

# contract



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The Growing Place by M(Arch) Studio  
EarthLink by ASD  
Stacking Chairs  
Starting Your Own Design Firm

design

# growing gains



After a little pain, it's all gain for the Growing Place in Santa Monica, Calif., designed by (M)Arch Studios

By Amy Milshtein

Move over Montessori, Italy has a new standard for childcare called the Reggio Approach, and it should make designers smile. Among its many tenets rests the theory that the environment is a teacher. So when Growing Place set out to expand its Santa Monica, Calif., school, it looked to another Reggio concept, the parent as partner, and accepted the pro bono work of architect and father Todd Erlandson, a principal of (M)Arch Studios.

Established over 15 years ago, the not-for-profit Growing Place rents three classrooms from an empty public school building. As the only occupant, most of Growing Place's needs were met except one. "An important philosophy of Reggio is documenting and displaying work and revisiting projects in their various stages of completion," explains director Ellen Khohka. "We just didn't have the physical space to dedicate to this concept."

As renting other classrooms in the building proved inappropriate, Growing Place explored the possibility of building a dedicated project space from the ground up. In the true Reggio fashion, the collaboration between designer, teachers, students, and board members became an important aspect of the process. "We had a model where there were no walls or roof, just a floor and some cabinets," recalls Sherry Hoffman, marketing partner, (M)Arch. "We ended up with a lot of input."

Collaboration continued during the construction as well. Instead of boarding up the work area, Growing Place insisted on a chain link fence so children could watch and document the process. "We took the kids through the construction site," says Khohka. "And they just melted the workers with suggestions like, 'Stay off the roof; it's dangerous.'"

The resulting 700-sq. ft. structure answers everyone's needs with a simple elegance. The building creates a central piazza while its wheelchair ramp doubles as an impromptu stage and play area. As natural light remained an important consideration, (M)Arch opted out of a single front entrance, instead creating a series of pivoting doors that move in unison. When fully open to 90 degrees, the doors practically disappear, flooding the room with air and light.

Inside, the single room is separated by a gauzy, black curtain into two functions: science and project art. Students enter this building with a readiness to work. "The kids really treat this place differently," says Erlandson. Teachers stock the child-high cabinets with a palette of materials for students to choose from. Other media are stowed out of reach until later. "We visited some Reggio

*A gauzy black curtain divides the 700-sq. ft. space into science and project areas (opposite). When fully open, the pivoting doors (above) practically disappear.*



GROW

*Kids need storage, as evidenced in the project room of the Growing Place (above left and right). Pivoting doors (opposite) create an open wall to let in light and air.*

schools where all the materials were available at all times," recalls Erlandson. "The chaos was too great."

True to the Reggio philosophy of display and documentation, the entire back wall is made of homasote and dedicated to pinning up work. Giving up an entire wall proved challenging. "It was hard not to put any storage there," recalls Hoffman. "Teachers always need more cabinets."

That wasn't the project's only challenge. With a limited budget and much donated work, the building came together only after years of fits

and starts. And because it is located on school district land, it had to meet a high level of standards. "We have a \$4,000-fire safety system in place," says Khohka.

Lastly, Erlandson had to be firm in guiding the teachers and board in what the building's final use would be. "People get excited with a new building and want it to do a multitude of jobs," he says. "I just didn't want the purpose to get muddled."

Looks like they managed to keep the mud out, despite all the energetic children that come in. ☐



## Project Summary

### Who

**Project, client:** The Growing Place; Ellen Khokha, director. **Architect:** (M)Arch. strategic architectures; Todd A. Erlandson, AIA, Sherry Hoffman, Paul Holmquist, Sophie Smits, Sarah Peltzie, Jason McCann. **Structural engineer:** Hedge Design Collective. **Electrical engineer:** G & W Consulting Electrical. **General contractor, construction manager:** MWH Development. **Painter:** Parrot Painting. **Flooring:** S&J Biren Floorcovering. **Furniture dealer:** Community Playthings. **Photographers:** John Humble and Sarah Peltzie.

### Comments from 4-year-olds watching the carpenter, Jason, at work

**Ella:** This is so much wood, Sophie.

**Sophie (to Jason):** Why are you still on the ladder?

**Jason:** Because I can't fly.

**Ella:** Why can't you fly—because you don't have wings?

**Chris:** Jason is a Power Ranger worker.

**Max:** When you drop toys, the work men pick them up.

**Reed:** Why does it [the studio] have two roofs? Because it looks like a restaurant. That's what Chris says

**Chris:** Some restaurants have two roofs.



*A student's interpretation of The Growing Place.*

### What

**Wallcoverings:** Homasote. **Paint:** Dunn-Edwards. **Flooring:** Marmoleum. **Lighting:** Fluorescent. **Doors:** Custom wood and Polygal. **Window treatments:** Polygal. **Student desks, seating:** Community Playthings. **Railings:** Trex. **Cabinetmaking:** Dave Hieronymous, woodworker. **Signage:** Domic Breaux.

### Where

**Location:** Santa Monica, CA. **Total floor area:** 800 sq.ft. **No. of floors:** 1. **Student capacity:** 16. **Cost/sq. ft.:** \$150.