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ImaginOn Unites Children's Library and Theatre

Charlotte leads the way in creating integrated learning environment

A new, one-of-a-kind facility is simultaneously turning heads and reinventing children's educational and entertainment spaces in Charlotte. *ImaginOn: The Joe & Joan Martin Center* by Holzman Moss Architecture, with Gantt Huberman Architects, was designed to "nurture young people at every stage of development." With its sloping roof, playful geometrical shapes, and focus on storytelling, *ImaginOn* is both compelling and engaging for visitors of all ages. The brainchild of Bob Cannon, former executive director of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC), and Bruce LaRowe, executive director of the Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC), *ImaginOn* integrates the two entities into a new facility type with an original approach to education, learning, and the arts.

Both CTC and PLCMC individually enjoyed tremendous community success prior to their integration. In fact, the organizations and their programs were so popular that they were quickly running out of space to accommodate demand. Cannon and LaRowe realized that, in addition to sharing a need for more space, their organizations also shared a mission: to bring stories to life for children. *ImaginOn* was designed to support that mission and the individual programmatic needs of both organizations.

The building itself was not just conceived as an activity center, it was designed

to captivate the minds and imaginations of children and teens. According to Malcolm Holzman, FAIA, partner, Holzman Moss, "The building engages visitors of all ages in a variety of programs and activities as well as in the structure itself...The vigorous interaction among design elements is as much a part of a visit to *ImaginOn* as attending a performance. It is an aspect of the story that can be taken away and considered in relationship to other building environments."

According to Holzman there are three primary ways *ImaginOn* engages visitors: culturally, intellectually, and sensually. Because of its central downtown location, *ImaginOn* becomes a critical element in Charlotte's growing arts district. Intellectually, the building is designed to stimulate curiosity and engage the mind. On a sensual level, the bold shapes, colors, and textures enhance the visitor's visual and tactile experience. The result is a fun and functional facility with, much like a story, many elements that are open to interpretation.

Activities support creative expression

The interactive activities at *ImaginOn*, designed to spark and strengthen children's creativity, were created by experiential design firm ESI Design. ESI Principal Designer Ed Schlossberg says, "*ImaginOn*'s interactive experiences invite visitors to participate in the creative process. Through



ImaginOn's shimmering aluminum roof dramatically enhances Charlotte's city-center skyline. The energy-efficient roofing material forms the exterior of McColl Family Theater. Photo courtesy Holzman Moss Architecture

engagement and collaboration, children will gain an understanding of how an idea evolves into a story, often leading to the creation of a book, a play, or an illustration. After spending the day at *ImaginOn*, children will be motivated to express their imaginations in new and exciting ways." Highlights of the program include:

- **ImaginOn Central:** The facility's welcome center and hub where visitors learn about activities, events, and a daily scavenger hunt.
- **Team machines:** Children work collaboratively on activities such as creating theatrical scenes or drawings.
- **Tale spinners:** Children create stories and drawings, add them to the Story Jar, and read stories by other kids.
- **Story Jar:** A large, colorful mobile that is the physical manifestation of the stories and drawings contributed by visitors.
- **WeeTeeVees:** Televisions that are hidden throughout the facility which provide anticipation of discovery and present visitor information and scavenger hunt clues.
- **Spy-noculars:** Rail-mounted binoculars that are placed throughout the building to encourage exploration of the spaces within.



ImaginOn adds to Charlotte's cultural profile as well as its skyline. Behind the new building are the Bank of America and Hearst Publishing corporate towers. The city's new Bobcats basketball arena also is adjacent to *ImaginOn*. Photo © Sarah Poole



A rendering of the main lobby view of ImaginOn. Courtesy Gantt Huberman Architects in association with Holzman Moss Architecture. Rendering by Lee Dunnette.

“Exciting and moving theatre”

ImaginOn boasts two performance spaces that offer exceptional experiences for audience and cast alike. The McColl Family Theatre is the larger of the spaces with 410 seats on the mezzanine and 160 seats in the balcony. It offers a 38-foot-wide proscenium opening; a single-purchase line set system which allows for the use of 36 different flying elements in a production; a 54-foot fly loft, enabling scene designers to create flying elements up to 27-feet high; a 20-foot by 32-foot trappable section of stage floor; a lighting system that contains 336 individual dimmer elements; and an orchestra pit that holds 20 musicians. In addition, carefully planned sightlines and seat elevations offer a tremendous view from every seat in the house.

The intimate Wachovia playhouse contains 250 seats and is home to the Tarradiddle Players, CTC’s resident touring company. It will also host student performances and other programs. Multihued stadium seating, walls, and carpeting creates a fun yet cozy atmosphere for theatergoers. The playhouse features a proscenium stage that can convert to a modified thrust, walls that can be removed to create a black box theatre, a 16-foot-wide thrust apron that brings the action directly to the audience, and state-of-the-art lighting equipment with a 250-channel control board. The two theatre spaces allow CTC to stage productions that range from a single-performer show to a large-scale production complete with a live orchestra.

CTC Artistic Director Alan Poindexter notes that this is the first time that the production company has had a performance space that was designed for theatrical productions. Prior “homes” included a converted VFW post and a former church. “ImaginOn represents the first time in Children’s

Theatre’s 58-year history that the organization will perform on stages specifically designed for the theatre,” says Poindexter. “From a production perspective, having adequate fly and wing space in both theatres will enhance our ability to create exciting and moving theatre.”

Library programs nurture children at all stages and ages

The PLCMC program supports and specifically responds to the developmental stages of children. Children in early childhood (birth to 5 years) have access to books placed within their reach in baskets. Their dedicated space features soft letters, mirrored-end panels, games, puzzles, and a mixture of adult- and child-sized seating. Age-appropriate educational computer games help foster math and reading skills. PLCMC also offers family-centered story-time programs that encourage reading.

Elementary school-age children (6–12) have a dedicated section with taller bookshelves and more sophisticated interactive elements. Children are encouraged to use the chalkboard end panels to jot story notes. “Lounge-friendly” furniture fills the space and a “sights and sounds” alcove features listening stations for the library’s collection of CDs, DVDs, and educational software. The “Quiet Zone” offers a place of quietude with study tables and computer workstations for research. Other programs



ImaginOn’s library offers a range of literacy programs for all ages. Photo courtesy ImaginOn.

and features include a puppet theatre, full kitchen, technology workshops, and CTC enrichment classes.

The teen section (13–17) was designed for increasingly independent-minded and tech-savvy teens. The Loft, a space of nearly 4,000 square feet, offers teens laptops and wi-fi, booth-style seating, and a vending cafe—a gathering place where teens can meet, talk, work on projects, or just read. One unique feature of ImaginOn is “Studio i,” a blue-screen studio where teens can use cutting-edge digital equip-



The Story Jar is the centerpiece of ImaginOn—a large, physical representation of the creative stories, books, plays and ideas swirling throughout the building. Photo courtesy ESI Design.

ment and video editing software to explore animation and filmmaking. CTC also offers free training to high school actors and enrichment classes to develop script analysis, improvisational technique, and scene study skills.

Unity through diversity

Holzman says that the project itself is the result of unity through diversity. Programs that were once associated with two distinct cultural organizations now reside in one comprehensive structure, yet are dispersed throughout ImaginOn. The theatres are at opposite ends of the building, but are connected through the library spaces and PLCMC’s attending programs. By housing both youth-oriented organizations under one roof, they have created an opportunity to engage children with stories in an entirely new way. ImaginOn’s visitors can now experience the written, spoken, and electronic word in a fully-integrated, self-directional, interactive environment. “The nurturing of young people at every stage of their development to allow them to discover their individual potential and to challenge their intellect is at the heart of ImaginOn,” says Holzman. “The building is more than a setting for activity, it is a story all its own, captivating the minds and imagination of young people and families.”

—Heather Livingston