

Designing Spaces for Children and Families: Architecture Inspired by Identity and Educational Philosophy

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(M)Arch. is a collaboration of architects and marketing professionals. Our belief that architecture can play an important role in communicating an institution's identity and supporting its mission differentiates our design studio. We are inspired by our clients - primarily commercial and community institutions - and look to them in their unique positioning and philosophy for our design direction.

We believe that architectural environments are read by their users, and therefore should reflect the institution's particular identity and values. The environment acts as a mirror that reflects the ideas, attitudes, and cultures of the institution and provides insight into how it views its audience. Visitors size up messages that the space gives about the educational choices and the quality of consideration given to the participants. For this reason a space for learning should not be considered an isolated experience, but instead, an expression of the institution, fed by its complexities. In this way architecture plays an active role as a communicator of identity.

At (M)Arch. we believe that the environment also plays an active role as protagonist or teacher, supporting both the learning and creative processes. We see children as equal protagonists: active, productive, and competent. We see adults as collaborators or provocateurs. In our work, we strive to create interactive spaces for children and families that address all three of these protagonists and promote open-ended possibilities and unexpected, collaborative learning experiences.

Our design process begins with research of an institution's identity – who are they, what do they do, and what differentiates them from others? Each manifestation of an institution's brand – its logo, its marketing materials, its physical spaces – consciously or subconsciously expresses its identity and has the potential to actively support its mission.

Following this research, we establish goals or objectives with the client, defining what the institution wants to achieve, both broadly and within the scope of the specific project. Once we have agreed upon and prioritized a set of objectives, we develop specific design strategies, or conceptual ideas, that help guide the design. The goal is to unite the institution's vision with the designer's creativity in a way that meets its objectives and the needs of its primary audience. This process allows for the possibility of both supporting *and* shaping the public's expectations and the institution's long-term vision.

In the summer of 2003, (M)Arch. was invited to participate in a competition for the re-design of the Getty Family Room. Our proposal afforded us the opportunity of collaborating with educational specialists and artists in the design of an environment for children and families – one that would be inspired by the identity and mission of the Getty Museum itself. The following is

an outline of our design strategies for creating spaces that best responded to the needs of the Getty, as well as the needs of their children and family audiences.

We began with the Getty mission, as we understood it, “to delight, inspire, and educate.” We needed to understand the Getty mission in order to understand how it related to the objectives of the Getty Family Room. Implicit in this was the need to understand how and why the Getty Family Room would be different from other art oriented, participatory spaces, like the LACMALab, for example. We asked ourselves, “What is special about the Getty?” Certainly it is the diversity of its collection, but what is the core essence of the Getty? Perhaps its educational programs and research set it apart. Our proposal for the redesign was about a repositioning of the Getty Family Room – the way it would be talked about and the way it would be viewed and valued by the public. We intended the physical environment to reflect the value that the Getty places on children and their families in its publications and programming. Everything was meant to be consistent with the mission of the Getty, building on its varied collection and notable equity of research and education, and reflecting its commitment to children and their families.

The objectives for the Getty Family Room provided by the Getty themselves were (1) to teach younger audiences basic elements of art, (2) to provide them with conceptual tools to access and understand the works displayed in the museum’s galleries, and (3) to create connections and a sense of ownership over the Getty’s works of art as well as the Family Room itself. Based on these objectives, our office proposed a strategic move from singular activities to endless possibilities, consistent with the Getty, allowing children and families to interact with and manipulate works from the Getty and works of their own creation. We developed three strategies, each related to a specific objective, which proposed, (1) an immersive and interactive space that allows children and their families to make connections with the Getty’s diverse collection through multi-sensory exploration, (2) a transformable space that utilizes all mediums in the collection to describe a consistent time period, affording the heightened sense of drama and immersive theatricality of the Getty galleries, and (3) a fluid space that invites participants of all ages, individually and in small groups, to engage with the Getty collection and to have an impact on the space, making possible unexpected and overlapping learning experiences.

We conducted field research and simulated educational possibilities in order to better observe the role of the environment and to ensure that it would meet the institution’s objectives. We invited children of varied ages and their families, and grouped them with other individuals not previously familiar to them. We tested how children reacted to a particular mood created by light or sound, and studied whether we could keep them engaged with a particular piece from the collection through a series of connected and collaborative possibilities. We experimented, made revisions, and tried new things to enhance the role of the environment. It was exciting to see the children and adults’ level of engagement with art and with each other.

Our final proposal, as described in *LA Architect*, created

“...an environment, part gallery and part studio, where children can explore art in an interactive and immersive way. Like a Getty gallery, it transports the visitor to a

particular time and place. Like a studio, it offers a palette of possibilities and open-ended tools for exploration and expression. The walls act as a receptive ‘canvas’; the room is essentially blank until activated by imagery, movement, music, and activity. The ‘Block Wall’ features projected images of the built environment and consists of three-dimensional foam shapes that can be pulled apart and reconstructed. The ‘Soft Wall’ is multiple layers of screen fabric extending from ceiling to floor. Projected imagery is softer, i.e. nature or bodies in motion. The layers are permeable and transparent, allowing the exploration of shadow and movement. A bench provides a place for hiding or viewing. The ‘Self Wall’ affords a more personal investigation. Here, participants explore sculpture with alcoves behind the sculptures allowing children to climb in and gain a sense of proportion and mass. Light walls and rolls of paper along the Self Wall offer a place for drawing. The ‘Work Wall’ is a display area containing several monitors, some of which cycle slowly through Getty works and others that capture room activity. The apparatus in the center is part enclosure and part furniture, part aperture and part machine. Inside, participants find tiered places for sitting and looking out through the apertures cut into the wall. Outside, the apparatus houses projectors, light sources, computers and sound equipment.”¹

By encouraging families to look closely at the collection through engaging and making, our proposal established a connection between art and child, as the two interact and one is transformed by the presence of the other. The adult supported or actively participated in this interaction. The proposed Family Room’s serious mood and inherent sensibility of a research institution reflect the qualities of the Getty galleries. Upon entering the room, both children and adults are immediately aware of the many layers and possibilities, the potential of the room, able to be flexible and changing with the child and adult’s input and the influence of the art. As these interactions occur, an appreciation and understanding of art is gained, which extends to the galleries, and potentially to the world beyond.

As designers and marketing professionals, our goal is to create significant works that support an institution and accurately reflect its identity. In the proposal for the Getty Family Room, we strove to provide a space that engages children and families and gives them an experience that is consistent with the Getty’s strengths and beliefs, while adding value to the institution (and its audience) by creating a differentiated experience. We believe that the key to this is a collaborative effort with the client and experts in respective fields that listen to one another, ensuring that the focus remains on the primary audience, the children and the families. Ultimately our goal as architects is to help institutions realize their unique vision in the built environment.

Getty Family Room Proposal Team

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¹ Danette Riddle, "Learning Cubed: The Getty Family Room Competition," *LA Architect* Sept. (2003): 39.