

# Creative Living

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## Brookside classic has new function

By Corinne Abatt  
staff writer

It was back to kindergarten for architect Richard M. Mitchell of Ann Arbor. But this second time around he was there to observe rather than participate.

The challenge was to convert a gym at Brookside School Cranbrook into a model kindergarten.

"Dealing with kids like this gives you a perfect excuse to be playful," he said, on his first visit to the kindergarten since it is in use.

The building, housing the auditorium later converted to a gym, was designed by Henry Booth, son of Cranbrook founders George and Ellen Scripps Booth. The structure is one of the earliest on the Cranbrook complex.

The meeting house on the northeast corner of Lone Pine and Cranbrook, Bloomfield Hills, was the first of the now famous Cranbrook complex. It was completed in 1918. Brookside School (elementary) was the first institution established after the Cranbrook Foundation was formed in 1927.

"The problems with the space," said Mitchell, "were on two levels, the functional level and the psychological — how to make 40 people three feet tall function in a space that is 38 feet high at its peak."

FOR THE FUNCTIONAL aspect, Mitchell had a lot of input from two of the four kindergarten teachers, Tower and Sandra Slavin. He said he also learned a lot attending kindergarten in the former location to watch the activity and become acquainted with traffic patterns.

The 2,100-square-foot space is 60 by 35 feet. The original wooden trusses of the pitched ceiling and the brass light fixtures remain. To turn this cavernous space into a cozy atmosphere for 5- and 6-year-old senior kindergartners, Mitchell repeated a band of four- and five-foot heights "to bring the visual ceiling down" in the space divider structures throughout the room.

The mezzanine and climbing areas, which break through the four- and five-foot barrier, are readily accessible to the children. These can generate a sense of adventure for the youngsters as they scramble up the carpeted stairs to the library/sometime block area of the mezzanine or settle for imaginary games in the secluded, gray carpeted corners and niches of the climbing structure.

"The functional space had to be finely tuned," said Mitchell, "all that came from the teachers, they worked out the functional relationships. The space is really highly organized."

Tower said, "I wanted it to be light, so he (Mitchell) put in two more windows."

Some of her other requests to the architects were to break up the length of space and to establish two home-room areas.

She added, "We have an open center approach, so he visited to see how we used them."

SLAVIN ADDED, "As he visited he became aware of activities and movements. He looked at the kinds of materials and designed shelving."

The teachers said they specifically requested a climbing area because the children are in school all day and need that kind of activity for a change of pace.

Slavin said the recessed area in one of the new interior walls created for hanging mats with hooks that don't protrude, is a definite asset, likewise the drying racks for art works.

"These give us maximum use of the floor space," she said. "And there's an area just for preparing snacks with low counters. They (the group of children delegated) can cut the fruit, peel the vegetables, prepare cheese and crackers — set up snacks for the whole day for all the children. We stress independence."

"There are various areas in the center which promote interaction," she said.

One of these is a dress-up area under the mezzanine, complete with mirrors, hooks for the clothes and open shelves for accessories. Another is an alcove by the climbing area with table and chair. From work to week this pretend, vocational area may be a clinic, restaurant or business office.

SLAVIN SAID, "We stress interaction skills, problem-solving skills, decision making, alternative thinking, independence."

Teachers and architect were acutely aware of the Cranbrook design heritage and of the fact that the building is on the National Historic Register. Mitchell included many of the architectural patterns indigenous to Cranbrook in the kindergarten design. The pillars are capped Cranbrook style. A wall with display niches is remarkably like others in the Cranbrook complex. The two new windows are closely related to the original, large one between them.

In areas where it was appropriate, Mitchell used the existing natural wood floor to define a particular activity area from the adjoining carpeted ones.

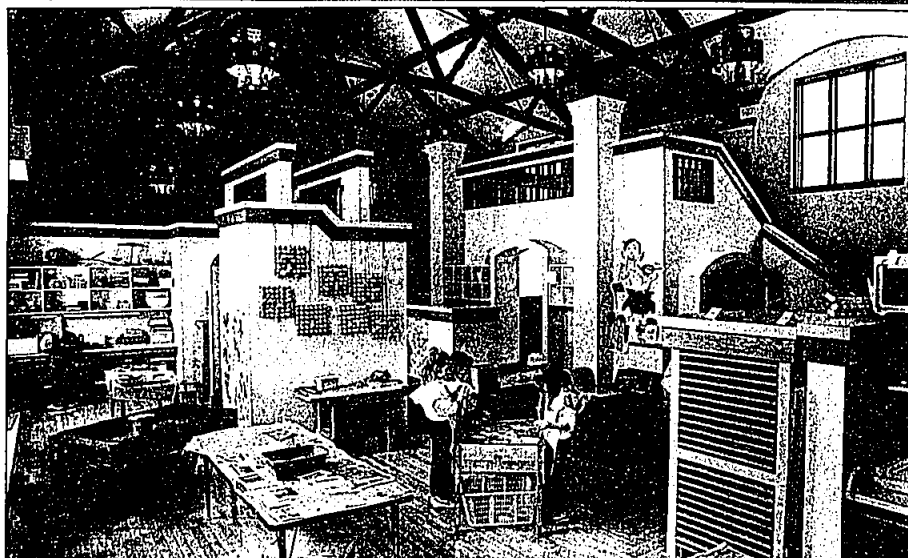
Essentially the new material used is off-white dry wall with natural finished wood trim.

"We kept color to a minimum," said Mitchell noting the gray carpet and off-white walls, "the children bring in so much color."

Soon, he said there will be bright sailcloth triangular banners hanging from the wooden trusses, repeating the open triangle pattern above them.

Mitchell has an affinity for Cranbrook architecture. He and his wife lived on campus for three years while she was a counselor at Kingswood School and he was an area Iacocca student at Lawrence Institute of Technology in Southfield.

And having two youngsters of his



The structures that fill the once large open gym area were designed to reflect the feeling of Cranbrook architecture and still provide an model kindergarten atmosphere.



Architect Richard W. Mitchell was seeing children in the kindergarten, which he designed, for the first time on a recent visit. The little girl in the hideaway area at the bottom is Daniello Smith.

Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell

own was a plus for this project. When in doubt, he often measured things by his son, Benjamin.

Mitchell said his firm, Policy/

Mitchell, has done a lot of work for educational institutions, high schools and universities, but this was, without question, the most fun.



Enjoying one of the many special activity areas are Melissa Mues, left, and Sarah Russell. Watching the action from the balcony/sometime library are Akhili Gulati and Charles Shaw, behind the wood lattice.

## Corporate life — a writer's view

By Corinne Abatt  
staff writer

Of the thousands of people who work for corporations, only a few have ever used them as a subject for a novel.

George Lee Walker of Bloomfield Hills did and his novel, "The Chronicles of Doodah," Houghton Mifflin 1985, has received wide national and international attention.

Walker puts a Kafkaesque twist on corporate life with some Orwellian touches. The nameless protagonist is a speech writer for an unnamed corporation, located in "a suburb of a large, decaying city."

Walker was with American Motors for two years, writing speeches for the chairman and president and did the same thing at Ford for three years. He also wrote speeches for President Gerald Ford, Sen. Robert P. Griffin, and Gov. William Milliken.

Without a name, Walker's central character who tells his story first person becomes, as the author intended, a 20th century "Everyman," registering his impressions of corporate life — the silence, the mystery, the insidious fear that is pervasive at all levels. He is tested, tried, examined and finally approved.

WALKER said, "I tried to capture the mood of secrecy and mystery that often prevails in a corporate setting — most people don't like to tell you

what they're up to and this promotes fear. Some corporations are more relaxed and easy going than the two I worked for. I had three years in the Navy and Ford was more military than the Navy."

Walker, however, was quick to quash impressions that he used specific people as models for his characters.

"There will be a lot of people in Detroit who won't like this book. I don't think everybody in a corporation is bad or corrupt," and then as his voice picked up intensely, he said, "And this book is definitely about Iacocca. I have very great respect for Iacocca. He's tough — very demanding. He sets his sights for himself very high. He's not a fun guy to work for. He's a workaholic. His office is stacked with big, black notebooks which he is (always) studying. He wants things done immediately."

"The basic idea of a novel based on a corporation in which something strange would be happening in the basement offices started in 1965-67."

He said he was hired as a speech writer for American Motors while his employer, the Free Press was on strike.

"For some reason I would find myself in the basement with all those closed doors," he said adding that the same thing happened to him later at Ford and his curiosity was peaked.

Walker said he hopes that corporate people who read the book will "feel a sense of verification" about their feelings, their need to talk with some-

one about them, but not daring to go beyond pre-factory remarks about the weather.

HE SAID, "I hope it will be a beneficial warning to you — you may get your BMW and all the stuff, but you're gonna pay the price."

With this book well-launched — an alternate Book-of-the-Month Club selection and two other book club selections, movie rights under discussion, Italian rights sold and others pending — Walker has finished a second is starting a third.

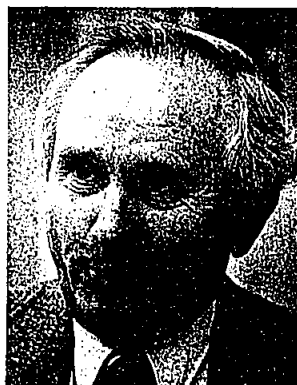
His second, with the working title, "Night of the Toy Soldiers," he said, "Ranges from the suburbs to the corporation."

Nan Talese, editor in chief of Houghton Mifflin, liked the original manuscript, so no rewriting was needed and only a few words were changed, he said.

The book is dedicated to Walker's wife, Edith, an English teacher at Royal Oak Kimball High School. They have three children, David, a senior at Oakland University, Cindy, a speech pathologist in Exeter, N.H., and Suzy, a senior at CCS-College of Art and Design.

Walker, a 1950 graduate of University of Michigan, was a member of the Detroit Free Press staff which won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Detroit riots in 1967.

"The Chronicles of Doodah," by George Lee Walker, Houghton Mifflin, 1985, \$16.95.



George Lee Walker said he hopes people will read his book, "The Chronicles of Doodah," and say, "Yeah, that's what it's like."

STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer