

Capitol Child Care Center

Because the state of Minnesota is not in the business of providing child care, Rosemary McMonigal Architects had more than the usual amount of work to do when the firm was hired to design a prototype day-care project for the Minnesota Department of Administration.

Since the state was uneasy about being in new territory, the first step for McMonigal was to provide a feasibility study with extensive budget information to back up a major renovation. Once accepted, the plan went into construction in the spring of 1990.

Essentially, the Capitol Care facility was designed to provide day care for state employees within walking distance of their offices. For the architects, that meant starting with an old warehouse/showroom building located one block east of the Capitol Mall on Robert Street in St. Paul.

"The building had no windows but was otherwise structurally sound," McMonigal reports of the cement-block structure. Surrounded by parking lots, a truck-maintenance yard and a busy street, the building was also below grade on two sides, all of which set up some stiff challenges for the architects.

"Basically, we had to provide six classrooms and staff-support spaces," project architect Mina Adsit explains. "We wanted to get the classrooms to the perimeter of the building so we could get light and air into the space. And we also needed to develop a green buffer zone outside for play space."

The resulting design provides classroom space for infants, toddlers and preschool children along two

sides. New windows were set 9 inches above floor level to allow even crawling infants a view to the outside. Also, interior windows to the hallways allow kids to see other kids as they move through the space. The architects placed support functions, including mechanical/storage rooms, playrooms and offices on the below-grade walls, but added skylights to flood play areas with natural light.

"There is a lot of natural light in the building now," says Adsit, who adds that a combination of fluorescent and incandescent sources on dimmers allows the staff lighting options to accommodate various functions. Likewise, acoustical controls were important in a facility that centers around noisy young children. Batt insulation in the ceiling and walls, as well as acoustically sealed windows and door frames, keep noise under control.

The center's overall tone is residential, making liberal use of natural woods, carpet and vinyl tile. According to McMonigal, the teals and corals were deliberately chosen to provide a cool, consistent backdrop for the vivid colors associated with children's clothing and toys. Hallway floors use patterns in the vinyl tile to emphasize directions and define various entries, while the classrooms have a combination of carpeted and tiled areas.

Outside, landscape architect Derek Young scaled a playground of small trees and shrubs, and even designed a miniavenue for a tricycle path. What had been a truck-loading dock was transformed into a terrace with railings, providing a spot for teachers to oversee playground activity below.

According to McMonigal, the project's successful completion resulted from a laudable team effort. "Contrary to the belief that you can't design by committee," she says, "this project really benefitted from the input of a lot of people from the state, from child-care authorities and the architects. That committee approach really helped make this project what it is."



JAMES ERICKSON

Windows are set 9 inches above floor level (above) in the Capitol Child Care Center so children easily can see the comings and goings.



Architect Rosemary McMonigal took a windowless cement-block building near the state Capitol (above) and turned it into space for six classrooms and staff-support offices. Though the building is surrounded by parking lots, a truck-maintenance yard and a busy street, McMonigal secured a green buffer zone for a playground (top), which was designed by landscape architect Derek Young. Classrooms with large windows are grouped along two sides (left).