California Construction

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Los Angeles' Childrens Museum

Shrinking Budget

Despite a dozen cuts, LA's Children's Museum on target for August opening

By David Silva

The architects and general contractor behind the new Children's Museum of Los Angeles had the simple-enough task of creating a public facility that could withstand the onslaught of 300,000 screaming kids every year and at the same time educate them about the world in which they live.

Problem is, they also had to stay within an ever-shrinking budget. The 67,000-sq-ft facility at Hansen Dam Recreational Park will replace the original museum, a 17,000-sq-ft structure in downtown's Civic Center. The new museum, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit, broke ground in March 2006 and is expected to open in August.

"The original space was never supposed to be a permanent home when it opened in 1979," says Dana Katz, the museum's director of development. "We had really outgrown it, and the space needed a lot of work. The new building is going beautifully. This has been a very smooth construction for us."

But according to Sarah Graham, a partner at L.A.-based agps architecture, which, with Edwin Schlossberg Inc. of New York City, designed the museum, says the road to completing the project has been anything but smooth.

Graham says that in the six years the project has been in the works, the budget for it has been cut more than a dozen times.

Katz describes the new museum as "a completely interactive facility with a theme modeled after an ecosystem where everything is interdependent," but Graham says there were "simply too many budget cuts for that to be the case and this has turned out to be a pretty low-budget building."

While the original budget was not disclosed, Katz says the total cost of the project was $53 million, with $18 million of that going to construction.

Graham says that, at that amount, the architects and Santa Fe Springs-based general contractor Matt Construction were able to accomplish quite a bit.

"We have a system in place that allows rainwater to cascade off the roof, collect in holding ponds and then be dispersed in the garden areas," Graham says. "So when we have wet weather you'll see a waterfall and lake, and when it's dry you'll see a dry canyon. We're cooling the building through misters at the entry doors, which are really fun because they make the space foggy and are remarkably effective - much more effective than air-conditioning systems."

Other unique features include a black-box theater with chalkboard walls for the children to draw on, structural columns wrapped in wood padding and a café decorated with magnetic paint.

Regarding the padded columns, Graham says that "the kids can hurl themselves into them and flop away."

She adds that at one end of the building, the roof is only 3 ft above street level, and that's where "we're using solar collectors patterned with random cow spots, so children can understand that a building generates energy as well as consumes energy."

Budget considerations drove both choices in building materials and key design elements. For example, tilt-back concrete walls reduced construction and cooling and heating costs, and Graham's original plans for baffled ceilings were scrapped to save on the bottom line.

Jeff Jarrett, a project manager for Matt Construction, says that while the budget changes were significant, his firm's biggest challenge has been building the museum's exhibit infrastructure.

"Obviously safety has been a huge concern since we're dealing with kids as the primary users," he says. "You want a safe design, with smooth corners and all that. Our greatest challenge has been to have the infrastructure in place for when the exhibit contractors come in. This means we've had to work very closely with the exhibit people, because exhibits change all the time.

"Right now we have a very industrial-looking building in which many of the systems are exposed to the observer. It almost looks like an onramp to the 210 Freeway."