

Design duo make sure there's still a place for the kids

After fire destroys an Annex drop-in centre, Adam and Katja Thom help bring life to an unpromising space



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This isn't really a Christmas story, but it does have all the elements of a good one: a magical place, a lot of children, a tragedy to overcome, selfless giving and a very, very happy ending.

While our story starts, technically, in 1975 – when this magical place was born – for our purposes we'll begin at the most difficult part, the morning of Oct. 31, 2009. That's when residents of the Annex neighbourhood awoke to learn the Children's Storefront, a beloved drop-in centre for parents and their little ones, had been completely gutted by fire.

Except for a few photographs and a dining table, everything at 1079 Bathurst St. was gone.

Everything except the will to rebuild, that is. Almost immediately, executive director Roona Maloney was out asking for help, there was a scramble to find temporary space and parents were donating old toys. Within days, a town hall meeting was organized to chart a course of action and to assign tasks to the many willing volunteers.

At that meeting, architects Adam and Katja Thom of Agathom Co., offered their design services, pro bono, should they be required when a new permanent location was found. While the couple had never used the Storefront, they had lived in the area years before: "We'd peer in the glass, and I'm telling you, even though we didn't have children we were, like, 'This is a great place,'" recalls Mr. Thom, now the proud father of two golden-haired little girls. "Privately, we'd been interested in finding a way to give back to society in general ... now, we're architects, this was an opportunity to help them rebuild."

In the spring of 2010, Agathom was presented with a space at Shaw and Bloor streets newly vacated by a cheque-cashing facility. While the floor plan wasn't optimum – unlike the square, double-storefront Bathurst Street space, this one was a long, awkward bowling alley – it was the only place Ms. Maloney and senior child parent worker Michele DeSouza had found that was large enough, almost within budget and, most important, on a major thoroughfare not too far from the old location.

Despite the odd shape, the architects had to accommodate a varied program, which included a "quiet area, puzzle tables, art rooms and sandbox" says Mr. Thom. Ms. Maloney also wanted to make use of the basement, which was "nasty, dark and long," remembers Mr. Thom. "I said to Roona, 'Nobody is going to want to be down here.'"

Working with a "very tight" construction budget only added to the headache: "We had to look for creative ways to bring as much life as we could to an otherwise fairly banal space, and a challenging space architecturally," Mr. Thom says.

Of course, since this is a happy story, you can correctly assume these architects rose to the challenge.

In the old space, a support column had been painted to look



It's playtime again at The Children's Storefront drop-in centre, thanks to help from Adam and Katja Thom of Agathom Co. PHOTO BY LUTHER CAVERLY

like a tree. Underneath it had been a gathering place for storytelling or quiet reading. So, the Thoms called in a favour and had a real cedar cut and delivered to the site. It now provides a little forest magic to a custom-built, raised reading and storytelling area not far from the front door. Just beside the front door is a large area with curvy, multicoloured cubbies for slushy boots and a long row of coat hooks (there is ample stroller parking outside).

Using custom millwork and colour-blocking, the long space also has a defined puzzle area, dress-up area, a bright orange kitchen/dining space (for kiddie lunches or parents to congregate over coffee), and, finally, an art area with easels at the back. "We used devices like that to help change the procession through the space," Mr. Thom explains.

While all of this is impressive enough, it's the giant hole in the floor that works best. Conceived of by the architects as a way to bring much needed light and air to the basement and a psychological connection between the two floors, this feature wasn't an easy sell at first: "I didn't like it at all," says Ms. Maloney bluntly. "To me, that was all about taking square footage away and I just couldn't wrap my brain around how that was going to turn out to be better, and yet, it is better."

With all of the associated safety issues and structural and mechanical details to work out for this "big move," Mr. Thom admits the hole was "a lot to ask for." But not only is the basement sunny and welcoming now, Ms. Maloney says she can hear if a child is in distress or if play has become too wild.

Surrounded by whimsical slotted walls and glass, the hole is also a punctuation mark within an already imaginative space. And with every peal of laughter that bubbles up from there or with every sunbeam that shines down, or, most assuredly, with each story told under the tree, every drop of paint dribbled on the cork floor or tasty lunch prepared in the brand new community kitchen, the countless volunteer hours of architects, millworkers, carpenters, consultants and community members is reciprocated.

"This is a beautiful place," finishes Ms. Maloney with a smile. ***

For hours and services, visit www.childrensstorefront.com. Despite the best efforts of all involved, construction of the new space exceeded budget, and donations will be gratefully accepted over the holidays ... or at any time of year.



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Adam, left, and Katja Thom, centre, check in on one of the young patrons of the popular drop-in centre at 826 Bloor St. W. DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL