



Creative play

Calgary's newest cultural
playground offers a fun
education in the arts for kids

STEPHEN HUNT - CALGARY HERALD

It's one part Willie Wonka's Chocolate Factory (minus Johnny Depp), one part the piano from big (minus Tom Hanks), and a generous dollop of Dr. Seuss.

Throw in the imaginative collaboration of two New York City kids museum design maestros, one determined, visionary ex-teacher and mother of two named Krista Schlosser and some of Alberta's top young artists and the get the Creative Kids Museum (CKM), a truly one-of-a-wonderful-kind of place.

Calgary's newest cultural playground, which opens to the public Saturday at Telus World of Science, is the only kids museum in North America that emphasizes the arts. It's an adventure in dynamic arts education, so good for kids they'll be having so much fun they won't even notice.

The \$3 million, 8,000 square foot Cre-

ative Kids Museum takes the art off the walls and puts the walls - along with five separate exhibits - into the hands of children, who now have the sort of institution only kids could dream up, which in fact they did.

Back in 2000, Schlosser rounded up a group of 11 local business people, psychologists, artists and teachers and started to dream about building a children's museum, that emphasized arts and interactivity. She found out the Frank Gehry of kids museums designers in Carol May and Tim Watkins, of Brooklyn, who also happened to have a strong Calgary connection. Watkins grew up here, and attended art school at the Alberta College of Art (before they added Design to make it ACAD).

In 2005, Schlosser and her group were awarded a \$2.8 million centennial grant by the city, which started the ball rolling

ENTERTAINMENT

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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2006

- although to hear Schlosser tell it, the ball was rolling long before the money ever was.

"When we first started (in 2000) conceptualizing the museum with Tim and Carol, we spent days, eight hours a day, just brainstorming and coming up with ideas and talking about how we thought - and then we also went into the schools and talked to about 300 kids and said, we want to build a museum for you," says Schlosser. "What would you like to do there? What would it look like?"

"A lot of kids, they just want to be free," Schlosser says. "To choose to do what they want to do. A lot of them did talk about wanting to paint," she adds. "Kids don't get to paint. Music was a big one, too. They wanted to learn about other cultures through music."

Watkins and May, who are kind of like big, overgrown, creative kids themselves, got the assignment to realize the vision in a building that's essentially a large rectangular box.

When they take a reporter on tour, though, we're suddenly off the grid as we explore the worlds of the performing arts, music, visual art and literature tailored to a kid's point of view. (Don't tell the kids, but the subjects conform to the Alberta elementary school core curriculum of science, language arts and fine art.)

Over here, there's Sound and Music, a tunnel with musical steps on which you can create an original tune as you walk along. Over there, it's Scribble Dee-Dee, a wall where you can paint in primary colours with sponges and brushes, then wash it all away when you get bored. There's a broadcast room where you can be your very own MC, and in the back, a do-it-yourself puppet theatre complete with a sound and lightboard so simple to operate you don't have to flip a single switch to make it work. Just wave a hand and sound and light washes over the stage.

Looming over everything is Mindscapes, a tableau of tall hoodoos topped by a nest, backed by a mural of the Southern Alberta landscape and undercut by caves filled with cool, glow-in-the-dark cave drawings that kids can walk through.

Each exhibit has been designed by Watkins and May and created by local artists and artisans, including Mark Dicey, Alex Caldwell, Bleeding Art Industries, Wayne Dang, F&D Scene Changes, and Wendy Toogood from ACAD, who drew the pictographs on the outside of the caves.

In addition to the exhibits, Wendy Passmore-Godfrey, the museum's programs co-ordinator has designed a series of innovative weekend workshops that will encourage kids to explore the creative theme of the day. The first Sunday of the month will feature Creative Time, a pre-registered session featuring various local artists.

The museum even has a co-ordinator of guest experiences, Bard Struble, and according to Struble, there will be quite a few guest experiences to co-ordinate.

"We expect about 250,000 to 275,000 visits (combined with the World of Science attendance) this year," Struble says.

Plans are afoot to move the Telus World of Science and the Creative Kids Museum to a site north of the zoo in 2010, according to museum spokesperson Jennifer Laraway. In fact, she says, they designed the CKM with one eye on the move: all the walls and exhibitions are portable and can easily be packed and shipped when the time came to do it.

What can kids expect to get out of a Creative Kids Museum?

"In most kids museums, there's a certain vocabulary," Watkins says. "This (Creative Kids Museum) is about exploring a certain part of your brain."

"This museum is unique," says May. "It lets them explore their own way without setting out terms to fail. It's wonderful (for a kid) to do something for the first time. That's Krista's courage and vision."

Then May sums it up surprisingly well for someone who grew up in New York.

"It gives an alternative for achievement for kids who aren't good at hockey."