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With its industrial-style lighting, ImaginOn glows lantern-like in Charlotte's skyline, a beacon in the uptown cultural district.

T. ORTEGA GAINES — STAFF PHOTO

A playful building for kids

ImaginOn is easily the most unusual public facility around

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Design a \$41 million building with walls that are out of plumb and you might expect complaints, even a lawsuit.

But Malcolm Holtzman has nothing to worry about.

The un-perpendicular walls in ImaginOn, the N.Y. architect's new public library/children's theater opening in uptown Charlotte Saturday, are part of the fun.

Working with Gantt Huberman Architects in Charlotte, Holtzman and his colleagues have given the community a playful building that creates opportunities for a new kind of learning. Home

to the children's library and the Children's Theatre of Charlotte, it's easily the most unusual public building hereabouts.

The architects achieved this by staying focused on their true clients -- children, from preschoolers to teenagers, who will gather at the uptown's newest cultural facility to see a play, read books, use computers, even write or film a story.

To those outside the target demographic who don't get a kick out of ImaginOn's bold geometric shapes and bright colors, I can only say, "Check your pulse."

No fear or formulas

"This (building) sets a new standard for public architecture," says Ken Lambla, dean of UNC Charlotte's College

of Architecture. He mentions two factors. The building is "green," designed and built to go easy on the environment. And its design is adventure-some. "It takes the fear out of architecture," says Lambla.

In other words, getting comfortable with such an edgy design could pull this community from its habit of going with the safe and predictable.

UNCC, CPCC, even the North Carolina Research Campus, the biotechnology hub recently announced for Kannapolis -- all have succumbed to using Georgian architecture, neo-Colonial, Regency. Whatever you call it, it can be so formulaic.

ImaginOn, of its time, is anything but.

The 102,000-square-foot building, bounded by Sixth,

Seventh and Brevard streets and the trolley, is a parallelogram, set on site at an angle. It is angled about 10 feet at the southeast corner on Brevard Street, the massive roof tilting east to west. That's why none of the walls are plumb.

Inserted into the glass-walled parallelogram are the separate functions for the library and Children's Theatre, each with a different geometric shape and inventive use of materials.

The three studios puncturing the front facade are in green, blue and purple tile. The 250-seat theater on the right is raw concrete. The 570-seat theater on the left is covered with a shiny metal roofing material.

This bold, more than three-story ovoid is bound to become an uptown icon.



Like all the exterior walls, this one spilling natural light onto some colorful seating and carpeting is out of plumb, playfully leaning into the interior of the building.

A good night building

Inside, the building, splashed with bright colors, is wide open. Stand just about anywhere, and you can take it all in. The ramp connecting the levels is an especially good vantage point. Clearly, the designers intended the users and their activities to be part of the show.

To the left of the generous lobby is the Story Lab, a space where the separate functions of ImaginOn come together. Its creators did not want a library on one side and theater on the other, but for both functions to interact, to become something more.

Wisely, the space divides into zones for younger children and high schoolers, recognizing their different interests and behaviors.

The upper levels offer good views of uptown. And passers-by will be able to see into the building. Such transparency makes a statement, offering opportunities for the public to

see what its tax dollars have bought and to witness learning and creativity.

ImaginOn is also a good night building. Industrial-style lighting, appropriate to the spaces, picks out forms and details.

The only false step is the entrance. It seems cramped and unappealing, hardly hailing pedestrians or those driving by. It looks like an afterthought.

ImaginOn offers lessons about architecture. The young people who will be its main users can see its separate parts, see how it was put together. Its bones are visible, as well as its guts -- for instance, the duct work.

Such a revelation is not trendy, as in some buildings, but a statement. Look at this and ask how it was done, understand how it was put together, what was intended. And learn, not just from reading or seeing plays or making your own film, but from what's around you.