

design

# curb appeal

A New York storefront location and flexible spaces for early childhood learning account for the popularity of The Preschool of the Arts by d-ash design

by Diana Mosher

photography by Frank Oudeman





Four classrooms are situated around the central atrium (opposite), which doubles as a communal play zone, as well as a space for Shabbat services and fundraisers. The cozy environment features a variety of textures, natural materials, and a subdued color palette (above, left). Garage doors (above, right) provide plenty of options, dissolving walls between classrooms and adding valuable space to the central atrium.

Before moving into its new storefront location in a luxury building in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, The Preschool of The Arts was hidden away in the basement of a bustling synagogue. Since the space was less than appealing, the teachers usually took off soon after their young students left. In the new school, created by New York-based d-ash design, the staff look for reasons to hang around after hours, and recruitment pretty much takes care of itself. "People come to me," says Sarah Rotenstreich, director of The Preschool of the Arts. "Word got out that this is a beautiful place to work."

Enrollment has gone up too. It's always been a great place for preschoolers to learn; Rotenstreich is the author of a book on early childhood education, a fact that's reflected in the curriculum. But, since moving into the new school, prospective parents are sold even before delving into what their kids will be learning. "The space makes a statement," explains Rotenstreich, who had specific design goals in mind for the new location. So many that the client—Chabad of Gramercy Park—had originally planned to execute the project in-house with the assistance of the contractor, who donated his labor, and various suppliers, who donated 80 percent of the materials. However d-ash design was enlisted when the realities of the undertaking and the need for an architect became apparent.

According to David Ashen, principal of d-ash, the 4,600-sq.-ft. space did require some very creative space planning because it needed to accommodate at least 48 students by day, and then be able to transform into an event space in the evening. "We have a lot of programs going on," says Rotenstreich. After the pre-schoolers go home, the older kids arrive in the afternoon for Hebrew school. There are also Shabbat services and fundraising events.

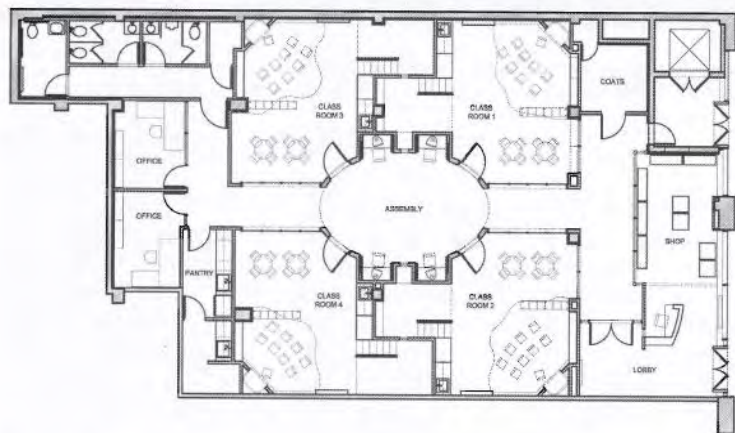
"David was incredible," says Rotenstreich. "He listened well to our ideas, then took them and made them better. Some architects are not as flexible." The solution developed by the d-ash team included a central atrium that during the day doubles as a communal play zone and at night can support

a range of activities including formal parties. Four classrooms are situated around the atrium. Industrial garage doors—constructed of metal and glass—serve as classroom walls and also help bring natural light from the school's only source, the glass façade of the storefront. By opening the garage doors, two classrooms can become one or the walls between classroom space and the atrium disappear. "The garage doors are wonderful. When we have a service, we just lift them," says Rotenstreich. Ironically, the doors were a hard sell when the design team first introduced the concept.

According to Ashen, each of the four classrooms needed to support a creative environment with a variety of spaces for both loud and "wet" play, as well as quiet reading among other activities. "It was challenging to fit so many functions," he says. "And it was interesting to put ourselves in the children's shoes." For example, some lighting controls are at kids' height, so they can put their dolls to bed or turn on a light to read a book. Windows are also low (each classroom has a porthole into the next), the lower portion of the walls are lined with cork so children can display their own art, and reading lofts that look like treehouses provide a place to spend quiet time away from the group.

"From colors to materials, we had a vision of what a preschool should look like in order to promote proper learning and growth," explains Rotenstreich. "Children are very in control of their environment. The space is what helps children learn through the freedom of exploration." She adds, "We also wanted it to be cozy and home-like." With this in mind, mock fireplaces were constructed to encourage children to take a book and cuddle up in a corner, while nooks and crannies stimulate exploration and provide a place for time alone. Angular classrooms, rounded doorways, and amorphous shapes also help children develop an "out of the box" attitude.

Color theory, as it relates to the cognitive development of preschoolers, is a specialty of this client, but research was also conducted by Ashen and his



Reading lofts that resemble treehouses (above, left) and amorphous design elements stimulate exploration, a sense of discovery, and “out of the box” thinking. Classrooms have been designed to support a range of activities from quiet reading (above, right) to group learning.

design team. Each class has a different coloration because two-, three-, and four-year-olds will all respond differently to the same hue. “The color thing was a little scary,” admits Ashen. “Red or saturated colors can be too distracting, while blues can act as a sedative. So bold color is used in furniture and toys but is not fixed on walls.” To encourage a sense of discovery, The Preschool of the Arts features creamy, neutral tones, light woods, and warm colors. A variety of textures found in the wall of Jerusalem stone, bamboo flooring, cork portions of the wall, and textural carpet also stimulate learning.

“This was a really good client,” says Ashen. But he admits it was a challenge working with so many donated materials that had already been selected when his team joined the project. In

particular, Ashen was concerned that the birch fine ply would be too bland. But this turned out not to be the case. “It’s very natural and the edges are textural,” he explains. And while Ashen would have preferred the durability of linoleum, the bamboo flooring is wearing well and keeping pace with the rave reviews that are still pouring in.

“We just had an article in *Jewish Week*, the main magazine of the community [nationwide],” says Rotenstreich. “Our school was named ‘nicest preschool in New York City.’ That’s a pretty big honor. And it makes my job a lot easier,” she adds. “The parents are sold before I have to say a word.” ☐

#### who

**Project:** The Preschool of the Arts (and the Chabad Center for Jewish Discovery). **Client:** Chabad of Gramercy Park and Wonderworks Construction Corp. **Architect of record:** Edward Hicks. **Interior/lighting design:** d-ash design; David Ashen, design director; Christopher Dierig, project manager; Ayelet Gezow, project designer. **General contractor:** Wonderworks Construction Corp.; Joseph Klaynberg. **Murals:** YVStudio; Yona Verwer. **Photographer:** Frank Oudeman.

#### what

**Wallcoverings:** Finette, Architectural Systems, Claridge. **Paint:** Benjamin Moore. **Laminate:** Formica. **Flooring:** Bamboo, Architectural Systems, DalTile. **Ceiling:** Tectum. **Lighting:** Lightolier. **Doors:** Arm-R-Lite. **Door hardware:** Schlage. **Architectural woodworking, cabinet-making:** Wonderworks Construction Corp. **Plumbing fixtures:** American Standard.

#### where

**Location:** New York, N.Y. **Total floor area:** 4,600 sq. ft. **No. of floors:** One. **Student capacity:** 48. **Cost/sq. ft.:** \$70.