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Inside Designer Apartment Buildings, Designer Playrooms

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In his dozen years in real estate, J. P. Forbes has heard the same question, time and again, from clients with children.

"It's always: 'What's your nearest park? What's your nearest playground?'" Mr. Forbes said by phone last week from the Kent, a new 23-story condominium tower on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Mr. Forbes, at the corner of 95th Street and Third Avenue, could simply respond: Why, just a block north, at the Marx Brothers playground. Instead, he can do one better.

"We tell them the park is right here," Mr. Forbes, the sales director for Extell Development, said. "We brought the park indoors."

On the third floor, in the kind of two-story space once reserved for a ballroom, a fitness center or even an apartment or four, residents will be able to retreat to Camp Kent. The walls are papered with forest scenes, the floors filled with beanbag boulders. A "treehouse" bigger than many New York studio apartments is suspended over the space. The room adjoins a balcony, so children may play outside, without being near the street.

"A lot of times, playrooms are just for rainy days, but we wanted to create a full-time refuge," Mr. Forbes said. "How many buildings can say they have a river running through them?"

Quite a few, actually. In Battery Park City, at River & Warren, children will be able to play inside a lighthouse and frolic in the carpeted surf. At the seven-year-old Barclay Tower near City Hall, children climb aboard a mini-tugboat before a colorful mural of New York Harbor. Across the actual harbor in Hoboken, 1450 Washington has a boat, the S.S. Friend Ship, built by Blue Water Dories, a company in Boise, Idaho, that typically makes fly-fishing craft.

And this is to say nothing of the underwater-themed playrooms at Crystal Green, the Easton and 1 Seaport in Manhattan, complete with submarine jungle gyms or orca-shaped swings.

"Children are very sophisticated these days, so it can't just be Barbie or Barney anymore," said Nancy Ruddy, whose



Above, Talli Levine, 30, with her daughter Olivia, 1, and son, Harrison, in the playroom at the Brompton on the Upper East Side. Right, a rendering of Camp Kent, the playroom at the Kent, also on the Upper East Side. It includes a giant treehouse.

architecture firm, CetraRuddy, has designed high-end apartment buildings for two decades.

Playrooms are nothing new in New York City. Residents have long turned unused or unused corners of their buildings into play spaces — anything to get the children out of the apartment for a few hours.

Yet these spaces are rarely afterthoughts anymore. Gone are the days of flickering fluorescent lights, blank walls and hand-me-down toys. Like the luxury apartments that surround them, playrooms have become carefully designed and curated affairs. Fisher-Price is out, Frank Gehry and Jean Prouvé are in.

"It's not so much playroom envy, but there's definitely this

excitement when you have a friend with a great playroom," said Talli Levine, a mother of two who lives at the Brompton, an Upper East Side condominium with a great playroom.

The trend toward bigger and bolder playrooms began about a decade ago, during the last real estate boom, when developers began cramming everything from screening rooms to climbing walls into their buildings. That many parents are abandoning the suburbs to raise families here has also driven demand.

"We definitely get more play dates because of the playroom," said Marilyn Clarke, a nanny whose employer lives at 400 Park Avenue South, where a large basement playroom be-



EXTELL DEVELOPMENT

comes a de facto day care center during the day. "Everybody wants to come over."

At Manhattan House on a recent afternoon, two boys were bouncing on the gymnastic-caliber mats, part of a stratospheric scene of carved clouds and a smiling sun. The 1,200-square-foot space on the Upper East Side used to be an apartment in the 1950s Gordon Bunschaft building, until O'Connor Capital Partners converted the white-brick behemoth into condominiums.

Parts of the space — like a spaceship pod the size of a Volkswagen Beetle and a talking seven-foot giraffe — resemble exhibits from a children's museum, and for good reason. When the developer went looking for a designer, it turned to Roto, a creator of science centers and children's museums based outside Dayton, Ohio.

"What we hear from developers is that New York parents just don't know what to do with their kids during the day, that they or their caregivers

need a space they can run to," Caroline Pettit, a designer with Roto, said. "So it can't be an everyday space, or something you would get at home, or the children get bored."

Roto is not alone. Local institutions like the Children's Museum of Manhattan, the Little Red School House and Kidville are also busy designing playrooms.

The results are often inspired by the building or the neighborhood. A Jazz Age street scene greets children at the Walker Tower, a condominium in a 1929 Chelsea tower, while 70 Vestry in Tribeca has a playroom with hundreds of blocks inspired by the neighborhood's cobblestone streets.

Some even have that most important New York feature: a view. At the Azure, on 91st Street in Yorkville, the playroom occupies the third-floor corner overlooking First Avenue. And the bright polka-dot playroom at the Sheffield 57, near Columbus Circle, is 57 stories in the air, offering a sweeping Midtown vista.

At 280 St. Marks in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, the architects created a playroom that hovers over the lobby. "We had this idea where you came home from work and your kids are basically there to greet you," Jordan Rogove, a partner at DXA studio, said.

The tables and chairs here are junior versions of Jean Prouvé collectibles, though Eames plywood elephants and Frank Gehry's Color Cube furniture — pieces more likely to resonate with parents than children — are just as likely to show up in playrooms now. Wayne Norbeck, another partner at DXA, thinks provenance is important. "When you experience something unique, no matter what your age, it speaks to your imagination," he said.

And renowned designers have tackled playrooms, as well. At 160 Leroy Street in the West Village, Ian Schrager, the Studio 54 founder turned developer, made it a point that Herzog & de Meuron, the Pritzker Prize winners designing the rest of the building, would have a hand in the playroom. At 101 Wall Street, the Dutch designer Piet Boon is carving custom building blocks

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for his playroom.

If it seems unfortunate that children are not frolicking in the streets anymore, playing stick-ball and double dutch, Samantha Rudin, a fifth-generation executive in her family's real estate empire, points out that has not been the case for some time.

"There were cars in the streets when I was growing up, so I learned to roller-skate in the garden of my parents' building, and we have a playroom there now," said Ms. Rudin, who helped design the playroom at the Greenwich Lane condominiums in the West Village. "It's a different city and different values."

But these spaces can have their limitations, especially as the children grow. The Brompton, on East 85th Street in Manhattan, has a British theme, so the developer, the Related Companies, hired an English firm to design the playroom, complete with a castle and Queen's Guard dolls. Residents found it too juvenile, so the condominium board replaced it. The walls are now painted in bright colors and giant Scrabble and chess sets are attached to them. An Xbox and a crafts table that converts into one for table tennis are also part of the new décor. At 4 p.m., younger children clear out and older ones take over from 5 to 7 p.m.

Related is planning a similar space in its next building, the Easton, complete with study nooks and rehearsal rooms, and a few other developers are following suit. They call them "tween rooms."

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