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# The creative spirit

Spaces for learning and growing take special care when designing and building

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Focus on education

# Creativity—going beyond the norm

The buzzword for today's kids is creativity, but their buildings should also be designed and constructed creatively. This one is.

BY CINDY GRAHL | EDITOR

Jim and Jennifer Levine say it was all done out of selfishness. With three young kids, they couldn't find a local educational center for them that would meet their needs, an extracurricular educational opportunity that nourishes both mind and body. They couldn't even find a prototype for such a place, even in leading-edge location like Harvard's Cambridge and Microsoft's Seattle. So they decided to work with renowned Cleveland-based pediatrician Dr. Arthur Lavin to design their own. The result: CHABAM, which stands for Children Have Active Bodies and Minds, which focuses on art, music and movement as a way of engaging and educating kids.

"It was a yeoman's task to do it, because it is all based on solid research," says owner Jim Levine. "It was a tough process to find and document the right age-appropriate activity, but we kept it at the highest level."

The resulting CHABAM interactive education center encourages play and exploration, but in a purposeful, guided way, not freestyle, with a high student/teacher ratio. There are two components to CHABAM: a Ready, Set, Grow area where parents can leave kids for one to four hours, and a Creative Curriculum area that offers progressive challenges for regular visitors.

#### Telling a story

The Levines had the idea, but what they needed was the space and someone to design and build their dream. Vocon Design proved the former, and D-A-S



PHOTOGRAPH BY D&amp;S CONSTRUCTION CO.

CHABAM is a double-decker delight for kids to play and learn in.



CHABAM is a mixture of storefronts and catwalks all clustered around a giant tree house in the center.

Construction Co, the latter. D-A-S came on as general contractor for the project, handling the shell of the building. It had already done the Original Pancake House next door as part of the same building, a former Realty One that moved across the street to Eton; the restaurant takes up 4,000 sf of the 7,000-sf building, leaving only 3,000-sf for the center with a 60-ft. frontage.

"We thought of going with a smaller company," says co-owner Bob Levine, who is Jim's brother, "but now we think a smaller one may have been overwhelmed by this. D-A-S had the depth of understanding and experience to think out of the box and make decisions."

And there were many to be made. "It was almost a design/build kind of project," says D-A-S project manager Gary Bryant. The many, many revisions did stretch out the project's timeline, but they also added to the overall mission of the center. "The curriculum drove the facility design," he says. "But the ideas we all came up with were unique."

#### Go climb a tree

Tamara Chesney, the Vocon designer, had a difficult task. She divided the space into zones and work areas, with various stations

represented by the buildings of a pseudo-village. The facility's signature tree in the center of the space meant to serve as storage and divide the area into the "Ready, Set, Grow" section and the Creative Curriculum one.

However, the tree concept literally grew, as it expanded to provide more usable space, with quiet reading areas and instruction areas as well as a tree fort and a bridge to a new mezzanine level. "We wanted to make it dynamic, to surprise the kids, compel them forward and give them different experiences," says Chesney.

While Vocon designed the treehouse and village, Interactive Playco of Nashville, TN, built them, expanding on the designs by using their own experiences in building for Disney as well as input from the CHABAM staff, to make them more educational and interactive. However, says Chesney, "it remained very close to our plan—they held our vision."

The tree was built at Interactive's Nashville shop and it took a crew of seven four weeks to assemble it. "We had to keep the front open until the tree was in," says Bryant; the barricade was up for five months. But D-A-S had coordinated the plan-

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The treehouse serves many purposes: as a way up to the mezzanine, as a storage area, as a divider and as a place to curl up and read.

with Woodmere fire marshals, with many meetings to address concerns, so there were no surprises," says Chesney. In addition, as the building was for an educational use, the state also had to approve; again, with no hesitation.

Jim Levine's background in security led to the installation of seven cameras internally and two externally. Fire doors lead to the parking lot; kids hitting panic bars will set off an alarm to alert staff, but will not open the doors for at least 15 seconds, unless a fire alarm had been set off. Internal doors work electronically, and all doors open in case of fire.

Other safety practices: Radius corners to prevent bumps, and pinch guards on doors to protect fingers, and all coatings and chemicals used were investigated for safety.

#### A full toybox

"We used a lot of new products we'd never used before," says Chesney. Flooring was a large issue, so the play area has a rubberized floor with padding, rated for a 2-ft fall in regular areas and 4-ft in the tree area by slides and climbs. The Ecco floor is of recycled material and set into imaginative patterns, with underlayment and rubber bound by a surface sealer into one unit. One remaining challenge: keeping the floor looking clean and fresh.

Unique ceiling tiles come with fanciful imprinted designs: balloons, tiger paws and fishes above the 500 gal., 8-ft. aquarium, stocked with vivid cyclids from South America.

The pottery stations, with slab rollers, extruders and state-of-the-art Skutt kilns, as well as washing and cleaning areas, were cus-

tom designed to be accessible to a variety of age groups, with adjustable-height work surfaces, created by D-A-S's millwork guru Tom Narduzzi. They are modular, to allow for versatility, and lightweight, so teachers can move them. Kilns are kept separate in an area guarded by two safety checks to protect curious young hands.

Keeping air clean was a necessity to minimize risk of colds and flu, so three ultrasophisticated Stoltz ultrasonic air handlers from Sweden puff out deionized vapors, at the command of four sensors, to maximize humidity. The idea came from Dr. Lavin, who also insisted on lavish use of Purell.

And frequent power outages in Woodmere meant the installation of a natural gas generator on a reinforced roof to as-

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sure that lights would always remain on at CHABAM. "Parents will find our lights on no matter what is dark in the rest of the town," says Jim Levine. The higher pressures demanded by the generator also necessitated all new pressure fittings for other stores in the strip, with a mid-night changeover to minimize disruption to other businesses. Between the generator, bridge and mezzanine, the building necessitated extraordinary steel supports. "It all ties into the mission," says Bob Levine. "For solid, safe, quality programming."

#### Play together nicely

Ultimately, the project was a true collaboration. "We got to do so much and propose ideas, it reminded me of design school," says Chesney, "except this really

ning so well that the tree fit perfectly into its new setting.

#### Learning by doing

According to Chesney, there were a million and one challenges on this project, mostly revolving around the size of the building and the large number of the client's program needs. "The square footage was a huge one—it was hard to fit it all in," she says.

The solution, adding some 600 sf, was a steel-floored mezzanine area along the entire 60-ft back wall, varying in depth to accommodate various needs. It serpentine from 5 to 20 ft., and offices and the restrooms, with special child-sized toilets, are located below it. "It was tricky for Vocon to design and D-A-S to build," says Bob Levine, who worked closely with both on the project.

The mezzanine is accessed by a circular stair inside the tree house and a double sleeved

suspended bridge, with plenty of bounce for kids to enjoy, connected to the narrowest part of the mezzanine. That meant the roof had to be structurally reinforced.

#### Don't run with scissors

And then there were the code issues: combine an unsprinklered building with the idea of using it for the education of young children, and you could have a problem. The fact that the building is not sprinklered meant using minimal wood, with less than 10% of materials combustible. Concrete board used for the different village storefronts. And the combustible surfaces are coated with intumescent coatings, a state requirement, that keeps any fire from spreading to the surface.

So thorough was the research done on fireproofing the building that the Village of Woodmere gave its fire clearance very quickly. "We worked early on

## Project specs: CHABAM

**Clients:** Jim and Bob Levine

**Architect:** Vocon Design

**General contractor:** D-A-S Construction Co.

**Timetable:** Construction started mid-August; completed May 2005.

**Size:** 3,000 sf

**Cost:** \$600,000

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got built. The client's vision was phenomenal—we became part of the educational team, not just contractor and architect. D-A-S

was wonderful to work with. They became part of the design team and we became part of the construction team. This project

hit all of us close to our hearts. We all put in 150%, because it was so exciting. We were all in each other's kitchens—we all got involved."

D-A-S's Bryant agrees. He says he often dined at the Levines' home to discuss the project. "They have plans to expand the concept if it's successful," he says.

"Vocon and D-A-S and the subs came in and functioned beyond the norm," concurs Bob Levine. "In fact, two of the subs told me they enjoyed coming here, because it caused them to dig back into their essential skills and come up with ways to build something extra."

He continues, "I am delighted that we had a quality, creative architectural firm and that D-A-S built it so creatively. And Interactive Playco built according to our very specific needs. If we do this again, and we plan to, we know how to do it now." **BXM**

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