

INSIDE: PAPER EYELASHES, PUNCHY SCARVES, AND PRETTY AWESOME MOTORCYCLES

DESIGN BUREAU

KARIM RASHID

The designer we know and love, or love to hate?

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FUN FOR EVERYONE

According to the duo at Architecture is Fun, you're never too old to play. They've just managed to make it their day job, too.

RAINBOW-PAINTED WIRE CURTAINS WELCOME guests to a room littered with swaths of colorful fabrics and mini dollhouse-like replicas of jungle gyms and playgrounds. Large photos of happy children adorn the walls of the space, hanging just above bookshelves filled with coloring books and textbooks. Picturing a warm, welcoming elementary school classroom? Think again.

Welcome to the office of Architecture is Fun, where playtime and designing for children is serious business.

Since designing the Chicago Children's Museum in 1995, Peter and Sharon Exley, the co-founding husband-and-wife duo, have focused their architectural practice on kid-centric educational projects. "I think there's a sense of humor in our work," Peter says of their quirky specialty. "We approach things with wit and a sense of interactivity, because if adults don't like our projects, they don't take their children back." Sharon agrees that although it's untraditional, this clientele suits them best. "We never woke up and thought, 'We just want to design children's museums.' We thought, 'We have an expertise.' It's not age-specific."

Despite their playful demeanor, the Exleys do take their work seriously. Both designers

boast master's degrees from lauded universities and have won numerous awards from the American Institute of Architects. They've been commissioned to design several large-scale museums around the country, including the DuPage Children's Museum, Young at Art Children's Museum in Florida, and the Mid-Michigan Children's Museum. For their project research, they hold what they call "envisioning sessions," where they consult with the young patrons to determine what they most desire design-wise. The clients gather a group of children or young adults from the community, and the Exleys can glean ideas for their design in an informal setting. "You have to give them something to react to," Sharon says, "so you can sort of judge and gauge those reactions. We start out talking about polka dots and circles, and then we learn what they enjoy and read about, and before you know it, you're having a great conversation." But, she adds, "There's always one teenager who doesn't talk and at the end hands you a notebook that is just covered with ideas. You have to listen in a lot of different ways."

Every interior, landscape, and building structure that Architecture Is Fun has created is done under the philosophy of "educative design." Peter explains: "Design that has a responsibility to provide an environment

**BY SARAH CASON
PORTRAIT BY
DREW REYNOLDS**

*Right: Peter and Sharon Exley
of Architecture is Fun*





for education that is fundamentally educated in itself. It's doing a space that is more than primary color palettes and Lego blocks." Adds Sharon, "We let the children be the conductors. We let them decide."

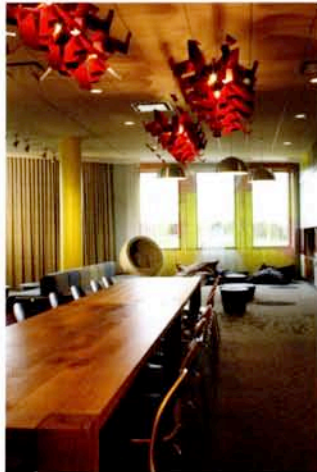
However, their ideas on how children should learn and play go beyond the four walls of a museum. According to Peter, "Play ought to be an integral part of everybody's lives, not just a domain of childhood. So our approach is maintaining some of the joys and forms of those experiences." ❖

"Play ought to be an integral part of everybody's lives, not just a domain of childhood...our approach is maintaining some of the joys and forms of those experiences." —PETER EXLEY

▶ PRITZKER CHILDREN'S ZOO

The Exleys created a jungle-like indoor playground for the Lincoln Park Children's Zoo. "Children don't pay attention to the natural world, so we wanted to highlight their awareness that they're a part of it," Peter says. Incorporating playful elements along the outdoor paths that wind around cages, they utilized every part of their design expertise to create a wonder-filled habitat for kids. "The visitors can go high up in a canopy climber, where you can slither like a snake or fly like a bird," he says. With talking tubes, animal pelts, and viewing windows at the top of the climber, children can now spend the whole day immersed in nature.





EXPLORATION STATION

"The number one request in a children's museum is seating. We want it to be so captivating that the whole family plays together," says Sharon. This community museum in Bourbonnais, IL is full of exploratory exhibits and homages to the agricultural context of central Illinois landscape. One way they promoted their desire for familial bonding is in the windows- situated high up on the walls, they were specifically designed to make kids ask their parents for a lift up to the view. Available for exploration is space equipment, farming traditions and a make-believe dentist area where a certified dentist visits monthly to teach children about proper dental care.

EVANSTON LIBRARY TEEN LOFT AND FPL TEEN VORTEX

In Peter's opinion, "teenagers are the most underserved segment of our population." When the Evanston Library approached Architecture Is Fun to help them get more teens to the library, they counted on the Exleys to create an outlet specifically for the 18 and under crowd.

Brainstorming sessions were held with the teen advisory board to find out exactly how they wanted to define their space, which resulted in details like an iPod-charging chair, media center and a stage with spotlights. Now, teens practice for school plays, hold open mikes, or just hang out in an area that used to hold forgotten stacks of books. Adults, don't even think about trying to crash the party: it's off limits for anyone past high school age, and is only open after school hours.

From simple to complex project builds, Morley has turned the imaginative designs of Peter Exley and architectureisfun into reality.

Creating the complex: To fabricate Peter's vision for the Fountaindale Public Library in Bolingbrook, Ill., Morley engineered, fabricated and installed a complex series of cables and brackets to support custom stainless steel "trees," "floating" panels and accessories.



Simple and inviting: At the Mid-Michigan Children's Museum in Saginaw, Mich., Morley worked with Peter and his team to engineer and fabricate his bright and playful vision throughout the facility. The entrance piece we built set the tone for the entire museum.



About Morley: Morley leverages its flexibility, creativity and outstanding work ethic to create exhibits and displays that are consistent with the intent of designers and architects like architectureisfun, while offering outstanding value to project owners.

For more information, visit: www.morleyexhibits.com