

child's play

the new **children's museum of the upstate** focuses on learning through **exploration and fun**

by *Martin Palicki*



Lexington designed and fabricated nearly all of the museum's exhibits. Photo courtesy of Commercial Imaging

Most children's museums are about 25,000-40,000 square feet. But The Children's Museum of the Upstate in Greenville, SC is getting ready to celebrate its first birthday in its 80,000 square foot building. The museum is housed in Greenville's old library building, situated on the cultural campus known as Heritage Green.

The project originated in 2004 and has now become a staple for young families in the area. The focus is on learning through play and exploration.

"We are not an institution concerned with children coming to learn facts," explained Carol Scott, museum president and CEO. "We want them to explore, ask questions and figure out how things work."

As such, the museum's exhibits are designed to be enticing to children, recreating the real-world environments they replicate in a way that is accessible and durable for children. All but one of the museum's exhibits were designed and built by Lexington Design + Fabrication, based in Los Angeles; the electronics and software for the WTCM Studios and BI-LO

Market exhibits were designed and built by Mad Systems in Orange County.

"We were especially impressed with how the museum is designed for a diverse group of children," said Richard Bencivengo, President and CEO at Lexington. For example, the Formula 1 themed Start Your Engines! Exhibit features a life-like racecar that children can virtually "drive" around the country. Lexington worked with a real Formula 1 racecar designer in creating the car's appearance, and a software programmer who designs high-end Formula 1 racecar simulators. The result is a realistic driving experience along one of several tracks, each providing a different level of difficulty for children to explore.

"The educational philosophy of the Museum's exhibits and programs is in line with documented educational philosophies which emphasize the diverse abilities of children," said Scott.

Similarly, the EarthWatch exhibit allows for integration of more science-specific content aimed at older schoolkids. The exhibit consists of a 3-foot globe that displays high-resolution images, interactive animations and live data

from the internet to show real-time depictions of the changing earth. The exhibit can show any image appropriate for the spherical display, including those related to climate, ecology, oceanography, political and historical simulations, the sun, planets and moons. Lexington worked with media producers Harvest Moon Studios to create a short film that connects Greenville's environmental history to the global problem of pollution

"We wanted to show children of the Upstate how dynamic the world is and how their personal choices affect the planet. We used the best in interactive and real-time technology to tell this compelling story," said Patti Drum, Vice President of Design at Lexington Design + Fabrication.

Technology is also a key component to the museum's WTCM Studios, one of the favorite exhibits at the museum, offers budding actors, news reporters, singers and instrumentalists the opportunity to experience the world of television and music in a realistic, imaginative way. The studio features a control room where visitors can activate on-stage lighting, add sounds and edit recordings into finished productions. A non-facilitated mode allows kids to scan their barcode to automatically start recording their performance, whereas a facilitated mode provides opportunities for kids to act as directors, and crew members as they use cameras, a greenscreen with background video, teleprompters, lighting and other television equipment to record footage.

The system may be run in automatic mode, where simple touchscreens teach kids the basics to handle the system, and a manual mode (typically for after-hours work-shops) where the covers come off and the real lighting, audio and video mixer desks are available for use. The exhibit also allows for families to collect their videos on a DVD at the giftshop.

"This is probably the most fun and sophisticated TV studio in any children's museum" said Maris Ensing, President and Founder of MAD Systems. "We worked hard to provide a system



The Start Your Engines exhibit takes the Formula 1 theme and explores ideas of speed, power and friction. Photo courtesy of Commercial Imaging.

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From Concept to Completion



Kids can pretend to be a television reporter and then purchase a video of their experience at the end of the day. Photo courtesy of Lexington Design + Fabrication

that would be easy to use on a day to day basis, but at the same time could be used as a real studio so that kids had an opportunity to enjoy a hands-on studio experience, and to learn at the same time”.

That seems to be the key to the museum’s success – the blending of realism with playfulness and exploration has brought over 77,000 visitors to the museum in the first eight months of operation. Almost 8,000 children participated in field trips, and nearly 5,000 celebrated a birthday at the museum.

“The Children’s Museum is a place of possibility, nurturing the future leaders, dreamers, scientists, artists, teachers and helpers from around the region,” said Scott. “We’re here to ignite a passion for learning – empowering all children to discover their full potential and expand their view of themselves and the world.” **ipm**

The majority of the museum’s exhibits focus on three main areas:

Health and Nutrition

- BI-LO Market – a child-sized grocery store focused on making healthy choices
- Healthy Heroes – an exhibit filled with physical, mental & visual challenges
- Children’s Hospital – an environment to investigate the body and how to take care of it
- What’s Cookin’ Kitchen – a workshop area for nutrition education

Sciences and the Environment

- Start Your Engines – a Formula 1 themed exhibit focused on speed, power & friction
- 3-2-1 Blastoff! – a space to explore aerodynamics, air pressure & flight

- Light Waves Ahead – an exhibit focused on the role of optics, light & lasers
- Reedy River Bend – a Reedy River-inspired exhibit to discover the wonders of water
- Talkin’ Trash – a conservation exhibit that encourages environmental consciousness

Arts and Humanities

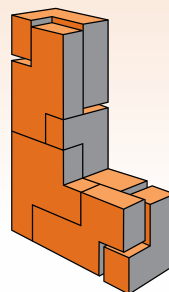
- Off the Wall – a unique space for discovering the visual, performing & language arts
- WTCM Studios – a real television studio designed for creativity and self-expression
- Garage Rock – an area to explore melody and pitch using unexpected instruments



The Children’s Museum of the Upstate, Greenville, SC



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