

The CIRCLE

SPRING 2015 / 5775

WWW.FCNJ.COM



A publication of



FriendshipCircle

EXTREME MAKEOVER LIFETOWN EDITION

Architects, Interior Designers Tackle Warehouse Redesign

BY FAYGIE LEVY



The glass paperweight sits atop the receptionist's desk beckoning visitors for a closer look. Suspended inside the glass brick is a laser-etching of a building with the word "LifeTown" on it.

It is fitting somehow that this is one of the first things visitors see when they enter the offices of architectural firm Rotwein+Blake, as they have spent the last few years designing the 47,000-square-foot recreational and educational center to be known as LifeTown.

"I'm anxious to see this project come to fruition," says Rotwein+Blake President Lance Blake. "There's always a lot of joy in seeing a project and design come to life, but with this one in particular there's even more." The architect first heard about the project three years ago when Rabbi Zalman Grossbaum, executive director of the Friendship Circle, approached Blake about the building he was interested in creating.

Rotwein+Blake was recommended to the Friendship Circle by developer Charles Kushner, who has been very involved in the LifeTown project from the beginning. In addition to many commercial projects, Mr. Kushner had worked with Blake on the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy and the Suburban Torah Center, both in Livingston.

During their initial meeting, Grossbaum laid out the vision that he and his wife, Toba, had for a building that would be a welcoming, integrated space for people with all kinds of abilities. A place where children could just be children and where young adults could learn to live independently by gaining crucial skills to help them reach their fullest potential.

Something similar had been built by the Friendship Circle in Michigan seven years earlier and it was thriving and constantly in use.

"Zalman described what LifeTown is, the impact that it has

had in Michigan and what they wanted to do here," recalls Director of Interiors Deborah Stoller. "There was a lot to pack into the facility."

The biggest challenge was that the building Friendship Circle had purchased -located right next door to offices of Rotwein+Blake-was 45,000 square feet. And based on the documents that Grossbaum had prepared, the architects estimated that Friendship Circle would need a building that was nearly 60,000 square feet to accommodate its programming.

"I said, 'You want to fit that in there?' And Zalman said 'Do you think we can do it?'" recalls Blake, adding that he wasn't completely sure they could.

But Blake and his team were up for the challenge.

One look at the numbers shows why Northern New Jersey is uniquely situated for an inclusive center that will offer life-skills training, social programs, recreational opportunities, after-school classes and more for people with all abilities. According to the American Community Survey, 2013, an estimated 67,000 children and 380,000 people overall have disabilities in the counties surrounding the town of Livingston.

CREATING THE CENTER

With Blake and his colleagues on board, it was time for the initial phase of preplanning to begin. Representatives from Rotwein+Blake began their "due diligence" inspections of the building uncovered some surprises; including the fact that the "one" building they were working on was, in actuality, three different areas with their own unique issues.

"We had to work around certain existing conditions," explains Blake, noting that there are 36 columns, three load-bearing walls and two mechanical rooms inside of the

building and it would not have made "financial sense" to move them.

Adds Stoller: "You had to understand what was a given, which aspects of the building you couldn't do anything with. Once we understood the parameters of the physicality of the space, we were able to start looking at the programs and the distinctive issues that exist for each program area."

Save for the spaces that couldn't be changed, the architects knew that the entire building from inside out would need to be reconfigured. Plus, what they were doing was essentially creating a building that would have many different types of uses-from a recreational center to a therapeutic setting to a social and educational environment, not to mention a working main street-all in a single space.

Before they could start their project, the team researched the existing LifeTown building in Michigan-finding out what worked there and what didn't-they also learned how individuals with autism and other special needs may react to certain colors and light, what individuals with traumatic brain injuries would need to be able to re-integrate into the real world and more.

"When designing offices and schools there are a lot of similar features used repeatedly throughout the building. In LifeTown, each [area] is unique and we needed to research and understand the actual function of each space," says Blake. "As we allocated spaces for programming, we began a stacking plan so we'd have the basic sizes of each room and then talked about the adjacencies of each room and how they'd relate to one another. It was like solving a complex puzzle.

"In Life Village, in particular," the architect continues, "each space is a mini-project onto itself."

Life Village is the 11,000-square-foot centerpiece of the LifeTown project. With a fully functional main street, Life Village will feature a bank, medical facility, theater, coffee

shop along with a number of stores. Tying the space together will be roads, stoplights, crosswalks and everything else one finds in a town square.

The experience is designed to provide individuals with special needs a quiet, vibrant and interactive place to learn life skills and receive job training. Participants will practice making a doctor's appointment, showing up to work on time, ordering a coffee and more.

Because each store, each office, each "building" in the village will serve a unique purpose and be designed to mimic similar real-world facilities, each needed a special design to address functional challenges.





“The Village was a bit more challenging as we had to make sure that everything worked for the needs of people with special needs but still function as real stores to teach the skills necessary to navigate the real world,” explains Stoller. “You want to have every participant to come into Life Village and get something out of it.”

If the interiors would need to be warm and inviting – not to mention fun and functional – the outside would need to entice people to step inside in the first place; not something a former warehouse with few windows is designed to do. Plus, the building as it currently exists is pretty nondescript, which didn’t help Blake as he began to create a vision for the exterior.

“It was almost like a clean, blank canvas in terms of style,” he explains. “I could have gone in any direction contemporary vs. thematic or traditional ... There was also nothing around the area to draw inspiration from like in other areas of Livingston- such as the colonial-style town center- because it’s in an industrial park. So it took quite a bit of work to come up with the right aesthetic and mix of materials” to make the building an attractive setting.

FINE TUNING & WAY FINDING

Once the design began taking shape, it was up to Cloudberry Studio, a designer of children’s museums and exhibits, to make the space as effective as possible while adding creative flair to the design. They also had to ensure ease of transitions among various spaces and activities.

Specifically, they had to address how the participants will be able to naturally find their way from one part of the building to the next. They also had to come up with a color scheme that would work for adults and kids, and make sure

that the long hallway, which runs the length of the building, is anything but a boring old corridor. Lastly, Cloudberry was charged with ensuring that the therapeutic rooms will be thematic and lively, not clinical and sterile.

“One of the major components we worked on from scratch was the way-finding and graphics system,” says Greg Gallimore, principal of Cloudberry Studio. Using a mix of color-coded stripes and graphic icons to designate different areas, “these systems help you get from the front door to all the places in the building.”

Blue stripes, for example, will lead to the aquatic center. As you get closer to the area the stripes will morph into wavy lines signifying water. This kind of way-finding system “gives a different life to LifeTown, while still being critically important to help people understand how to navigate the building,” says Gallimore.

But even the color choices had to be specific for the LifeTown audience.

“If you look at typical playgrounds for children you’ll see primary red, green, blue and yellow as the base for everything, but studies have found that these are not the most effective colors for children,” Gallimore explains. “Bright red is a very agitating color, and we want to avoid using that kind of strong color because you don’t want someone to be agitated when they walk in.

“We were very sensitive to this and looked at studies for people with autism, in particular, to make sure we were developing a color palette for LifeTown that was unique and timeless,” he adds, “while still giving an interesting character to the brand of LifeTown.”

Gallimore is extending that character and brand to other areas of the building as well through the use of light, sound and décor. For instance, upon entering LifeTown, visitors will climb a musical staircase to access the lobby. The staircase

will play different notes depending on the day or how many people are on it at once.

The therapy wing’s playground will mimic an outdoor city park and will include benches, swings and a rock-climbing wall. Then there’s the sand room, which while being used as a therapy room for those with tactical sensitivities, will be designed to look like the Jersey shore thanks to a boardwalk, plenty of sand and large-scale images of the actual beaches that will cover the walls.

“We had to create a space that was appropriate for many uses, not just sensory training,” Gallimore says. “We had to make something that was attractive to anyone coming into LifeTown, but still address the specific concerns” of the special needs population.

THE FUTURE

As the countdown continues to construction, local social-service agencies, educators, therapists, politicians, medical

personnel and more have begun planning how LifeTown will help them and their constituencies.

Already many school administrators have visited the facilities to talk about how LifeTown will work within their curriculum.

And if there’s one thing those involved with creating the facility are sure of, it’s that LifeTown is definitely a model of what future inclusive centers could look like.

“I have people coming to my website and reading the Cloudberry Studio blog and saying we need this,” says Gallimore. “This is an amazing opportunity to provide therapy and is a wonderful model for the rest of the world. It is a very contemporary and effective way to provide life skills and therapy to these children and expand their quality of life and abilities, which is what everyone wants for all children.”


Says Blake: “I think this could be a model for other areas, other communities and other cities to learn from. ... This is definitely a necessary facility, not just for the special-needs community, but for the community as a whole. It will become a beacon and attract people from all over who will come to see what it’s about. I think that’s a really good thing.” ●



THE LIFETOWN DESIGN CALLS FOR THE CURRENT CONCRETE EXTERIOR (LEFT) TO GIVE WAY TO A GLEAMING, LIGHT-FILLED ENTRYWAY THAT WILL BECKON PEOPLE TO VISIT.



FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL



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