

Architect's Statement

Children's Museum of Manhattan: The Transformation of 361 Central Park West

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During my early years in New York City, I would wander the city streets, exploring different neighborhoods and sketching buildings that caught my eye. A distinctive church at Central Park West and 96th Street intrigued me. I returned multiple times to sketch and ponder its strong form and mannered elevations, its materiality, and the play of light and shadow on its façade.

Now, years later, the FXCollaborative team and I have the privilege of designing the next 100-year chapter of the former church at 361 Central Park West as the Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM). The genesis, history, and unique qualities of the building have inspired our conceptual approach to its adaptive reuse and the creation of a welcoming, exciting place for children and their families. The building is the foundation for CMOM's future story and a memorable visitor experience.

Our design for CMOM is a conversation between the historical and the contemporary. The building's spirit and imbedded memory will remain, even as the 117-year-old building begins its new life as a vibrant place of wonder and joy. Our cohesive and sustainable approach unites old and new, just as it maintains the building's strong relationship between its light-filled interior spaces and stately exterior presence. It renews the hopefulness and optimism of the original Beaux-Arts structure as the building once again becomes a place of exploration, gathering, and celebration open to all.

Genesis and History: The Artifact

The Carrère and Hastings-designed edifice was purpose-built for the thriving congregation of the First Church of Christ, Scientist at the turn of the 20th century. The commission brought together an activist religious movement and architects who believed in architecture's ability to mend the social fabric through the physical representation of cultural ideals. Carrère and Hastings cast aside fixed theories of form-making, opting instead for a knowledgeable, refreshing pluralism that freed them from rigid architectural conventions.

The architects' composite design consisted of three large blocks of unusual massiveness. Thomas Hastings combined the dignified and monumental character of a Roman basilica interior with the needs of a modern church. Critic Montgomery Schuyler wrote at the time that

“The whole possesses a degree of force and power that is astonishing.” The building’s Classical style conveyed contemporary ideals of rationality, moral order, and efficiency, and distinguished the church’s architecture from that of contemporaneous churches built for traditional Protestant denominations. Beaux-Arts principles of symmetry, proportion, and unity gave the building its visual coherence.

Underlying Concepts/Goals: Mindset

Although originally built as a house of worship, we think of 361 CPW as a structure with its own story to tell. As we explore its many levels, we feel its spirit and poetry beyond its social history and formal components. We think about the building’s memory; in other words, what is “stored” within its walls. As we transform it from church to children’s museum, we believe the new design should emotionally connect with what was already there. We envision the building as a palimpsest: something altered but still bearing traces of its earlier form. We balance the desire to honor, converse with, and expose the historic fabric with our drive to create something contemporary and new.

The museum will come alive through the intermixing of the new and vital with the historic and venerated. Our cohesive design unfolds as a journey of discovery and surprise, much as children will learn as they experience the immersive exhibits or participate in activities or events. Like the diverse and complex city of New York, CMOM will have a distinct and palpable identity. Whether in its grand volumes or nooks and crannies—from auditorium to attic, ground to sky—the museum will be a lattice of perspectives and environments, both spatial and material.

Development of Design: Inside/Out

Constructed from large and deep blocks of Concord white granite symmetrically arranged, the structure was designed to convey permanence and protection. Yet the church is a three-dimensional structure whose visual impact is more than skin-deep. The strong relationship between the exterior façade and interior space enhances the overall experience. The austere exterior of the church opens into a soaring, spacious barrel-vaulted space that once embraced the gathered parishioners. Framed by symmetrical cross-arches, illuminated by tall stained-glass windows, and animated with light from above, the space is thrilling.

Inspired by the dialogue between the building’s form, fenestration, materiality, and the barrel-vaulted auditorium space with its framing transverse vaults, we imagined the museum from the inside out. We were awed by the central volume enclosed by the church’s distinctive shell and the artful interplay of the interior with the exterior. We radically changed the circulation, expanded the building both up and down, and inserted floors within, always working with the structure’s original, cohesive spatial logic.

Preserving the heart of the building: We began with the ground-floor auditorium where the congregation originally met under a gracious 60-foot-high sweeping barrel vault. Into this grand space, we will insert two new floors of exhibition space, preserving the “soul” of the building while adding space for a range of installations. Varied openings in the added floors will provide glimpses of the barrel vault and the wondrous world above. The once singular volume will become a place of mystery and surprise, discovered and understood from multiple vantage points. It remains the building’s heart.

Using natural light to animate: The tall, arched stained glass windows remain key elements of the interior, as they extend unobstructed from the lobby to the vaulted third floor. High performance glass will replace the translucent stained-glass panels, permitting natural light and views to the city and park and to the wondrous world within. The restored stained-glass border of decorative flora and fauna will reinforce the museum’s connection to the park. We will maintain Hastings’ inventive oculi and unblock and restore the skylights above the side vaults, using natural light to animate the interior spaces and bring the outside in.

Transforming the top: Our transformation of the top of the church honors the building’s original roof profile while redefining and maximizing its use. Just as Thomas Hastings originally placed the church’s community room on the top floor, we have located a workshop/gathering space on a new floor within the footprint of the once-utilitarian rooftop monitor. This “found” attic space within the structure’s terracotta roof is a hidden treasure brought to life.

Walking within the roof, visitors will experience the relationship between the building’s interior space and exterior shape. This new “attic walk,” and companion child-scaled “attic nook,” will be dappled with light from skylights under an innovative terra cotta “veil.” What was once utilitarian interstitial space will now be occupied, animated by performances, exhibits, and workshops. The use is transformed, yet the building’s spirit remains.

Returning to the city: The “attic walk” connects the new elevators on the west to a “magical” glass elevator that rises within the steeple above the building’s eastern entry. Visitors will emerge onto the outdoor terrace that surrounds the steeple’s base and enjoy the spectacular vista of the city foregrounded by Central Park. Returning to the city above the tree line, new discoveries will unfold for all visitors to the museum.