

# Introducing the GARAGE by iLab: Behind the Scenes at Our New Innovation Hub

*Learn about the launch of our new state-of-the-art space, built to accelerate innovation from the inside out and provide new solutions for employees, partners and ultimately, our patients.*

By [Caleigh Findley, PhD](#) | May 23, 2025

On a crisp spring morning, the sound of snare drums and brass horns echoed on our East Hanover, NJ campus. A high school marching band paraded past in celebration. Employees and their children looked on, snapping photos as the ribbon was cut outside Building 345.

But this wasn't just about spectacle.

Inside the GARAGE, a high-tech incubation space that opened in April, six experience stations were ready for action, inviting associates and their children to experiment with gamification, AI Copilot sessions, and XR. It was "Take Your Child to Work Day" — with a twist: The launch of the new space, created by the Novartis Innovation Lab team, was themed "Take Your Inner Child to Work Day," and it lived up to the name: Bold, imaginative and hands-on.

And yet, as Sterlena Taylor, PhD, MBA, and Executive Director of the Novartis Innovation Lab put it, "The GARAGE is a workhorse, not a show pony."

## A Space Designed for Doing



The GARAGE is designed to spark creativity and built to sustain it. The hub is grounded in open innovation, where transformation meets emerging tech and ideas become working prototypes.

In this context, the term “garage” emanated from Silicon Valley, where, for many high-tech companies, the first spark of innovation occurred with smart people experimenting in a safe space, fit for that purpose. And the Innovation Lab team benchmarked against similar innovation labs at Microsoft and NASA to arrive at their approach.

The goal is to equip Novartis teams with the tools, skills and mindsets they need to navigate and lead in a rapidly changing healthcare landscape. “We’re focused on enabling open innovation and innovation acceleration,” says Taylor. “This isn’t just about trying cool tools. It’s about solving real problems — for our customers, colleagues, and ultimately, our patients and those that care for them.”

For Vinod Nair, PharmD, MBA and Director Innovation Lab, Game Studio, gamification has real-world application, helping physicians to better diagnose diseases, and ensuring patients get the right treatment. “There are very few healthcare companies developing games,” he says. “Gamification uses the principles of behavior change. And as a pharmacist by training, the neuroscience behind it is fascinating.”

The GARAGE space offers a blend of structured programming and drop-in access, allowing associates to test platforms, join a hackathon, attend a fireside chat or explore technologies like generative AI, AR/VR or new content systems.

The GARAGE is more than just a physical space. It reflects a growing belief that to truly accelerate progress, innovation can’t be siloed.

And the in-house expertise of the Innovation Lab team means they will be practitioners of the discipline of innovation, as well as enablers: The team will work in ~~the~~ <sup>275</sup> GARAGE every day across their three core verticals,



and play a crucial role in prioritizing new and emerging technology that will deliver solutions and capabilities for associates, customers and patients.

The GARAGE is part of Novartis' broader transformation journey. Teams are encouraged to bring business challenges into the space, collaborate cross-functionally and build solutions that scale.

"Our culture of innovation is a core value at Novartis," says Gail Horwood, Chief Marketing and Customer Experience Officer at Novartis. "We are committed to shaping the future of healthcare and advancing solutions for patients through using this new open innovation and transformative hub."

## Inside the GARAGE: Six Exciting Experience Stations



Step through the double doors of The GARAGE and you'll find more than just an open-concept workspace. The area has been carefully designed to support different stages of the innovation process, all while encouraging collaboration across disciplines. Each of the six experience stations serves a unique function, but together they form an integrated ecosystem for creative problem-solving.

- **Open Innovation Theater:** A flexible event space for hackathons, panels, fireside chats and live demos. It will also host open innovation sessions with external thought-leaders, mavericks, academia, and partners.
- **Learning Center:** Offers hands-on training in emerging technology and platforms, helping associates build new tech competencies faster. digital fluency.
- **Wonder Center:** A quiet, reflective space for ideation and deep thinking — because, as Taylor says, "innovation is a thinker's sport."
- **Immersive Studio:** An XR tech playground featuring VR, AR and mixed reality tools that help teams test ideas in 3D and develop compelling customer-obsessed experiences.
- **Content / UX Design Studio:** Supports content creation and UX design, research, and testing, with

resources and tech from the Novartis Content Lab and MarTech teams.

- **Think Tank:** A private space for focused strategy sessions, pitches or small-group collaboration.

## **Innovation in Action: Hackathons, “Coffee with Copilot” and Executive Residencies**

And the GARAGE is already fueling real, high-value work across Novartis.

Even before its official launch, the team hosted a GenAI hackathon, our first enterprise hackathon sponsored by our President, Victor Bultó, and a CAR-T hackathon, each bringing together cross-functional teams for a three-day deep dive into a real-world challenge. Associates rolled up their sleeves (literally, in custom t-shirts) and worked side-by-side to develop tangible solutions for utilizing GenAI to change behavior and addressing the unique needs in our novel approach to oncology treatment, respectively.

The teams also ditched the slide deck and showcased their work science-fair style, building final presentation boards to share their ideas. The format not only pushed new thinking forward, it also gave associates an opportunity to share their ideas with leadership.

At AIX Days on campus the team has hosted “Beyond the Bubble” segments featuring external speakers who provided thought-provoking and at times, eye-popping talks that got teams out of their own cubicles as they built understanding with each story.

But not every activity at the GARAGE requires a team, a challenge or a matching t-shirt. Some are as simple as stopping by for a conversation.

Take the Copilot AI sessions, for example: These informal, twice-weekly drop-ins named “Coffee with Copilot” offer hands-on help from experts. Whether you’re exploring new use cases or learning how to think differently about generative AI, you can grab a coffee and leave with actionable insights. No sign-up required.

Or the GARAGE Executive Residencies, where executive leaders across the US will hold residency in the space, allowing for robust conversations and sharing with all who are in the iLab that day. It’s a unique opportunity for leaders to hear about business problems directly from teams, in a more intimate setting – and the opportunity to use new tools to solve them together.

“The more people understand the tools, the more they can bring them into their day-to-day thinking,” says Taylor. “That’s how we build a culture of innovation from the inside out.”

## **Transforming How Novartis Works, Together**

The GARAGE is more than just a physical space. It reflects a growing belief that to truly accelerate progress, innovation can’t be siloed. It must be collaborative, applied, and woven into the day-to-day work of every associate. And creating a dedicated space accelerates that progress.

That means shifting from “innovation theater” to innovation as a discipline, something Taylor is deeply passionate about. “People sometimes think innovation is all puppets and fairy dust,” she said. “But it’s not. This is about solving real problems in pragmatic ways. It’s about delivering solutions that matter.”

As the space came to life, so did the enthusiasm across the Innovation Lab team. “The GARAGE is where we make time for bold ideas. It’s where we turn reflection into action, and action into impact. This is where the future of Novartis starts to take shape,” said Linda James Smith, Director, Innovation Lab Governance, Policies and Guidelines.

## What's Next: The GARAGE is Open for Brainstorming



The GARAGE is now open for associates to explore, book, and build. Each month, the space will host a range of events, training sessions and fireside chats. Whether you're prototyping a new workflow, testing a MarTech platform or curious about emerging tools, The GARAGE offers an easy way to engage and experiment.

At the end of the day, the GARAGE isn't about the tools; it's about the people using them and the bold ideas they're ready to bring to life, says the team.

"It's all about changing the culture of innovation," Smith explains. "We make it real to people, but it's there to enhance what we really do — a place where they can go and ideate and think outside of the box and not get confined to their day job."

"We're enablers of innovation," adds Taylor. "We want to set it loose across the organization."

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