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## *Playrooms That Are More Frank Gehry Than Fisher-Price*

### The Appraisal

By MATT A.V. CHABAN MAY 9, 2016



Talli Levine, 30, with her daughter Olivia, 1, and son, Harrison, in the playroom at the Brompton on the Upper East Side. CreditHiroko Masuike/The New York Times

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, of 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 Dorries, a company in Boise, Idaho, that typically makes fly-fishing craft.



Riley Hughes, 2, in the playroom at the Azure, on East 91st Street. The room occupies the third-floor corner overlooking First Avenue. Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times



And this is to say nothing of the underwater-themed playrooms at Crystal Green, the Easton and 1 Seaport, 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 architecture firm, CetraRuddy, has designed high-end apartment buildings for two decades.

Playrooms are nothing new in New York City. Residents have long turned unloved 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 light bulbs, 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.



Inside the Luxury Playroom  
Credit Extell Development

“We definitely get more playdates because of the playroom,” said Marilyn Clarke, a nanny whose employer lives at 400 Park Avenue South, where a large basement playroom becomes 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 used to be an apartment in the 1950s Gordon Bunshaft 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 Petitti, 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.



A talking seven-foot giraffe is one of the features of the children’s room at Manhattan House on East 66th Street. Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

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 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,” said Jordan Rogove, a partner at DXA studio.

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, [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 for his playroom.

If it seems unfortunate that children are not frolicking in the streets anymore, playing stickball 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 parent’s building,” Ms. Rudin said. “And we have a playroom there now. 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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