

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



local makers flex their talents at the city's 'gym for innovators'

DANA HENRY | TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 201



Want to make something cool? In this city, you're not the only one.

NextFab Studio has been around for barely three years and in that short span Philly's "gym for innovators" outgrew its original space at the University City Science Center. The membership-based, high-tech workshop and prototyping center's new home -21,000 square feet on Washington Avenue - officially opened in January. The beefed-up facility is both a boon for local artists and small-scale manufacturers, and a tremendous boost to a struggling commercial corridor.

Walking into the new NextFab, it's easy to be seduced by all the state-of-the-art equipment. In addition to SolidWorks, a Computer Assisted Design (CAD) software that renders true-to-life modeling, NextFab provides access to industrial textile machines, a water jet cutter, a CNC plasma cutter and a high definition 3-D printer the height of a small person. These are fabrication machines that typically don't exist outside academic and factory settings.

But the real story behind NextFab is not what they have but *who* they attract. With its deep industrial roots, Philly has long boasted a creative community that loves using their hands - urban gardeners, craft brewers, crafters, hackers and salvage masters help define the city's character.

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So what happens when this spirit of tactile innovation meets the tools of high-tech fabrication? Flying Kite went behind the scenes to find out.

The Artist

Shelley Spector was altering prints on Photoshop 20 years ago, long before it was considered art. But when 3-D printers and laser cutters came along, she assumed they were intended for factories. That changed once she got her hands on a digital sewing machine.

"I'm a little geeky anyways," she admits. "I didn't really have anything in mind, but I saw it as a way to increase what I could do."

Spector was formally trained in sculpture at University of the Arts and already had serious cred when she joined NextFab in the spring of 2011. The former Breadboard artist-in-residence has received grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the Independence Foundation; her work is featured in the collections of Philadelphia Art Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) and the Human Rights Campaign in Washington, D.C.

Spector works big. Her most recent installation, "But Not As Much As Tomorrow" at Bridgette Mayer Gallery in Center City, included brick façade cut from old clothes, wallpaper made from cereal boxes and an entire room filled with handmade wooden spools. For productions this size, SolidWorks, laser cutting and digital embroidery are a no-brainer. Spector's new challenge – which she meets by hand-drawing shapes before uploading them – is learning to be less precise.

"It's really easy to use these tools to make something look polished," she says. "The challenge for me is to use them to make something look handmade."

<http://www.flyingkitemedia.com/features/NextFab022113.aspx>