Storage Systems

How to organise tools, materials and resources in a clear, safe and easy-to-use way

Summary

A make-a-thek space needs a simple and reliable storage system. Tools, materials, machines, activity kits and printed resources should be **easy to find, easy to use and easy to put back**.

Good storage helps the space stay organised, safe and accessible. It reduces staff workload, supports user autonomy, prevents materials from being lost or damaged, and makes activities easier to prepare.

This resource gives practical suggestions for organising storage through boxes, drawers, shelves, labels, access levels and simple inventory tools.

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1. Start with what you need to store

Before buying boxes or shelves, list everything that needs a place.

To do

- ☐ List all tools, machines, materials and resources.
- ☐ Group them by function.
- ☐ Separate what users can access freely from what needs staff support.
- ☐ Identify items that need safe or locked storage.
- ☐ Decide what should be visible and what should be stored away.

Common categories

- **Basic tools**: scissors, rulers, pencils, tape, needles, pliers.
- **Machine accessories**: cables, bobbins, blades, mats, nozzles, pedals.
- **Consumables**: thread, paper, vinyl, filament, glue, batteries.
- **Reusable materials**: fabric scraps, cardboard, donated garments, yarn, buttons.
- **Activity kits**: workshop materials, instructions, examples, feedback cards.
- **Safety and cleaning**: gloves, cleaning tools, first-aid or safety notes.
- **Communication materials**: posters, flyers, stickers, brochures, QR codes.
- **Examples and samples**: outputs, material samples, prototypes, repaired objects.

2. Create clear storage zones

A good storage system is easier to use when divided into simple zones.

Everyday access

For tools and materials used often.
Examples:

- scissors;
- rulers;
- thread;
- pencils;
- measuring tape;
- basic repair tools.

These should be easy to reach, clearly labelled and easy to return.

photo credits: Carly Holzner @curlypaints

Supervised access

For items that require guidance, booking or training.
Examples:

- machine accessories;
- cutting blades;
- heat tools;
- soldering tools;
- specific machine parts;
- expensive materials.

These can be visible, but access should be controlled.

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Staff-only storage

For items that should not be freely used.

Examples:

- hazardous materials;
- maintenance tools;
- backup stock;
- valuable equipment;
- documents with personal data.

Use closed or lockable storage where needed.

Reuse materials

For leftovers, donations and circular materials.

Examples:

- fabric scraps;
- clean garments;
- yarn;
- cardboard;
- paper;
- buttons;
- small offcuts.

This area should be curated, not treated as a random donation box.

Display and inspiration

Some materials and outputs should stay visible.

Examples:

- sample outputs from machines;
- repair examples;
- material samples;
- activity results;
- “what you can make here” displays.

Visible examples help users understand the potential of the space.

photo credits: OpenDot - Making Fashion Last - Distributed Design project

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3. Choose simple storage formats

Use storage formats that are easy to understand and maintain.

photo credits: OpenDot - fab lab

Transparent boxes

Best for: fabrics; yarn; activity kits; paper; machine accessories; donated materials.
Tip: use labels even if the box is transparent.

Drawers

Best for: needles; bobbins; buttons; small electronics; blades; screws; spare parts.
Tip: use dividers for small items.

Shelves

Best for: larger boxes; material samples; books; manuals; activity kits; visible resources.
Tip: label shelves by category.

Closed cabinets

Best for: expensive tools; machines; fragile materials; staff-only items; safety-sensitive items.
Tip: use lockable cabinets in public or shared spaces.

Wall organisers

Best for: frequently used tools; sewing tools; measuring tools; scissors; rulers; thread.
Tip: draw or label the position of each tool, so people know where to put it back.

photo credits: OpenDot - make-a-thek Wall organizer

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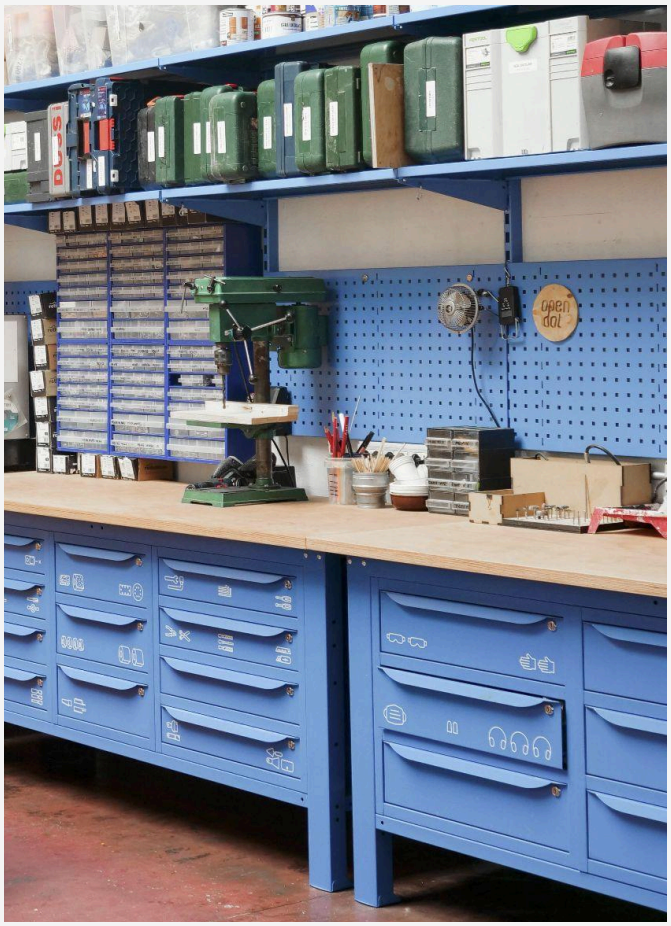
Mobile carts

Best for: temporary spaces; pop-up workshops; shared tools; activity kits; mobile making stations.
Tip: give each cart a fixed inventory.

4. Label everything clearly

Labels make the space easier to understand, especially for first-time users.



A good label includes

- name of the item
- category;
- simple description;
- access level;
- return location;
- icon or image, if useful;
- QR code, if needed.

Examples

Sewing tools
Scissors · pins · measuring tape · chalk
Return here after use.

Machine accessories
Ask a facilitator before using these items.

photo credits: OpenDot - fab lab

To do

- ☐ Use short and simple words.
- ☐ Avoid technical jargon where possible.
- ☐ Use large, readable text.
- ☐ Use icons for beginners or multilingual contexts.
- ☐ Do not rely only on colour: add text too.
- ☐ Keep the same label style across the space.

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5. Define access levels

Not everything should be equally accessible.
Use three simple access levels.

Open access
Users can take and return these items independently.

Examples: pencils, paper; basic hand tools; fabric scraps; printed guides.

Ask first
Users can access these items with staff or facilitator support.

Examples: machine accessories; specific tools; expensive materials; tools linked to safety procedures.

Staff only
Only staff or trained facilitators can access these items.

Examples: sharp replacement blades; maintenance tools; backup stock; valuable equipment.

Optional colour code
Green — free to use
Yellow — ask first
Red — staff only

Keep the system simple. If it is too complex, people will not use it.

6. Make storage accessible and safe

Storage should work for different users, bodies and levels of experience.

To do

- ☐ Keep frequently used items at reachable height.
- ☐ Avoid heavy boxes on high shelves.
- ☐ Use lightweight boxes with handles.
- ☐ Leave enough space to open drawers and cabinets.
- ☐ Keep pathways clear.
- ☐ Store sharp tools safely, and heat tools only after cooling.
- ☐ Keep chemicals, glues or inks in safe containers.
- ☐ **Add short safety notes where needed.**

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Quick test

Can a first-time user understand what is available, what they can use, and where to return it? If not, simplify the system.

7. Manage donated and reusable materials

Reusable materials are valuable, but they need rules. Otherwise, they can quickly become clutter.

To do

- ☐ Create a dedicated area for donated and leftover materials.
- ☐ Define what you accept and what you do not accept.
- ☐ Check materials before adding them to the space.
- ☐ Keep only materials that are clean, safe and useful.
- ☐ Sort materials by type.
- ☐ Remove damaged or unusable items regularly.
- ☐ Use reused materials in activities and displays.

Example donation rules

We accept:

- clean fabric scraps;
- buttons;
- yarn;
- paper and cardboard;
- garments suitable for repair or transformation;
- small useful materials for workshops.

We do not accept:

- dirty or wet materials;
- unsafe materials;
- unidentified chemicals;
- broken electronics without prior agreement;
- very large donations without checking with the team first.

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8. Prepare activity kits

Activity kits help staff and facilitators prepare workshops faster.

Each kit should include everything needed for one activity: tools, materials; printed instructions; example output; set-up checklist; clean-up checklist; feedback cards; missing materials list.

Examples

Repair workshop kit

- needles;
- thread;
- scissors;
- patches;
- fabric scraps;
- repair examples;
- printed mending guide.

Material exploration kit

- material samples;
- labels;
- activity sheet;
- sustainability prompts.

9. Use a simple inventory

An inventory helps you know what you have, what is missing and what needs replacing.

Start simple. A spreadsheet or printed checklist is enough.

Include

- ☐ item name;
- ☐ category;
- ☐ quantity;
- ☐ location;
- ☐ access level;
- ☐ condition;
- ☐ date added;
- ☐ responsible person;
- ☐ notes.

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For machines and valuable tools, also include:

- ☐ purchase date;
- ☐ serial number;
- ☐ accessories;
- ☐ maintenance notes;
- ☐ booking or use rules.

Simple status options

- available;
- low stock;
- missing;
- needs repair;
- staff only.

A basic inventory that is updated is better than a complex one nobody uses.

10. Keep the system alive

Storage systems need regular care.

After each activity

- ☐ Put tools back in place.
- ☐ Check if anything is missing.
- ☐ Separate broken or unsafe items.
- ☐ Collect reusable leftovers.
- ☐ Remove waste.
- ☐ Reset the space for the next users.

Regularly

- ☐ Review donations.
- ☐ Remove unusable materials.
- ☐ Update labels.
- ☐ Check QR codes, if used.
- ☐ Clean drawers and shelves.
- ☐ Check machine accessories.
- ☐ Update the inventory.
- ☐ Ask staff and users what is unclear.

Assign responsibility clearly. If everyone is responsible, the system may not be maintained.

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