



## **Triple-Threat Team of Architects Designs For Beauty and Brains at The Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden**

Unlike most gardens, designed to be aesthetically pleasing or to provide sustenance, the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden at the Dallas Arboretum was designed to offer, first and foremost, education in life sciences and earth sciences for toddlers, middle schoolers, and everyone in between. The aesthetics and sustenance are just icing on the cake.

Boasting more than 150 interactive exhibits and 17 learning galleries, the Children's Garden was created to address one inescapable fact: American children score lower in the sciences than in any other academic area, with earth sciences regularly showing the lowest scores of all. The Arboretum designed its program around the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) annual tests in the hopes that not only would state test scores improve, but that children would learn earth sciences in an environment offering interactive education alongside plenty of fun and excitement.

"The approach is fun and imaginative and engages the children, as well as the teacher or parents who may accompany them," says Linus D. Wright, former Dallas Independent School District Superintendent. According to Wright, the Children's Garden is "the best outdoor laboratory of all." It's a place where, says Maria Conroy, Arboretum Vice President of Education, "Children can learn about nature *in* nature."

But you can't educate children about nature in nature just by letting them loose in the outdoors. From the very beginning, the Arboretum's Education Committee was very hands-on in the design process, ensuring that the Garden would be constructed and laid out in such a way as to ensure maximum learning potential. To that end, after a lengthy RFP (request for proposal) and RFQ (request for qualifications) process, the Arboretum settled on Van Sickle & Rolleri as its exhibit designer and lead designer for the project.

"We are purely an exhibit planning and design firm," Prime Consultant Andy Rolleri explains. "We're always going to science museums, natural history museums, history museums, park visitor centers, environmental education centers. We brought to the table all that knowledge in the way of museums and visitor experiences."

Choosing an exhibit designer as the lead architect was a unique move for the Arboretum. "Typically an architect is the lead designer and they have sub-consultants underneath them," says John Armstrong, the Arboretum's Vice President of Construction. "Here the exhibit designer was

the lead designer, and the reason for that was not to make it some great architectural piece, but a garden that was driven by the educational pieces in the garden.”

Joining Van Sickle & Rolleri on the team were Dattner Architects, who designed the 9,100-square-foot Exploration Center, the Garden’s main edifice, and MKW & Associates, the Garden’s landscape designer. These three worked together with various Arboretum groups to ensure that the Children’s Adventure Garden is educational, aesthetically pleasing, and ecologically sustainable.

“It’s been a thrilling process and an unusual project, and we’re pleased with the results,” says Beth Greenberg, Principal at Dattner.

At the Garden, beauty, education and sustainability commingle in “outdoor classrooms” such as: the Wild Wetlands, a 31,000-square-foot ecosystem where children learn about plant and animal life in a wetland environment native to Texas; the Incredible Edible Garden, which offers grains, vegetables and interactive exhibits to teach children that food comes from plants; and Pure Energy, where students learn how to use alternative energies such as wind power, solar power and hydroelectric power. “It’s a very sophisticated and well developed education program,” Rolleri says. “It’s the ultimate in immersion experiences. Here, children are immersed in the subject material.”

“In my opinion children are natural-born scientists,” says Conroy. “They’re curious, they pick up rocks, throw them in the water, make mud pies, they’re picking up sticks. Then we throw them in school and give them textbooks and turn them off of what they love.”

Dave Forehand, the Arboretum’s Vice President of Gardens and Visitor Services, agrees. “It’s hard to teach plants from a book in a classroom,” he says. “It’s so much easier to teach children about a flower when you can have them looking at one, or to say ‘This tree you’re looking at is alive; now let me explain why it’s alive.’ The Garden is like a science book come to life.”

According to Hanson Liu, an architect at Dattner, the Children’s Adventure Garden is already a world-class educational venue. “It’s quite unprecedented in size,” Liu says, “and in the amount of information and the special experience they’re trying to transmit to the kids.”

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