

With their cameras at the ready, Pressley Ridge Summer Camp students Tori Luckenbach, 11, her sister Hanna, 9, and Justin Leavitt, 10, wait for the doors to open on their first field trip to the new Children's Museum. In background at left is the 1890s-era Allegheny Post Office.



# A GREAT BIG PLACE TO PLAY

At the new Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, the players are everywhere: architects, foundation and government types, exhibit programmers, urban planners, historic preservationists, nonprofit neighbors, one very happy museum director and — oh, yes — lots and lots of children.

By Michelle Pilecki

Photography by  
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## WE REALLY WANTED TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Top: The modernist, glass-and-steel structure of the Children's Museum, designed by Santa Monica-based Koning Eizenberg Architecture, which won the design competition. It is known as the Lantern Building for the glowing effect at night from inside lighting passing through the glass. Bottom: A child works with a pulley, which is one of many interactive features in the "Garage & Workshop" exhibit.



## AND RESPECTFUL TO KIDS.”

**Janet Rice Elman** executive director  
Association of Children’s Museums

fter a two-hour romp with her family through the newly expanded Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, Megan Hendricks is bone tired. Her daughters are at the other extreme: giggling and yakking as they scramble to the third-floor Waterplay station.

“I’d like to build a boat, too, but I don’t want to get wet,” the mother of two says forlornly.

Up to this point, she has been a trouper—modeling clay in the Studio, keeping her balance in the Attic, catching a falling poem in Text Rain and exploring the MINI Cooper in the Garage. “I really like Daniel Tiger’s ‘Quiet Room,’” she says wistfully, recalling the visit to “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and the cubbyhole in the famously shy tiger’s clock house.

Waterplay is not for the shy and retiring. As Mom concentrates on staying dry, 7-year-old Nell and 10-year-old Maeve splash around with 10-year-old Karen Lee. They gush over Build-a-Fountain and work together on connecting pipe sections to redirect a stream of water. They put together rudder, hull and sails, then guide their boats through the hazards of the 53-foot “river.” They learn: Karen figures out that a bigger rudder keeps her boat afloat even in a whirlpool. A little boy at the nearby “Pond” figures out that yelling straight into the water makes for a great reverb.

It’s for lack of time, not lack of more to explore, that the children are finally pulled away.

Though the trend in children’s museums is to appeal to younger, mostly pre-school children, Pittsburgh’s held the rapt attention of Liberty School students Maeve and Nell of Bloomfield and Karen of Shadyside. Even Mom was captivated enough to forget for a bit that she’s a grown-up with a job as a clinical research coordinator at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School.

“I love it when parents take delight in their kids,” says Jane Werner, the museum’s executive director since 1999. Her conversation usually is punctuated with laughter, but she takes on a serious tone when she discusses the mission of the Children’s Museum.

“We really wanted to do something different and respectful to kids. We weren’t going to do cutesy stuff. We wanted to create experiences that families and children can do together and talk about.” A grand reopening last year celebrated a renovation so extensive that even the name was changed to put “Children” first. It also is historically respectful, uniting two landmark buildings with a third. “It’s created a very excited buzz in the children’s museum community,” says Janet Rice Elman, executive director of the Washington-based Association of Children’s Museums.

But it’s not just a pretty place. Yes, the new museum is a stunning unification of art and design—and a “green” building. But it’s also a nationally recognized research institution for education, a “town square” for child-centered organizations and a crucial economic development player on the city’s North Side. “You could argue that this project is a poster child for all five of The Heinz Endowments’ giving areas,” says Janet Sarbaugh, who directs the foundation’s Arts & Culture Program and has overseen most of the nearly \$5 million in total grantmaking to the museum during the past 12 years.

Within a few months of opening its \$28 million expansion and quadrupling to more than 80,000 square feet of exhibit space, the museum was exceeding its own expectations in two key areas. During the nine-month period between last year’s opening and this summer, there have been about 158,000 visitors. That number is a whopping 257 percent increase from the same period the year before the expansion, and 17,000 visitors more than the museum’s most optimistic projection.

The community’s response to the \$28 million capital campaign also was dramatic: Donations came in nearly \$1 million beyond the goal. Much of that success is attributed to extraordinary leadership in the local philanthropic community: 28 private, corporate and community foundations awarded a total of \$15.6 million, with several of the leaders—

Hillman and Grable foundations along with The Heinz Endowments—offering campaign-management guidance. But museum managers also attribute the ease in raising money to the personal interest in the expansion idea shown by children’s educational television icon, the late Fred Rogers.

While he was focused on shaping the inside exhibits, others were interested in influencing outside design. The Children’s Museum building mixes tomorrow’s architecture

with yesterday’s treasures. The classical Old Post Office (circa 1897) is joined to the art deco Buhl Planetarium (circa 1939) by the museum’s box-like, glass-and-steel structure, which in the evening resembles a softly glowing nightlight. For this effect it is known on the street as the Lantern Building.

“It really breaks down the boundaries of what’s a kids’ place and what’s an adult place,” says Julie Eizenberg, president and principal in charge of architectural design and master planning at Koning Eizenberg Architecture. The Santa Monica–based firm won the museum’s national design competition, made possible with grants from the Benedum Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Rebecca Flora, executive director of the Endowments-funded Green Building Alliance and a leader in the design competition for the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, advised the competition.

“Play With Real Stuff” is the museum’s guiding philosophy. The Garage, in the old planetarium, offers kid-friendly adult tools to use on objects that can be dismantled and explored. The Studio has everything budding artists need for silk screening and for paper making, as well as colorful paints and clay. The emphasis is hands-on experiences: no e-mailing, cell phoning, iPod-ing, or Game Boy-ing allowed.

## **T REALLY BREAKS DOWN THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT’S**

But kids can explore lots of art: Monoprints, mosaics, paintings. Andy Warhol silk screens and an elephant sculpture by the late world-famous artist and one-time North Side resident Keith Haring that is on loan from the Warhol Museum. Antique stained-glass windows and assorted architectural artifacts from the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. An extensive collection of famous old puppets.

“Everywhere you go, you will see art,” says Werner. She’s not embellishing—even the bathrooms serve as exhibit space. There is also the floor of the Nursery, where babies and toddlers can crawl over an installation created by Paul Rosenblatt. The interactive art pieces are hands-on exhibits, not just neat things to look at.

Indeed, on a tour with Werner, the toughest task isn’t dodging running-everywhere children—which the Squirrel Hill mother of two boys does expertly—it’s not being able



## A KIDS' PLACE AND WHAT'S AN ADULT PLACE.™

**Julie Eizenberg** president  
Koning Eizenberg Architecture



Top: The once ponderous and cavernous entrance to the Buhl Planetarium has been transformed into a grand and captivating entrance hall for the Children's Museum. The Buhl, one of the city's older classical buildings, was saved as part of the museum expansion. Bottom: No children and few adults emerge dry from the Waterplay Exhibit, which features the "Pond" and several other interactive locales that aim to instruct as children play.



to linger. There are so many temptations, like Ed Tannenbaum's "Recollections," a wall-sized screen that reflects any passerby as a series of psychedelic colors.

Dominating the central three-story space of the Post Office is the familiar Kids' Climber. "It's the only piece we kept from the old museum—kids come in and remember it," says Werner. It also anchors the sightline through the minimalist Lantern into the Cafe—the Buhl's former entrance hall—through a new window on the far wall to provide a full view of the Romanesque Allegheny Regional Branch (circa 1890) of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, which is in the throes of its own capital-improvement plan.

The first exhibit most visitors see is the "Neighborhood" and a video of the late Fred Rogers, who caps his welcome with "this would be a good time to hug." Pre-schoolers can dress up as "Land of Make-Believe" characters or play with the Trolley, while older kids and adults make physical impressions on a wall of soft plastic pins.

Adults are more leery of the optical-illusion-filled Attic's most famous feature, the Gravity Room. "Since the rest of the exhibits are 'Play With Real Stuff,' the Attic asks 'What is real?'" explains Thad Bobula, one of three in-house designers. "You can't always rely on your senses. The Gravity Room is pretty straightforward, but at a 25-degree tilt. Your eye sees everything the way it's supposed to be, but your inner ear tells you something is wrong." The room's exit is down a bowling alley. A real one.

Why? "It's very sturdy, and we could get a salvaged one fairly inexpensively," explains Bobula. That's one of the many ways the museum makes it easy to be green. The Endowments' record of requiring that green practices be followed in any building project it funds is well known, and the Children's Museum's green design was well in the planning before managers pitched to the foundations for funds. The project calls for using mostly recycled or locally harvested materials, relying on energy from entirely renewable sources and employing new resource-saving technologies. Sometimes the benefits reach beyond the museum.

For example, during construction, the museum needed to lobby the state to change the plumbing code to allow water-saving dual-flush toilets. Similarly, the museum pushed Pittsburgh city government officials to sell recyclable building materials

rather than just dump them in landfills. The new city policy covers not just material that was carted out of the city-owned Buhl building, but every city government-owned property.

Being "green" isn't an add-on, but part of the philosophy. "If we're going to be dealing with the future, we should deal with the future," says Werner. "And kids really are the future."

The museum's role in that almost was cut short. Anne Lewis remembers her first board meeting in 1991. "We couldn't meet payroll," says the Fox Chapel resident who would spearhead the massive campaign as board president. The Pittsburgh Children's Museum that opened in 1983 with 5,000 square feet had managed to grow to 20,000 square feet and some 110,000 annual visitors. That fell to 80,000 when the Buhl Science Center closed in 1991. "We were going to ask the full-time workers to go a week without pay," Lewis recalls.

The museum scrambled to stay alive, and, "after three years of putting our finger in the dike," says Lewis, by then the board's vice president, directors considered joining forces with another museum. "We actually talked about closing."

The Hillman Foundation wasn't about to let that happen. Its president, Ronald Wertz, has supported the concept of a premier children's museum since he took over as CEO in 1969. His foundation was the first funder on board when the Junior League of Pittsburgh launched plans in 1982 to open in the basement of what was then the Old Post Office Museum. The relationship grew as Hillman Foundation staff assisted with plans for the children's museum to take over the building, and to conduct marketing studies.

Meanwhile, Fred Rogers envisioned a children's museum exhibit after receiving the Great Friend to Kids Award from the American Association of Youth Museums in 1996. Now the Association of Children's Museums, the international network counts 288 member museums and some 30 million annual visitors. The award alerted Rogers to a new way to reach out to children, says Bill Isler, president of Oakland-based Family Communications Inc., the Endowments-supported nonprofit founded in 1971 by Rogers to produce a *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* exhibit and a wide range of child- and family-oriented materials. "But it would have been senseless for us to think of doing a hands-on exhibit ourselves," Isler says.

Top left: Youngsters squeal and jostle for position while waiting for their turn to enter the Limb Bender feature, a new climber that spans two floors. Below left: Historic preservationists and architecture critics have lauded the museum's design, which complements the classical buildings around it.



With funding and guidance from the Grable Foundation, the museum built the Rogers exhibit and a companion piece that were fully booked for three years around the country. A smaller, refurbished version is back on the road for another three years. On its first road tour, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” earned the museum \$477,000 and allowed them to create an endowment. It drew 83,000 visitors in six months at the Pittsburgh museum in 1998, “so we knew we could draw people in with the right exhibit,” Werner says.

When the exhibit closed, the museum refurbished with the help of Hillman Foundation grants, and resolved visitor complaints about the lack of parking and food service. Attendance rose dramatically and overcrowding became an issue, says Werner. “We knew we needed to expand.”

Her vision encompassed remaining at the North Side location to lead the creation of a “campus” for children’s organizations and the revitalization of the neighborhood. “That one entity is bringing 200,000 people into the North Side,” notes the Hillman Foundation’s Wertz. He gathered representatives of local philanthropies and helped Werner and Lewis make the pitch. “The program sold itself,” he recalls. Grable quickly pledged \$1 million, followed by \$3 million each from the Hillman Foundation and the Endowments, and then \$2.7 million from the museum’s board. Other regional foundation contributors included \$1.5 million each from the Buhl and Richard King

Mellon foundations; \$500,000 from Eden Hall Foundation; and \$218,000 from the Benedum Foundation. With persistent lobbying work from Wertz and Lewis, state and other government sources contributed more than \$9 million; museum staff fund raising came to \$872,000, and corporate donations totaled \$824,000.

Such perseverance and planning paid off. “We ended up sitting pretty with an extra \$1 million in funds,” says Lewis, who left the board’s presidency in December. Similarly, the original projection of 180,000 visitors within a year had to be revised: As of July, the museum was on track to host more than 200,000, says Werner.

Helping to defray operations costs and feed the buzz are five nonprofit groups renting some 30,000 square feet in the museum. The idea is not simply that the museum helps other organizations, but that they can also help one another, such as combining resources to launch and promote a book club.

Clockwise from top: Lucy Murtaugh, 14 months, stays close to her grandmother’s hand as another museum visitor runs loose in the Fred Rogers’ Neighborhood feature in “The Neighborhood of Make-Believe” exhibit; Children’s Museum Director Jane Werner shepherded the expansion project for five years; 2-year-old Sam Petrich, attempts to cross a rope bridge as part of the Garage & Workshop exhibit; and 7-year-old Ben Shaffer, and 5-year-old sister, Kate, work diligently on the “Animateering” exhibit, which allows users to create their own virtual puppet show on a large video screen.

Carnegie Library is a non-resident partner, offering some 1,000 library materials for borrowing through the museum.

“People are watching Pittsburgh very closely because the museum brings to full scale the concept of the ‘town square’ for children,” says Elman of the Association of Children’s Museums. The proposed National Children’s Museum in Washington is taking Pittsburgh as its model, she says.

The museum expanded not just its space but its mission. Explains Werner, “What it really comes down to is this: We believe in children’s literacy, but we know Reading Is Fundamental does it a lot better than we could. We believe in child advocacy [for children in the foster-care system], but Child Watch knows how to do it best.” Other partners include

## THE MUSEUM BRINGS TO FULL SCALE THE CONCEPT OF

“The Saturday Light Brigade,” a family radio show on local public radio, and a pre-school program.

The largest and oldest partnership is with the University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out of School Environments (UPCLOSE), part of Pitt’s Learning Research and Development Center. “The partnership is a two-way street,” says Karen Knutson, UPCLOSE associate director for arts and humanities. “They need research and evaluation, and we need to satisfy our own research agenda and work through our theories on informal learning.”

The museum designs and builds nearly all of its own exhibits; they’re not from an outside exhibit house. After a team comprising a developer, a designer and an educator create a design, a prototype is built and UPCLOSE examines how it works, who uses it and for how long, and if it can be improved. A typical “blitz study” runs two weeks: one week of video-taping and interviewing people at the prototype, then another week analyzing it. The relationship with Learning Research has evolved since Kevin Crowley, now UPCLOSE director, came to study the “Mister Rogers” exhibit in 1998. Last year, the partnership won the MetLife Foundation and Association of Children’s Museums Promising Practice Award, “sort of the Oscar for the children’s museum world,” Knutson says.

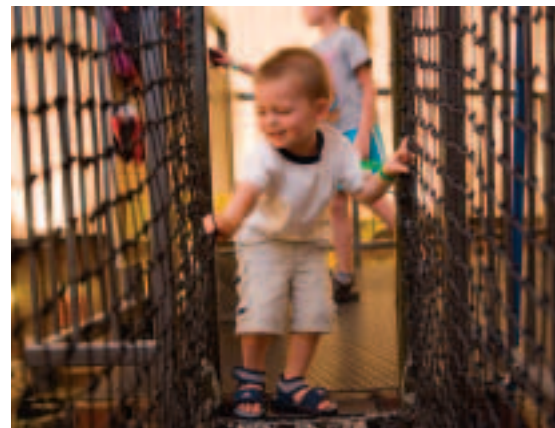
The newest partnership will start in the fall with Pittsburgh Public Schools educators operating two classrooms on the



**THE 'TOWN SQUARE' FOR CHILDREN."** Janet Rice Elman



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second floor of the Buhl building for 34 children in a joint Head Start/pre-kindergarten program. Each class will be a mix of children in the federal program, which has specific income eligibility requirements, and the district's magnet school-like program for 3- and 4-year-olds, says Carol Barone-Martin, senior program officer for pre-kindergarten education. The entire museum will be their "school."

The arts-based curriculum is still being developed, and eventually could be used "not just in Pittsburgh Public Schools but around the country," adds Isler, who serves as president of the school board. "We're going to learn a lot about how children learn." UPCLOSE may, too, in a proposed study that "will tell us something about the creative process in children," says Werner.

The Children's Museum has taken its mantra of partnerships outside its campus, as well. One long-term dream is a "Family District" based on the model of downtown's Cultural District, to which the Endowments has invested \$50,000. The first step in that process is reopening the Hazlett Theatre.

When the Pittsburgh Public Theater left its North Side home in 1999, local businesses—especially restaurants—were devastated. The city-government-owned Hazlett has seen sporadic use since then, but city officials aren't equipped to run a 450-seat performance space. A new plan, with \$1.2 million already in the funding pot—\$500,000 of it coming from the Endowments—has the Children's Museum and the Andy Warhol Museum partnering to take it over. Family District discussions also have extended to other North Side neighbors—among them, the National Aviary and the Carnegie Science Center.

For Werner, the force driving her business planning and fueling her programming dreams is a belief in the sanctity of childhood. "That formative time is not being respected. Kids are not getting the opportunity to play and try things out," Werner says. She refers to Fred Rogers' dictum that play is the "work" of children; it's how they learn.

"I have the best job in Pittsburgh. I work with really interesting people, and, if I have a bad day, I can just walk out on the floor and see all these children play. Really play." *h*

Two of the most popular Children's Museum features are, top left, the "Kids' Climber," the only exhibit saved from the earlier set-up, and, below left, the "Mud Basin" in the museum's "Back Yard" exhibit. Enjoying the "Mud Basin" are students from the Pressley Ridge Summer Camp.



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