

Judson Center

Judson Center Autism Connections

Location Royal Oak, Michigan **Date** 2009 **Client** Judson Center **Client liaison** Stephanie Harlan
Design firm Hathorne Architects **Design team** Jessie Chen, Lars Graebner, Christina Hansen, Matt Hathorne
Area 5,000 sq. ft. **Cost** \$750,000 **Estimated value of pro bono design services** \$18,000 **Websites**
www.judsoncenter.org, www.hathorne-architects.com

Matt Hathorne
Principal, Hathorne
Architects,
Detroit, Michigan

ARCHITECT The first thing I did when I started my own firm was place an ad offering free schematic design services in a publication produced by the Michigan Non-profit Association. After several phone calls from organizations that were not entirely committed to building, I heard from the Judson Center, offering me this opportunity.

Other than a few drawings for Habitat for Humanity, I had not worked on a pro bono basis as an architect prior to this project. In addition, this was the first project of any kind that my firm took on. I would like to say that my intentions for performing pro bono work were purely altruistic, but that is not entirely true. I saw offering design services to a nonprofit as a great way to establish myself while helping an organization keep its costs down.

Long before the project went into construction, a large team from the ▶

Stephanie Harlan
Director of Autism Connections, Judson Center,
Royal Oak, Michigan

CLIENT Autism Connection's mission is to create a suitable atmosphere for children with autism and their families, providing them with a space where they can feel comfortable to be themselves. When we met Matt Hathorne of Hathorne Architects, it felt like a good philosophical match in terms of how he envisioned our project progressing. Autism Connections occupies a wing in the Judson Center, a nonprofit that helps improve the lives of families with special circumstances. In addition to autism services, that includes assisting adults with disabilities and families dealing with foster care and adoption.

Frankly, the interior of our former space was boring, and it didn't address our needs. Matt was very interested in designing a space that wasn't sterile like a doctor's office or institutional like a school building. He wanted it to feel like a welcoming community facility, a place you want to visit.

Matt tried to learn as much as he could about autism and did a lot of independent research. He frequently came in to work with us and watch the kids interact. We wanted to show him what it was like to work with these kids, who have many sensory challenges and behavioral issues. Matt even came to our summer program, which we hold off-site. Just from being there for one day, he came up with so many ideas.

One of the things he observed is that when kids with autism get overwhelmed by noises and lights, they will find a small, quiet space where they can remove themselves from all the craziness. At the summer camp, we took tables and put blankets over them so that the kids could have their own little safe spaces. Matt saw that and it gave him the idea of building hideaway nooks into the walls of our classrooms. The nooks give the kids a place to get away from the stimuli but still remain with the group. It is something unique about our therapy rooms. ▶





Judson Center met with my colleague Lars Graebner and me on a weekly basis. We discussed the program and the space endlessly. I have never met a client so intent on getting it right. Obviously, concern over the sensitivity and special needs of the autistic children served as the catalyst for these discussions. Although I was given a lot of leeway on the design, the owner focused more on the user's comfort.

If you research autism, you find some very practical dos and don'ts for design, which, although helpful, are no substitute for having direct experience inform the design process. As the director of the center, Stephanie Harlan was able to quickly evaluate the implications of our decisions. We also walked through her classes and, together, developed some interesting ideas for the program. In a typical project, researching the program is incidental or done far in advance. In this case, continual research was critical to the design process.

The biggest success for me is that the space feels more like a community center than a clinic. I always felt like we were designing for three users: our client working in this space, the children using the space, and the parents. It was very important that the parents feel the center was a destination rather than a necessary burden. I didn't want them to have the impression they were dropping their kids off at a front desk to be walked down a lonely, narrow corridor to a door in a wall. ▶

The key to creating a communal feeling is to provide a generous space that pulls in as many people and functions as possible. Space and visibility are critical. For this reason, we lowered the walls to 6 feet and lifted the ceiling as high as possible within the existing construction. Introducing skylights permitted natural light to enter these rooms and unified the individual spaces under the vaulted ceiling.

The spaces between the classrooms contain services such as a library, computer room, and kitchen. All of these functions and the classrooms come together under this one ceiling because users can see past the lowered walls. In this way, everyone sees that they are sharing the space. The classroom walls are curved, which adds to the visual and physical fluidity. It is easy to keep an eye on the children and for the children to see around the corners. It also gives the user permission to move about the space freely.

One of the criteria for this project was to reduce noise travel. Wood-slat walls are often utilized in large auditoriums to break up and reduce noise. We applied this principle to the ceiling. Additionally, the curvature of the ceiling and the extension of the slats down the wall reduce the datum reference for the ceiling. These features make the space feel more organic, similar to being under a sky filled with white clouds. If you stretch your imagination, the skylights are gaps in the clouds where light penetrates. ▶

Matt also noticed that there are a lot of safety issues for kids with autism. They like to run, especially in circles. All the walls here have rounded edges instead of sharp corners, so that if the kids run into them, they won't hurt themselves. We also put fabric on the edges of the walls to create a sensory experience for the kids. The wooden slats on the walls also receive a lot of attention. The kids like to trace their hands along the lines up the walls; the verticality helps them feel organized. We educated Matt about the children's needs, and with all of these design features, he figured out a way to build solutions into the environment.

Our old space was comprised of modular office cubicles. There was a big, long hallway with conference rooms in the center and rows of cubicles on the edges. The color scheme was gray and drab, and there wasn't much natural light. It wasn't a welcoming environment for people with autism—or anybody, really. All of that was completely gutted and changed. Lighting was one of the key focuses of the design. Matt added skylights and a full wall of windows, which opened everything up.

Everything here is unique. I've never seen a building that has these modular pods, as we call them, for the therapy rooms. It's very creative and a wonderful use of the space that we had. The slatted ceiling is beautiful and makes the place look so big and airy; it throws the natural sunlight beautifully. I'm really proud of those features.

The staff absolutely loves the space. Anything would have been an improvement on what we had before, but this is wonderful. In our old space, we were apologetic. We'd say, "Sorry, it will be better someday." Now we're very proud to have people come to this beautiful, state-of-the-art facility, and to have a comfortable waiting area as well as suitable therapy space to help our kids. The staff was involved in all aspects of planning, so everybody takes some pride in the finished product. We were able to see the problems, find solutions, and actually create something that works for us. It was a really fun process.

I think we've gotten into Matt's heart a little bit. He definitely has a soft spot for the kids. He'll drop in and play with them and look at how the space is being used. He has stayed very involved in this project. The parents are thrilled when they walk in here, and the kids love coming here. To them, the space has become a big playground.



We are proud of these design elements, but I am probably most satisfied to see the parents and children congregate and use the space as a community center. This has been a very positive experience for me, and I plan on doing many more projects like it.