

A tropical street for healing children

by Ezra Claire Howard

Once, a live bamboo forest grew in the five-storey atrium at the Oakland Children's Hospital outpatient clinic in Oakland, California. Then air quality tests revealed that spores in the soil posed a potential health risk to patients. Fortunately, the greenery's removal presented an opportunity to re-design the atrium, which was white and rather cold and clinical. As Mary Dean, Senior Vice-President for external relations at the hospital, puts it, 'We wanted a space that would be much more playful and engaging for children.' The hospital's then-President and CEO Tony Paap hunted for designers outside the hospital building field who could bring a fresh, creative eye to the problem.

David Trachtenberg of Trachtenberg Architects, was commissioned: a Berkeley-based architecture firm with a track record of commercial, institutional, residential and restaurant design. Trachtenberg asked Jeffrey Miller, of San Francisco based Miller Company Landscape Architects, to collaborate and the two settled on a design that suggested an active street scene with a variety of levels and areas to meet. The design team was expanded to include visual artist Amy Trachtenberg. She expanded the theme with a colourful intervention of fabricated trees, kites and wall treatments that mirror the city's diverse cultural landscape with a tropical spin.

Along the northern side, a whimsical forest of carved blond cedar poles, topped with green nylon 'leaves', recalls totemic structures. Monkey sculptures climb the trunks, while shadow paintings of camels, giraffes and elephants march across the wall. The trees shelter two new stages with bamboo

flooring, making it easy for the hospital to host performances, holiday parties, and fundraisers in the atrium. A sinuous bench courses the length of the atrium providing additional seating and defining the stage areas. To draw activity into the middle of the space, the design team added a café near the elevators, with tables scattered at the far end. Custom-designed kites hang in the air, enlivening the atrium's volume for patients and staff passing by on upper-floor balconies.

Amy Trachtenberg researched the use of colour in healing environments and selected a rich variety of hues that lend a multicultural feel. Arrayed in blocks that align with natural breaks in the atrium's structure, the colours make the space feel restorative and playful without being frivolous.

'The renovation created a child-friendly atmosphere that's immediately visible as you enter the building,' says Paap. 'The space now has a vivid, imaginative quality that kids respond to, and it also reinforces, for the staff, what the hospital is all about. We were excited by the results of the design team's work – their efforts exceeded our expectations.'

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Daylight enhances the effect of the colourful construction