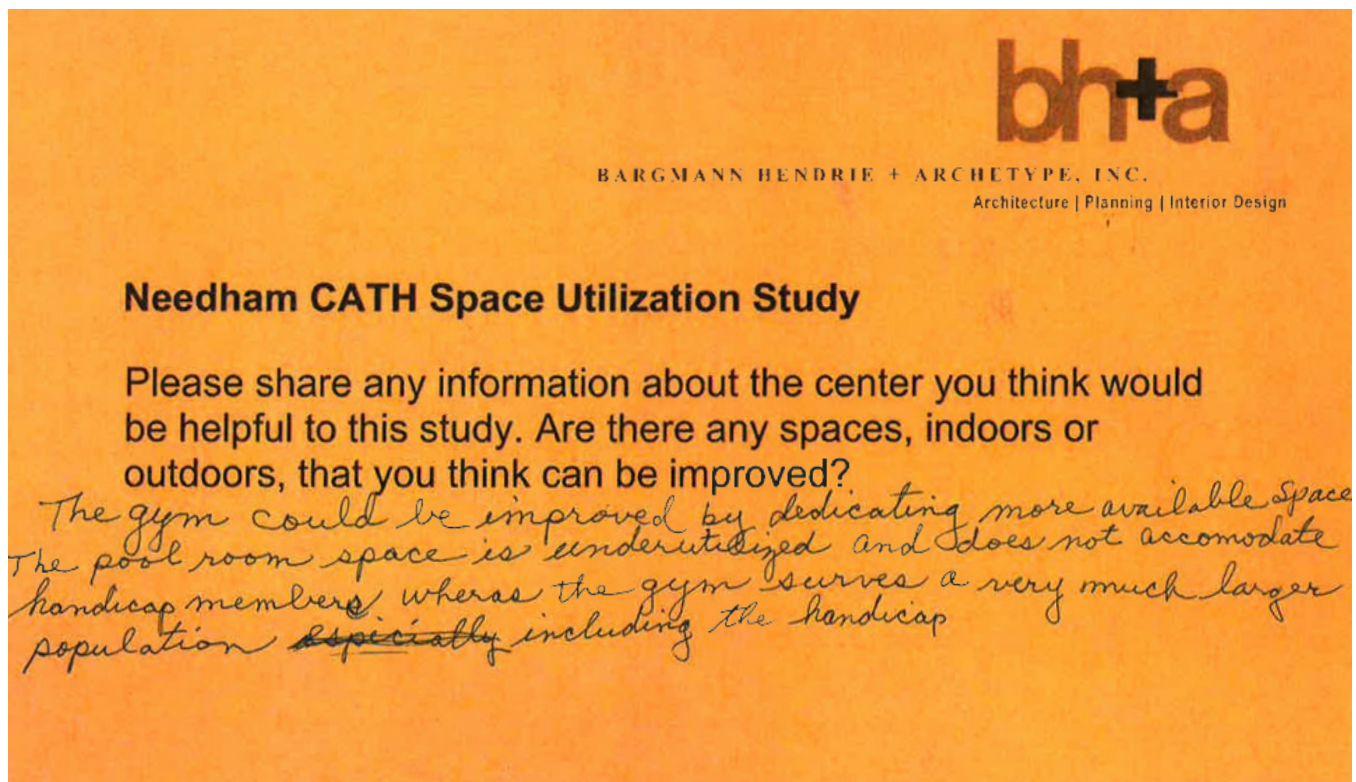


Figure 2.14: CATH Patron Questionnaire Response.

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BH+A issued an open-ended questionnaire intended to solicit feedback on presentations and received 23 responses.

BH+A also referenced data collected from two earlier community surveys authored by UMASS Boston and the CATH. The UMASS community survey was conducted in Spring 2020 and received nearly 700 responses. The CATH conducted a “Getting Back to the CATH” follow-up survey in Winter 2021 and received almost 200 responses.

Some key findings from all three of these outreach efforts with citations:

- **Parking and class times were inconvenient:** CATH patrons could not participate in programs because of either inconvenient parking (33%) or inconvenient class times (15%) (UMASS survey).
- **Fitness programs are popular and fitness classes and space should be expanded.** CATH patrons primarily came to the center for its fitness programs (51%) and asked that additional fitness program be offered (17%) (CATH survey) and that the fitness room be expanded (43%) (BH+A questionnaire).
- **CATH hours should be expanded.** CATH patrons asked to have the center’s hours expanded to evenings and weekends.
- **CATH spaces should be more inviting.** CATH patrons asked for a more inviting space, such as “relaxing lounges” (UMASS survey).

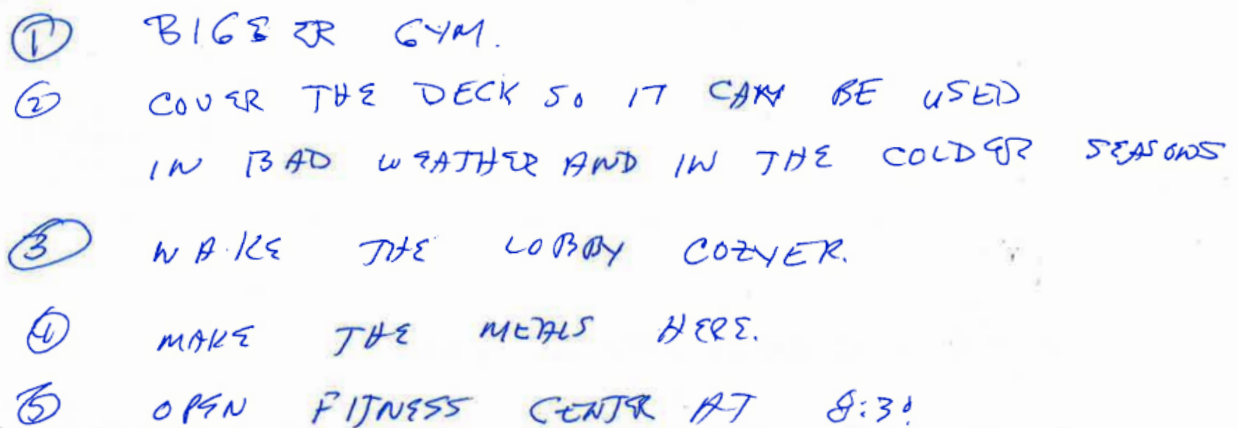
- 
- A photograph of a handwritten list of five suggestions for CATH space improvements. The list is written in blue ink on a white background. Each item is numbered with a circled number from 1 to 5.
- ① BIGGER GYM.
 - ② COVER THE DECK SO IT CAN BE USED IN BAD WEATHER AND IN THE COLDER SEASONS
 - ③ WAKE THE LOBBY COZYER.
 - ④ MAKE THE METALS HERE.
 - ⑤ OPEN FITNESS CENTER AT 8:30

Figure 2.15: CATH Patron Questionnaire Response.

