

Award for Outstanding Achievement

Kidspace

EXPLORATION, INVESTIGATION, EXPRESSION

by IAAPA Staff

A child walks up to an interactive order window and comes face to face with a hungry insect. The insect, projected in 3-D animation, demands its lunch. If the child selects and delivers the meal that correctly corresponds to the insect's natural diet, the insect eats its meal and moves on. If the child happens to deliver the wrong meal, the insect will proceed to regurgitate a green slime all over the window to the horror and delight of squealing children. While they're being delightfully grossed out, children are learning the feeding habits of the insects they see every day.

That's Bugsy's Diner, at Kidspace Children's Museum, located in Pasadena, California.

Another insect-centric exhibit at Kidspace is Bemazed, an interactive tabletop with a ball inside, representing a bee. The tabletop incorporates several different environments: city, arroyo, and desert. Children tilt the table to move the bee around to different areas, and when the bee lands in a certain locale, animated video displays details of the bee's adventures in that area. Meanwhile, the bee is also trying to collect pollen as it jumps from one area to another and through "story traps."

Kidspace is a unique facility which opened in December 2004 and is geared to children 12 and younger. Kidspace comprises 20,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor exhibits and learning environments, and over two acres of gardens and waterways – filled with highly original, stimulating, hands-on interactives, and unique design elements of which Bugsy's Diner and Bemazed are just two examples.

Worlds Collide

When Michael Shearin, Exhibits and Facilities Director at Kidspace, joined the Museum in the early stages of its development, he essentially took on the role of art director as he brainstormed the exhibits and followed them

through the design and execution process. As a guide, he and his team established three words by which all exhibits would be designed: exploration, investigation, and expression. "We tried to make sure each exhibit embodied those three words," said Shearin.

Shearin says Bugsy's Diner meets those criteria and also summarizes the over-arching goal of Kidspace: to go beyond just the touchscreen interactivity to provide an immersive and hands-on experience for kids. "We felt we could be unique if we melded the educational content of a children's museum with the theatrical and technological aspects of the theme park industry," he explained, adding that with the bug order window, "they're having a full interactive experience and not just making selections on a screen."

To fully realize that goal, the technology for an attraction such as Bugsy's Diner has to be airtight. Achieving the vision of Kidspace depended on a creative team capable of

closely integrating design, fabrication, media, and technology. For instance, the experts at Mad Systems, an audiovisual company based in Orange, Calif. wrote the interactive script, integrated the RFID technology, provided the plasma displays, and created all of the animation for Bugsy's Diner.

As design, technology and fabrication become ever-more inseparable in today's visitor attractions, companies with a range of competencies are redefining vendor and designer roles. Fabricator Lexington, tech integrator Mad Systems; designers AldrichPears, Portico Group and Tom Luckey; architect Michael Maltzan, glass artisan Lech Juetko and the many others who helped make Kidspace a reality [see Credits] – have multiple capabilities that allow them to take on such challenging projects and make them work flawlessly. Speaking of Mad Systems, owner Maris Ensing said, "Our major work is audiovisual integration, but we have tools in-house such as a laser, metal



Mmm, good! Children learn many things at Kidspace, including the dining habits of insects.

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 Founded in 1918, IAAPA is a nonprofit association that works behind the scenes to help attraction owners run their businesses smoothly and profitably. From increasing earnings and discovering new sources of revenue to improving operations and employee performance, IAAPA resources and programs are designed to ensure that its members succeed. IAAPA hosts an annual, industry-wide convention in the US every November, as well as conventions on other continents throughout the year. IAAPA publishes the magazine Funworld. Visit IAAPA.org.



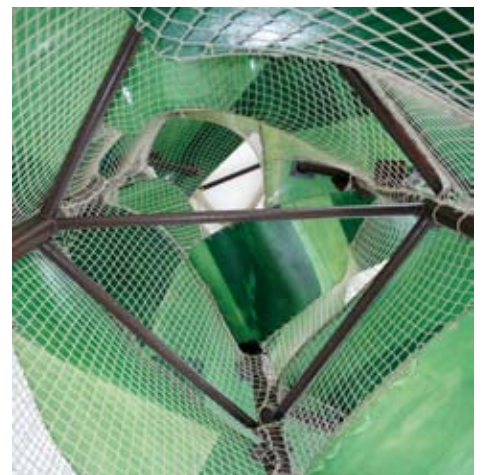
working and milling machines, and guys who can do rockwork and fiberglass work. And we can help with development of media and simple stuff.”

Repeat Visitation

In the case of Bemazed and many other features of the museum, each time a child goes to the attraction, the outcome is different, thereby drawing the child back to the same exhibit again and again. “We didn’t want ‘bang and go’ exhibits, where kids come up and push a button, discover something, and move on,” Shearin said. “We tried to make the exhibits open-ended where there isn’t just one right answer. That way it’s a new experience for them each time.”

The museum also incorporates good old-fashioned play into the experience with its spectacular climbing towers, which provide fun and challenges for the climbers. The towers enable children to venture up as much as 40-feet high for a thrilling (but safe) view of the 3.5-acre Kidspace campus. “What’s really unique about them is that it’s hard to tell where the building ends and where the climbing structure begins,” Shearin said.

Shearin notes that high-tech is not always the answer to drawing in guests and creating meaningful experiences. In fact, because technology can become outdated very quickly, it was important for the museum to create experiences where the technology isn’t visible or obvious. “They’re interacting with physical objects, not the technology,” he said. In the case of Shake Zone, for example, kids are manipulating fabricated tectonic plates and “creating” earthquakes. The platform they’re standing on shakes according to how intense an earthquake each guest has created. This feature is also one that has multiple outcomes, thereby drawing children back to the station again and again—certainly an attraction that inspires plenty of exploration, investigation, and expression.



Left: The glass mosaic entryway at Kidspace.
Above: A climbing tower.