

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

MUSEUM REVIEW

More kids, more space

Some experts — they're 5, you know — take the new Kidspace for a test drive.

By Brenda Rees
Special to the Times

Dec 23, 2004

"I feel like dancing" squealed my 5-year-old daughter, Katie, as she entered the Kaleidoscope walkway that welcomes visitors to the new Kidspace Children's Museum in Pasadena.

Gentle harp music flowed in the glittery, colorful tunnel as Katie twirled and spun — but only for a moment. She stopped abruptly and grabbed my hand. "Let's go! Let's go!" she said impatiently as she dragged me inside to meet some of her school friends for a sneak peek of the new facilities, which attempt to marry playtime and brain time.

It's been nearly two years since the old Kidspace — with its well-worn imaginative play areas in a scrunched location — closed in Pasadena. Although families bemoaned the loss, there was also fevered anticipation for the new and improved site.

Would the old Kidspace magic still be there, now housed in a \$30-million historic horticultural building and located on 3.4 acres? We were there to find out.

Forgoing the inside pavilion, Katie and her gang raced to the outside trike tracks where they whizzed around on red Norwegian tricycles. "Yee-haw!" screamed Andrew Aguilar as he avoided oncoming traffic with deft precision.

A big hit with our crowd, the trikes, however, caused many grumbles for those waiting turns. "There need to be more," announced Donovan Gonzalez, 5, who finally got a turn on the only recumbent bike, which he later dubbed "the coolest thing of all."

Tired of pedaling, the kids ran up a hill to explore the gardens, rock climbing area and a wildlife pond, among other features.

Entering the bat cave, the kids were disappointed that it didn't house real bats. "Just some fake ones hanging from the ceiling," declared Donovan. A Kidspace representative reassured us that the hopes are California brown bats will one day set up home in the structure.

There was quiet concentration as the kids navigated over and hung underneath the Rootwad, a giant climbing structure. Opinions varied as to what they were climbing: "It's a vine." "It's tree branches." "It's like roots."

We decided to go inside to appease Katie's cries of checking out the Ant Climber, her favorite structure from the former Kidspace. She joyfully relived old memories of her first ascent up the curved leaves of the climber.

Katie was reluctant, however, to walk downstairs and crawl upward through a squishy darkened ant tunnel. Good thing the crawl space is adult-size — my husband, Jim, wriggled through it several times before Katie agreed to try it.

Other parents got in the action too, especially at the nearby Raindrop Climber, one of two 35-foot climbers in the museum. Susan Ruffins escorted daughter Olivia, 5, to the top of the blue glass platform steps for a window view of the parking lot. "It goes on forever," said Olivia, awestruck. "Let's do it again." The insect theme of the pavilion was readily apparent at Bugsy's Diner, where kids play wait staff, serving plates of Mosquito Smoothies and Poo Poo Platters to humans and oversized bugs. We were told videos will play around the diner showing how certain cultures eat bugs and how bugs eat each other. Comments ranged from "oh cool" to "yuck gross."

Andrew was intrigued with creating a plastic bug at the diner, piecing together assorted heads and abdomens, pinchers and claws. Nearby, he found real specimens — beetles, spiders, millipedes and his favorite, "a scorpion. His tail was up in a curl and he was alive."

Taking a break from the congested interior space, we moved out to the central courtyard. Olivia, Katie and other friends played in misty fog where water squirted upward. "We made up a jumping game where we tried not to get wet," Katie explained. "That was really fun."

Indeed, it seemed that for all the bells and whistles of the new Kidspace, the simple aspects of open areas for play and imagination worked best for these kids. We wished for more pretend spaces like at the former site: the fire truck, beach, supermarket and puppet theater. We missed the quiet reading nook of the old location, but thought maybe the gardens may one day fit that bill.

Only time will tell if new generations will embrace the outdoor sandbox area, the paleontologist dress-up exhibit and the build-your-own-river river. Breaking ground next year is a new pavilion with a robotics area and do-it-yourself movie studio.

As for my daughter and her friends, the museum will no doubt become a weekend or after-school destination. We'll keep an eye on the new Kidspace to see how it grows and — like the freshly planted flowers and bushes in the gardens — fills in the gaps by allowing kids to just be kids.

Kidspace Children's Museum

Where: 480 N. Arroyo Blvd., Pasadena

When: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

Price: \$8 for adults and children; infants younger than 1, free

Info: (626) 449-9144 or www.kidspacemuseum.org