



DALLAS ARBORETUM

Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden

Exploration Center Is One With Nature at the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden

It's easy for a 9,100-square-foot concrete and steel structure to look out of place when it's surrounded by eight acres of gorgeous landscaping, outdoor learning galleries, and scenic overlooks of a pristine lake. But the Exploration Center at the Dallas Arboretum's Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden, slated to open September 21, 2013, not only blends well into the surrounding nature, it represents it.

Nestled near the top of the Garden's 40-foot slope overlooking White Rock Lake, the building that houses the Exploration Center, designed by Dattner Architects, is shaped like a leaf.

"There's a line of columns through the middle that's like the midrib of a leaf," Hanson Liu, an architect at Dattner, explains, "with the beams above expressing the veins of the leaf, and the wood panels are the cells."

From the beginning, the Arboretum wanted the Garden's main structure to not only complement the surroundings, but to look as if it were a natural part of them. Liu, a LEED AP-credentialed green architect who works with the goal of translating natural forms to built forms, was a, well, natural choice. "It's the notion of looking at nature and finding inspiration for form, and then integrating it into the landscape," he says.

"It's significant, the way that the architecture and the landscape architecture blend together there," says Joe Buskuhl, retired architect and member of the Arboretum's Architecture and Construction Committee.

Outside, the Exploration Center is one with nature; inside, it's a technological marvel.

The building is filled with innovative exhibits and interactive technology designed to engage children in all areas of life and earth sciences. The five-foot-tall OmniGlobe, one of only 50 in the world, is a cutting-edge spherical display projection system which educates children with animations of weather patterns, plate tectonics, ocean currents, climate change and much more. Spin browsers allow children to view video of bumblebees, hummingbirds and other animals and insects frame by frame, speeding up or slowing down the browsers in order to get a rare glimpse of these creatures' movements. Smart Tables allow children to play a variety of educational games, including a CSI mystery in which they guess which animal is the culprit. Kids can play these games at easy, medium and difficult levels, and can compete individually against friends or in groups against other classes.

“It’s hard to grab and keep kids’ attention these days, so we’re hitting them with a 1-2 punch of pretty amazing elements, as well as curriculum,” says Travis McElroy, a technological consultant on the project and owner of The Old State House of Design and Development. “[These technologies] really are attention-grabbers for these kids who are used to digital media more so than ever.”

Andy Rolleri, Prime Consultant at Van Sickle & Rolleri, the Garden’s exhibit designer and lead designer for the project, agrees on the importance of cutting-edge technology when designing an educational program for today’s children. “Technology changes so quickly,” she says, “and [if you don’t keep up] there’s a good chance that kids will come in with equipment in their back pocket that’s more powerful than what you have. It’s kind of like the arms race.”

Along with the games and labs, the Exploration Center also contains a 3-D mini-theater where children can watch educational videos, during which they can learn, relax and refresh. It’s a good place to cool off, too, especially during the hot Dallas summers.

As it should be, considering that the building’s cooling system is just as cutting-edge as the games and exhibits. Outside the Exploration Center is the Cascade Walk, a series of pools that, in effect, serve as the building’s water tower: heat captured from inside the building is vented out through the water, lessening the need for artificial cooling systems.

The fact that the Center is built into the site’s slope also offers a natural way to conserve energy. “You effectively engage the thermal mass of the Earth so you don’t have to cool the buildings as much,” says Liu. “[The heat is] tempered by the Earth itself.”

“The challenge was, how best to incorporate what’s already in nature into the building,” adds Beth Greenberg, Principal at Dattner. “As is so often the case, the challenges are the progenitors of design solutions.”

Even with so many outdoor experiences to discover in this “museum without walls,” the Garden’s one walled edifice is destined to prove extremely popular with children.

Not to mention adults, most of whom are bound to be fascinated with the OmniGlobe in particular. “Everybody who’s seen the OmniGlobe says pretty much the same thing: I need one of those,” says Brian Shivers, Chairman of the Arboretum’s Board of Directors.

“The architecture and design [of the building] is phenomenal,” adds McElroy. “With the balance of technology, architecture, design and curriculum, the Arboretum has really hit a homerun.”

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