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STRETCH THE IMAGINATION GOES BEYOND ART, YOGA, AND CREATIVE EXPLORATION
ARCHITECT AND FOUNDERS LEARN THE ABC'S of GREENING A NEW SPACE

(Corte Madera, CA – March 31, 2009) While many families are getting on the green wagon by switching their light bulbs, reducing the plastic and increasing the organic San Francisco-based *Stretch the Imagination* extends the philosophy into the renovations of its new Corte Madera studio offering art, yoga, and creative exploration for children.

“As parents, we have the power to eliminate the toxins within our home but kids spend hours every day in outdated classrooms full of chemicals so it was important to us that we find a location free of any elements that could be hazardous to our children,” says founder Michelle Lawton. “Our Corte Madera facility was perfect as far as location goes but it needed a complete overhaul to bring it up to more environmentally-friendly standards.”

Michelle along with her business partner and husband, Ned Lawton, sought the expertise of a green architect they had come to know during a home renovation and together they approached the owner with an idea to update the almost thirty year old building using recycled and more environmentally-friendly materials.

Recently, Michelle Lawton and Bassel Samaha, of Hart Architects, came together to talk about the experience which became a lesson in patience, perseverance, and a little creative exploration on everyone's part.

Designing a space is like creating a lesson plan for school. How did you approach the task of updating the Corte Madera facility?

Michelle Lawton: *Stretch the Imagination was created from an innate sense of responsibility to our community and to our environment and we strive to instill this environmental responsibility within our children, and the children we teach; therefore it was an absolute priority that the building reflects this philosophy. From the floor, to the walls and ceiling, we attempted to use certified green building materials. We wanted parents to walk into the building and really feel as though it was something that feels natural and calming.*

Describe the Stretch the Imagination space before the remodel and what changes were needed to be made to make it “green”:

Bassel Samaha: *When Ned and Michelle first told me that they were considering a space in a “strip mall”, I was a little nervous as those spaces tend to have very low ceilings and minimal natural light. I was pleasantly surprised to find it had a tall sloped ceiling, skylights, and windows continuously along two sides. The space was divided*

into two separate shops, the ceiling was painted dark brown, and there was old carpeting throughout.

Given that this was an interior remodel, and not a new building, there were limitations to how much we could change. Except for the bathrooms, all the flooring throughout the space was replaced with cork tiles. Cork is a natural material that is sustainably harvested; it is soft underfoot and has a great warm look. And the cork tiles we used were interlocking so no adhesives were used in the installation.

Given the abundance of natural lighting in the space, we then wanted to see if we could maintain that even after we subdivided the space. We added a ribbon of “clerestory” glass: glass above the height of the doors, along the walls that separate the classrooms from the movement room. This allows rooms that get more light than others to share that light throughout the day but still maintain acoustic and visual privacy. This will dramatically cut down on the amount of energy required to artificially light the space.

In addition we employed a range of other features that are now (hopefully) starting to become commonplace: low VOC paints and finishes throughout, locally fabricated cabinetry with low-formaldehyde substrate, the tile in the bathroom was new but made of recycled material.

What obstacles did you encounter while updating the structure?

Michelle Lawton: *I think the biggest obstacle was ensuring that the design integrity did not get compromised throughout the building process. Many decisions could have been made to save us time and money but we decided to look carefully at every detail in order to get the outcome we had originally envisioned.*

As an architect, how do you define "green living"?

Bassel Samaha: *From an architectural perspective a lot of this to me can be fairly low-tech but it all adds up: natural lighting versus artificial and natural ventilation versus air-conditioning. On a personal level I just try to have a daily routine of activities that feels comfortable with the environment always in mind: we are a one-car family, we live and work in SF. We take public transportation and walk a lot! We make it a rule in the office to not print emails unless absolutely necessary and are committed to recycling.*

What was it like working with the building owners?

Michelle Lawton: *I j Market Place loved our concept from the beginning. The center has been around for over 30th years and is going through physical upgrades. They were very supportive of our early designs and actually helped us identify energy and environmental friendly ways to save money that are also aesthetically pleasing.*

Q: Give three steps parents, or individuals, can take to make changes in their own workplace, or home, to provide a more energy efficient and green living space:

Bassel Samaha:

- 1. Flooring: Next time you change out the flooring in a room, make sure that what you are replacing it with is sustainable or has recycled content and that it doesn't off-gas. There are a lot of options available.**
- 2. Lighting: We all know that we can easily change out our current incandescent bulbs with fluorescent ones, but we can also change out our switches like in bathrooms. Switching to motion occupancy sensors means no more lights being left on all day.**
- 3. Painting: There is no good reason not to use a low-VOV paint when you repaint a room. Benjamin Moore has a great range of colors that all can be made with their low-VOV line.**

What advice could you give to other school directors or owners of children's facilities when renovating their space?

Michelle?

Founded in 2002 by Michelle Lawton, a teacher and yoga instructor, the San Francisco location has nurtured the creative growth of children from infants through elementary school. Michelle explains the approach of the program: "Our educators at Stretch the Imagination take inspiration from the Reggio Emilia philosophy of Italy, the importance of play based learning, and the developmental benefits of art, music and movement. We hold true to the belief that knowledge is learned from experiences with others. We believe that it is not only what a child learns, but **how** a child learns that gives quality to the educational experience."

To learn more about the renovation and view photos, please visit www.stretchtheimagination.com or call Ned Lawton at 415-927-2616. Spring and summer schedule also available online.

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(below are additional answers to questions and information to enhance the story and run a pictorial online. This information is good for follow up with media to help them build their story)

Q: What are some important factors parents should consider when undertaking a remodel of their home?

People really need to assess the way that they live as a family; first, to better understand what it is about their house that either works or doesn't work. The better a family can get at articulating that the easier it is to get to an architectural solution tailored to meet their needs. Finally, hiring an architect is very personal. You are inviting someone into your life on a journey that could take months and even years, make sure that you feel comfortable with that person and that their heart is in it.

Q: Describe how you generally work with clients and how your relationship with Ned and Michelle is different than other clients:

Even though this was a commercial project and not Ned and Michelle's house, the project felt just as personal to me as any residential one that we work on. Stretch the Imagination is clearly more than just a business to them, it really is their passion. Irrespective of whether the project is commercial or residential, it is clients like Ned and Michelle, focused on creating something unique and of quality; that makes what we do worthwhile.

Q: What did this project mean to you?

For me it was an opportunity to work with smart, passionate clients who have a great business model and strong vision. It represented a challenge (the kind we love): to design a space with architectural interest that still met their programmatic needs, that was as green and sustainable as possible, and that did all those things by staying within the budget.

Materials used:

AD Painting provided all of the color consultation and suggested using a new product from Benjamin Moore Paints called Natura. The paint emits no harmful VOC and has all of the color combinations of Benjamin Moore lines of Aura paint

Floors:

Wicanders Cork Floors were used throughout the facility including raw cork matting that was rolled up the wall, the product is floating floor product with minimal toxin or varnish as well as glues used.

Building materials:

Steel/Aluminum used for framing commercial and standard sheetrock

Lighting

We utilized the natural light and abundant windows and skylight to take advantage of the all of the natural light that was offered to us while the school is in session. We chose T5HO linear fluorescent fixture the pendant versions; it is energy-code compliant and suitable for projects applying for LEED certification. It's slim 1-inch-wide by 2-inch-high profile and solid surface make for clean uninterrupted lines for children and teachers in the classroom